

Johnny: Patron Saint of the Traveler  
Josh Downey

Chapter 1

I get up from the couch, the moon illuminating only the floorboards that lead me to my bedroom. I follow the path in a slow, somber, curious, walk. I drop my cigarette on the floor and step on it with my right shoe. I finish my beer and put the empty can on the shelf at the end of my hallway. As I turn the corner into my bedroom I see a female figure on my bed, only wearing a bra and underwear, lacy, black. The covers are pulled up only to her shins. The moonlight doesn't allow me to see her face, just her body, taugth, yet tender. I stare from the doorway for a moment as I unbutton my shirt, already untucked. I unfasten my belt, unbutton my pants, they fall to my ankles. As I step out of my dropped pants, I let my shirt fall from my shoulders. I lay on the bed, putting my arm around the figure's waist and turn her towards me. The moon is bright from the window behind her, creating only a silhouette. I slide my right hand down the back of her panties, gripping firmly. I take my left hand and brush away her silky, dark, ravenesque color hair. The room glows bright white.

After waking to my alarm, which interrupts my dream, in all senses of the word, I get out of my newly stained bed and make a pot of coffee. Living alone, it is of no healthy matter that the coffee will be gone within an hour.

As the pot brews, I shower in the brisk, cold, water because hot water aggravates my inherited rash. While shivering in the shower, I come across the conclusion that I am dying of something. I haven't felt well in the longest time. What can be wrong with me? I have health insurance, but I figure I'll bypass the doctors, they only do tests upon tests until your insurance stops your coverage; then the doctors don't know what is wrong with you. Besides, if I am on my way out then there is nothing I want to be done, who can trust the opinions of someone in an expensive lab coat that doesn't even know you?

While drying myself off, I discover a sore on my stomach. I pop it. The sore is full of puss and blood. This would normally disturb me, but I have come to the realization that I have not lived the healthiest of lives. I clean myself up, dry myself off, and go into my bedroom to dress.

I open up my closet doors, white shirt, black pants, black sport jacket, wooden hangar, white shirt, black pants, black sport jacket, wooden hangar, white shirt, black pants.

## Chapter 2

I pop some sort of sore on my stomach, another on my shoulder. I shiver in the streaming ice water. I dry myself off. I comb my hair. I walk to my bedroom. I get dressed. White shirt, black pants, black sport jacket.

The combination of a cold shower and strong coffee is enough to get any man up in the morning.

I light a cigarette and toss the pack on top of my dresser. I check my wallet, low on cash. I walk to my fire safe and get some more money out. Three hundred dollars, this will last me a couple of days.

As I'm walking down the hallway the phone rings. I take a deep drag off of my cigarette and answer, "Mr. Jones, how can I help you?"

"This is Kate with Metacard credit services, do you have a moment?" her voice travels through the copper wires and tears me apart as it vibrates the magnetic speaker on the receiver.

I drag another deep breath of calming nicotine. "Nope, on my way to work." Fuck this lady and her ill-paying job.

I hang up the phone and walk out my condo door into a waft of disgusting seafood smells. That damn smell of fish.

## Chapter 3

The phone rings as I pass it on the wall. It has one of those coiled cords. The kind of cord that makes you wonder how it can be mostly coiled, but over time, some of it straightens out or coils itself backwards in some spots. One of the unexplained riddles in life I guess. The cord always comes in a perfect coil, and by the time you throw it out or it gets chewed by some animal or cut by accident, it recoils itself in the most unnatural manner.

"Hello," I say in a morning grumble.

"Is this Mr. Jones?" The feminine voice asks in a humble tone.

I picture this lady to be a highly attractive brunette with just the right size breasts: enough to know they are there, but not too big so that you can't grab a good hold of them. She has just the right amount of weight to her, though she is petite. Not as much as a classic pinup girl, such as Bettie Page, but more than today's super models like those in "Vogue."

"Mr. Jones, are you there?" She begins to get agitated.

"Uh, yes ma'am. Sorry. A little early for me I suppose." I get up the same time every day. She doesn't know.

"Mr. Jones, I'm Sara with Metacard Credit Services. Mr. Jones, the reason I'm calling today is because you are behind over three months on your payments. If you would like, I can help you set up a payment on the..."

I hang up the phone. It isn't that I don't have the money, but I just don't care. Fucking credit services.

The phone begins ringing again, but this time I ignore it.

I proceed to my bedroom and continue dressing. White shirt, black pants.

I walk to the kitchen, smoke a cigarette, drink my pot of coffee. I start the paper's crossword. I walk out the door and head to work.

## Chapter 4

I step out of my cold morning shower. As I travel down the hall, my phone rings.

"Mr. Jones. Is this Mr. Jones?" Greeting me this morning is an average looking woman, slightly overweight for a person her age.

She is short, not abnormally short but a few inches below average height. She is the typical woman you would see in a small town bar on a Saturday night. Not your girl next door, but maybe the one a few houses down.

"Yeah, that's me." My morning grumble is gaining normalcy with these people.

"Mr. Jones, I am calling in regards to your mortgage payment. It is..." She continues her spiel.

Her breasts are small for a woman of her weight. They give her an unorthodox appearance. She doesn't need to get an augmentation, but she should work on losing weight.

"Would you like to set up a payment over the phone? I can take any major credit card, check, or even a debit card number." She just finishes asking.

I hang up and continue to my coffee and cigarettes. I pick up the local morning paper, outside of my condo door.

Dressed and caffeinated, I walk down the stairs and out to the back alley. The beginning of my typical route to work.

## Chapter 5

White shirt, black pants. I walk down my hall.

"Mr. Jones, can I take your payment over the phone?" An overweight, very unattractive lady on the other end of the phone asks.

"Sure." I leave the phone lying on top of the cradle. Maybe she will spend the rest of her day trying to understand what happened.

I finish the rest of the coffee left in the pot. I light a cigarette as I lock my condo door. That damn fish smell.

My condo, as it was listed in the real estate paper, "rests above a Chinese fish market store."

Taking the front exit of the building often leads to foul smelling clothes and discourse I don't understand. I take the alley.

The graffiti at the end of the alley has been painted over recently. You can still smell that freshly painted, kind of nauseating smell. It is a given that this will be filled with advertisements of local hoodlums by the start of the weekend, "tagged" in an artistic form or "marked" by a local organization for welfare reform; both are hoodlums.

Work is about four blocks away. I don't mind the walk. Many other people have it a lot harder.

I work as a curator for contemporary art at a small museum. The pay is good, and I get weekends off, but yuppie hipsters are the grievance of my days.

I pass by a local deli each day on my way to work and get a glance at a brunette, about a 'B' cup, working behind the counter. She looks out of the window store-front every now and then, and I get a nod from her, as if to say "hello," but most days I need to imagine such an event. Today was apparently one of those days.

I continue my morning walk without her acknowledgement.

There is a hint of sun coming through the clouds. I wish that I had time in the mornings to stop and look at them. It is amazing how many times I find something up in the sky, some sort of image, something others may not see.

I remember lying on the hill at the park as a child. The park was close to home, so there wasn't ever a discrepancy with my parents of going there alone. The park was safe, it was neighborly. It was always so beautiful for me to imagine things like Cupid, or boats, or trains, and how the forms changed as they passed above me. Perhaps actions like that as a child created my artistic sense that I obtain at this older stage in life; my love of photography, my interest in the unknowns of the art world, why I want to observe art before any other observers, collectors, or aficionados, why my imagination can run so vividly and fast.

## Chapter 6

"Is this Mr. Jones?"

I immediately hang up the phone as I realize there is probably an overweight, missing-teethed, bald, diabetic lady on the other end that smells of B.O. and Cheetos.

Drink my coffee. Smoke my cigarettes.

Oh how I hate that smell of fish.

The buildings at the end of the alley now have stickers for something I can only imagine is a band, "The Camaros In Santa Monica." They must be somewhat of the thing to see because the stickers are all along the path to work; garbage cans, newspaper stands, street signs, already peeling on the sidewalks.

There is a bum handing out bumper stickers for "The Camaros In Santa Monica" at the last corner I turn before seeing the gallery I work at.

I arrive at work quite early. My mind is slipping.

What the hell am I going to do for thirty minutes?

The free local club magazine, "Shit You Need To See," is staring at me from across the street with its puke yellow cover. I take a quick stroll across the street to see what kind of scene events are happening this weekend. If I don't find out what is happening this weekend, I might just sleep through my off days again, waiting for that woman to enter my dreams. It just doesn't seem viable anymore. It just isn't a constant occurrence.

I open the horizontally hinged door and grab a copy of the magazine. "New Venue to Open Doors Saturday," magazine headlines never give any worthwhile details.

"The Sparkling Opera has been a work in progress for about three months now. We have finally reached Her awakening." The article isn't promising.

I have been waiting for the place to open since I first heard of it, basically because it is right down the street from my condo. If nothing else, the sign outside of The Sparkling Opera promises cheap drinks and live thrills.

"Star Fires scheduled to open the night, with appearances by Jason's Fleece and Meth On A Sleeping Problem."

It might be an interesting time, but might be quite the let down when I can get drunk to the sound of my stereo at home for even less money and similar thrills, just the cost of a companion.

Of course, I won't have to smell the odors of twenty-something year old kids living in the city off of their parents' money. With all of the time these people spend not working and pretending to learn in college, I don't know why they can't find the time to bathe. I suppose a monthly visit from their parents is all that forces them to wash, or maybe it's because deodorant just isn't organic enough to save the earth. Yuppies are everywhere, a daily drag.

The article continues, "Headlining are The Camaros In Santa Monica with their guarantee of feminine vocals and lyrics of anonymity for just the soul of this city."

What the fuck does that even mean? I thought journalists had to go through schooling so that shit like this doesn't happen; so that the reader isn't more confused after reading an article than before reading one.

I throw out the magazine in a trash can labeled, "Bombing for peace is like fucking for virginity."

What happened to my grandparents' era? What happened to the patriotic drones of a capitalistic society?

Crossing the street back to work becomes a hassle with all of the hands grabbing at my pockets.

Keep your damn hands off me. So much for chivalry.

## Chapter 7

"The Camaros Of Santa Monica To Play Special Midnight Show At The Sparkling Opera." The flyer stops me as I wait for the brunette to get behind the counter at the deli, below a picture of a car bursting through the sun. "Local Band To Make Special Appearance To Open The Doors Of New Venue." I start to read the article that I kept in my pocket from the magazine yesterday.

"Hey man, don't block the doors!" Some angry guy shouts as he pushes through me, needing his morning pastrami or whatever the fuck he is getting from a deli at 8:34 on a Friday morning.

I speak to myself, "Shit, its Friday. Eight more hours of yuppies until a weekend without."

Brunette must be off today, or at the least, she hasn't arrived to work yet.

I continue on my way to work without my greeting in the form of a nod, as if it means anything anyways.

"Hey Johnny." Samantha, a girl I've known for about three weeks, but acts like we are old pals acknowledges me on the sidewalk about halfway between the deli and my work.

"How you doing Sam?" Between my hope of a nod from the brunette at the deli, and thoughts of how money owns the art world, I have to see her? Fuck, at least its Friday, at least the weekend is almost here.

"We should go to the Sparkling Opera opening tonight. I hear its going to be a riot." She says it as she has the hope of a cigarette gleaming in her eyes, a look I've come to know all too well.

You learn this kind of look after years of giving away expensive cigarettes to your friends, family, strangers, just about anybody. I pull out my pack to light one, hoping that was all she wants and will leave shortly after.

"You want one Sam?" At nine dollars a pack it is like giving her my money to ignite into happiness.

"Thanks. Who can afford to smoke these days?" She speaks with a sense of arrogance in her voice.

"Anyone that knows me apparently," I tell her arrogantly, as if to say, 'get out of my face.'

She doesn't get the hint.

"I guess I'm one of the lucky ones." She says.

I can see the ignorance in her demeanor.

Samantha takes a drag on the cigarette and says, "Not everyone can support their friends like you."

"Gotta go Sam." I tell her as I am already in half-stride, gleaming to get away.

What the hell is going on at work? There are police, firemen and paramedics, a caution border around the street? Road blocks? I have to see what's going on. I see my 'mentor,' John, just inside the yellow tape.

"John, what is going on here?" I ask while pointing to the circus of people.

"Bomb threat. Sorry Johnny, guess you'll have to miss out on the days pay." He says with a concerned look on his face. "Nobody is allowed in the building until they sweep it. Might take a while."

He seems genuinely disappointed about the concept of a three-day weekend.

I put my hands in my pants pockets and say, "Bummer. Guess I might actually have to visit my folks this weekend." My co-workers assume I am a good family man because of the crucifix and religious medallions around my neck. It started along with my first week at work. I go along with it for the image, but the truth of the matter is that my immediate family has been dead for a while now.

John is looking at the crowd and says, "I'm sure a few more hours with you won't bother them one bit."

He bought my story of being a family man since I interviewed for the position.

"Guess I'll see you Monday, John. Go get some sun, would you?" I say while walking away.

John is as pale as notebook paper.

What a change of events: three day weekend, new venue in town, blowing past Samantha the quickest I ever have. On my walk back home, I see the brunette from the deli walking into an upscale clothing boutique just beyond my condo.

Should I take a shot at it today? Fuck, I got nothing else going on.

I power-drag the rest of my cigarette to calm my nerves.

## Chapter 8

I take a quick glance through the window to see what the brunette is doing inside the store.

She is pointing to a dress behind the male cashier, hanging on an unmarked rack.

He is rather well-dressed for what I previously thought of as a department store outlet: silk tie, brown and white leather shoes, and a very handsome blazer. His pants are the kind of material that keep a crease, but look as soft as Egyptian satin.

"This shop is much more upscale than I thought, I speak as I reach to open the all-glass door. "Oh shit." I whisper, foreseeing what is about to happen through the storefront window.

The deli girl gets flustered and starts walking towards the door. I turn so she won't see my face as she comes out of the store, and put a cigarette in my mouth and light it, using my hands to cover my face; an immediate calming that I most certainly need. She doesn't notice me as she passes by and walks down the street, passing by my hopes and dreams of companionship this weekend.

She might not have seen me, but a younger looking man behind me has.

The stranger looks up at me, "Can I borrow a smoke man?"

As if he has the intention of giving me one of his sometime.

"Here you go," I frantically give him the one I just lit, and I walk briskly into the store.

Fuck him and his free wants if he doesn't like a used cigarette.

I walk right up to the cashier. He is bringing the dress to the rack, the one that the deli girl wanted.

"That's a beautiful dress," I know that commenting on the beauty of an item to a commission based employee will get his attention.

"Absolutely. One of the best we have." The cashier changes his countenance from frustrated to a bright and happy grin. He is falling right into my hands.

"How much does one of these dresses run?" I know he will divert me from the one in his hands to a better, and by 'better,' I mean more expensive, dress in the area.

Sure enough he says, "Well, this one over here is about \$1,200." He says this as if the one in his hands is no longer an option, sweeping it down to his side and out of my immediate view.

"The one you're holding seems to be a hot topic of discussion." I announce, trying to draw his attention back to silky red dress, hoping it would open conversation about the deli girl, in a subtle manner.

"Oh yeah." He says.

He falls into my plan.

The salesman thinks momentarily and comments on the deli girl, "Some lady had it on payments and couldn't afford the last one. It was quite a shame. She really wanted it. Something to make her beautiful for a significant weekend, she said. Or something like that. Are you interested in it?"

The sharply dressed salesman now realizes that I may not be willing to drop \$1,200 on a dress that obviously isn't for me to wear.

I cross my arms to put myself into a power position, "How much is it?"

I imagine her in the dress. She is tall. She is thin. She is far from voluptuous. This dress is tailored just for her. Thin black straps that cross at the open back. Smooth, silky, reflective silk fabric. Candy apple red. Form fitting from bust to waist. Fluted bottom that goes to an inch below the knees. This dress must have been designed by a man with the most erotic of tastes.

"This gorgeous, Italian silk, red..." the salesman says something about a designer and something about information that came straight from a sales manual.

We are sitting in my condo to a candle lit dinner, The Everly Brothers, "Let It Be Me" on the stereo. Moonlight coming through my living room window facing west. My hands around her waist, swaying. Slowly swaying. Her head on my chest. Her touch, the touch of a person that knows how to caress. I lay her slowly, gently, on the couch, my arm supporting the small of her back on the way down. She takes her hair down with one hand while keeping her other at the back of my neck.

"\$600 and it can be yours. If you sign up for a credit card you can get..." The salesman continues.

I slide my hands down the outside of her legs, pulling up her left foot and sliding off her shoe, kissing the top of her foot and the daisy tattoo on it. I catch a glimpse of her panties as I gently put down her left leg and, pulling up her right foot, slowly gliding off her other shoe. She pulls down the straps from her shoulders, allowing me to slide the silky, candy apple red dress down her tender, soft, young body.

The salesman interrupts my thoughts, "So what do you say? Would you like to sign up for a card and get the dress?"

When the fuck did this guy become a used car salesman? When did I become a credit sale?

I pat my pockets. "Uh, yeah. The dress, not the card. Put it on the counter, I'll be right back. Have to get some money." I am almost out of the door before I finish talking.

I run a couple of doors down and through the front door of my condo building, a path that takes me through the "Chinese Fish Market" and up the stairs in the back.

That damn smell of fish.

I don't even remember unlocking the door before I am in my fire safe in the bedroom closet getting out cash. I grab a stack of \$100 bills and fold them into a gangster's wad, putting my money clip around it, the way you always see mobsters hold their money. A stack of cash about a quarter inch thick, folded in half and tightly pressed to give the appearance of being wealthy, and at the same time, well-kept. As if the money is never ending.

On the way out of my condo I catch a view of my couch. It is slightly crooked towards the window. I fix it. Perfectly centered. Perfectly positioned. Perfect.

I slide down her dress. She is wearing a strapless black bra. Her stomach is taugt. No definition or toning, but a slight bump on the vertical of her center. Her chest is slightly indented by her ribs, where I slide my hands, one on either side. I gently cusp her left breast with my right hand while I slide her dress off with my left hand, ever so slowly, with hopes of making the moment last longer. With hopes of being tantric.

"Shit!" I jolt as I hear a loud bang outside.

I walk to the window and see a car crash in between the market and the dress boutique. I feel the wad of cash in my hand and I am reminded that I have to get to the store and pay for the dress.

On the way down the stairs, I see smoke and broken glass sprawled along the sidewalk. Surely the person in the rear car is no longer among us. Bugs Bunny can't survive this crash.

I get into the store and see that the cashier isn't here. The dress is on the counter.

"He must still be here." I mutter quietly to myself.

I turn around to the storefront window and see the youthful salesman as an onlooker to the accident outside. I go out there to get him. I can smell the oil that is pouring from the obliterated car.

"Hey man," I say, tapping his shoulder. This suit really has a smooth feel to it.

What kind of material is his jacket?

I appreciate his fabric as I ask, "I gotta get somewhere soon, can I get that dress?"

He speaks in pauses, "Uh, yeah, sorry."

He is still awestruck about the poor schmuck in the car. I can see the driver's face, indented and bloody, missing teeth. This isn't how it looks in the movies. This man has no expression on his face, if you can even tell that it is his face. The windshield isn't shattered, just cracked. His thumbs are bent straight back. His fists tight, still as if gripping the steering wheel, but pressed against the dashboard. The hood is collapsed. The steering wheel pushed against his chest. It clipped his jaw in the crash and ripped open his cheeks. He is now the proud owner of a permanent smile. All of these poor onlookers have to see this event on their way to school, work, or play. Why couldn't this asshole die on his own time? Imagine how long it will take for these children to mentally overcome a site like this.

I'm confused about why everyone looks sad. This man is on to better things than his 1997 Escort and nine to five job. Lucky fuck.

I grip the shocked salesman's shoulder, "Sorry buddy, but I need this dress now."

I don't even notice a little girl, who is probably the daughter of the man in the crash, screaming from the back seat. I hope she is okay.

"Yeah." The salesman is still in some kind of a daze. "I'll help you with that right away."

Even in his daze, he still remembers the training from his corporate bosses, always be closing.

He walks slowly in front of me, staring at the ground, with a 'can I help you' smirk on his face, but not attentive to me. He is still in his sales façade. At the end of the day money is still his bottom line.

"That one, on the counter." I point to the neatly folded, semi-glimmering cloth on the marble countertop.

He begins to process the order with distant sirens on their way to the accident, most likely caught up in city rush hour traffic.

I slide the dress completely off. It lands on the floor, softly. I reach my left hand around her back, rubbing my fingertips gently on her glimmering, moonlit skin, moving to the center of her back. My fingers glide up her spine to the clasps of her bra. I take my right hand off of her left breast and place it behind her neck. She tilts her head back gently, and I kiss the right side of her neck. She gives off a slight groan.

Shit. Shoes. "Hey man, that girl that was interested in this dress. Did she mention what kind of shoes would go well with this kind of dress. You know, a female's opinion of beauty. Not that I don't trust your opinion, but someone interested in this dress was no doubt also interested in a nice pair of shoes."

"I think she said black, stiletto heels. Something with a half covered top," he says as he has already forgotten about the accident that shattered his mind. "Let me show you."

He starts walking towards a pair of shoes around the corner in the back of the 'L' shaped store.

Thank God. Get those fucking sirens out of my mind.

He pulls a pair off of the shelf. They have about half inch heels, short and stubby looking.

"Something with higher heels. Like these." I comment as I grab a pair a couple of slots over from his choice. I am like a kid in a toy store, I don't know exactly what I am going to do with these, but I feel that I need them. "I don't see having such short and stubby heels on a dress like this."

"Great choice, elegant selection," he apparently approves.

He has completely forgotten about the mangled man in the car and is now thinking about his new Versace watch or some shit, back to the bottom line.

"These are..." He is saying something that I don't care to hear.

This guy must have some book of clothing designers on his coffee table. Who the fuck cares who designed these shoes? Like it makes a difference to me.

Though, they are nice.

"All right. Take this heel," I cover the shoe with my hand, exposing only the heel, "and put it on a top like this." I grab at a shoe by the heel to show only the upper section. I still hear him talking his salesman garbage as I am explaining to him what it is that I want.

"My goodness these shoes are nice," I speak to myself. Closed toes and crossed straps that wrap around the back of the ankle. I am almost aroused just holding them.

I've got to have some kind of fetish problem.

"Something that gleams a little bit more though." Why can't I just draw him a picture? I don't think I am getting my point across.

"I think I know exactly what you are looking for. If I'm right, you have great taste my friend," he waves with a gesture of his hand for me to follow behind.

When did we become acquainted enough to the point of friends? I hope he knows what the hell he is talking about. He hands me a box.

As I go to open the lid, I see a size seven label on the front of the box. How in the hell do I figure out the shoe size of a woman I have only seen through window panes?

"Holy shit." I say quite loudly.

I would get glares from ritzy women in the store if they heard what I just said, but this shop is empty. The presence of police must have something to do with the way that the wealthy spend their corruptly gotten money.

"Sorry. I meant to say, WOW." I can't believe how stunning these shoes actually are. Exactly as they should be as I am clasping her thin, tight calf as I pull the shoe off of her.

The salesman smirks as he says, "You do have taste. I thought I saw that in you."

How am I supposed to believe this chum obtained some kind of degree in psychology? How does he see things in me?

Lay her on the couch, slide off her shoes, slide off her dress. It's all set. "All right man. I'll take these shoes and the red dress."

We walk over to the register as he is trying to avoid looking at the cleanup of the accident going on outside.

I pull out my gangster wad of cash and purchase one half of euphoria, one half of companionship.

I grab another copy of the local magazine with the Sparkling Opera spread as I walk over to the little girl outside, whose assumed father just perished, and say, "Sorry for your loss." I don't mean to sound arrogant, but it comes out that way.

## Chapter 9

I have no idea how to woo a woman. It's always been so easy in the past, meet, hook up, date, break up, go out, meet someone, hook up, date, break up... It was easy. Already has the paradigm.

I pull out my wallet, "There we go." A small piece of yellow paper with writing on it.

Samantha. 5559743. XOXOXOXO.

Hugs and kisses, what a loon." I let out a slight laugh.

I dial the number.

"Samantha, hey. It's Johnny." One ring and she picks up.

"Oh. Hey," She responded.

I can hear that she was waiting for this call since she met me at O'Cool's fake Irish pub three weeks ago.

"You decide about going to that opening?" Samantha quizzes me hoping for just one answer, yes.

"Um, actually I was wondering something, and I kind of need your help to complete this thing." I realize how hot Samantha sounds on the phone, but not so much on the street when she is trying to get cigarettes from me, or when she is junked up on drugs, or the general annoyance in my existence.

"Oh, great! Do you want me to come over?" She sounds as if she is already waiting outside of my condo.

"Sure, I guess." I hang up the phone.

Shit. Now I have to clean.

Cleaning isn't that big of an occasion. I keep a pretty clean home, it always just stinks of beer and leftover take-out, and, every now and again, a "Chinese Fish Market."

I turn on the radio just as a knock comes to the door, along with an exclamation, "It's Samantha! Johnny, it's Samantha." She keeps knocking. She keeps announcing her presence.

Goodness this girl has no patience.

As I open the door, I notice she is dressed quite fancy to have just stopped in at the drop of a hat.

"Going out tonight?" I inquire.

Samantha smirks and says, "Not that I know of. At least not yet."

I walk into my living room.

"So what do you have going on? Expecting company?" She surely notices the softly playing music and burning incense.

"I was just going to rearrange and I thought a woman's touch would turn out better than mine. Do you mind helping me out here?" I can tell she is getting the wrong impression.

I begin second-guessing my decision to call Samantha into the situation. I know what I want, I know what I think needs to be done, I just don't know how to accomplish it.

"I was kind of hoping to set things straight with an acquaintance tonight. I want to set a good impression." I know she still doesn't get it. I don't get it. Why am I wasting my time arranging my condo? What difference does all of this arranging make?

"Maybe some nice red candles on the table." Samantha grabs me by the hand and brings me to the closet. "These will work nicely. Sets a nice mood. Who are you trying to impress anyways?"

Samantha pauses and puts her palms on her hips. She juts her waist to the right and says, "Because, you know, some girls are already impressed with you." She bats her eyelashes like Betty Boop.

She is really laying it on thick tonight. "Like I said, she is an acquaintance. I don't know as much about her as I would like to. I'm hoping that this could be the start to something good. Something different than what I am used to." Samantha still thinks it's her. Her expression is clearly saying that.

Samantha starts to express a smile, "Me?"

I can hear it coming in her voice.

She says, "Johnny, are you asking me to come over for dinner tonight before the opening? Johnny! What took you so long?"

What did I do? Shit. "About the opening Samantha."

"Oh, we don't have to go. This is much better than going out. Much better. Johnny!" She yells loudly, louder than I've ever heard her before. "I was wondering how long it would take for you to have me over!"

"Samantha," I raise my voice a little bit. I have to get this out. "This isn't for you. I just need a female opinion and..."

"You fuckhead!" she cuts me off.

I guess I was asking for it. I really should have thought this through much better than I did. Samantha can be a rough trip sometimes.

"Shit. You ass! You put this unbelievable dress out on the couch, the Sparkling Opera page is open on the kitchen table, you ask me about my opinions. Ughhh. You dick! What kind of sick game is this?! The next time I see you, I'm gonna castrate you. You fuck!"

And just like that, she is out the door. I really should have thought that through. Now what the hell am I going to do?

"Well, first I better make sure this girl at the deli wants to come out tonight." Amazing how my thought process changes when I speak out loud, from angry and belittled, to curious.

I look up the phone number to the deli. I look at my watch. It's 11:37. I hope they aren't too busy.

"Hello. Hello." Someone on the other end answers. "Photzsky's Deli."

"Yes, is this the owner?" I ask the man.

"Hold on man." I hear him set down the phone. There are people yelling in the background.

I look at the glossy red dress, gleaming in the evening sun. I hope the dress doesn't get ruined just laying out on the couch.

"Hello." A new voice answers the phone.

"Yes, is this the owner?"

"Yeah, you got a complaint?"

"Oh, no. Not by any means."

"Waddya want then buddy?"

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Uh, no, I mean I'm sorry to take your time, but I have a question." I pause in case he wants to make another snide remark, then ask, "Do you have a tall brunette working behind the counter?"

"Suzanne?" The man asks.

"Uh, well, I don't know her name. She works during the week, like during the day. Behind the counter, you know, slicing and whatnot."

"Suzanne. What about her? You got business with her?"

"No. No. I mean," boy is this difficult. "I mean I hope to is there a way, uh, do you know her situation?"

"Situation? "He pauses, most likely in contemplation. "Like, does she have a boyfriend? What the fuck is this, a dating agency?"

"I didn't mean to disrespect you. Its just. Is she there today? I have something for her. Something she lost."

"She'll be here in about an hour."

"Can I come in and drop it off in person? I'm only a couple blocks away."

"Yeah." He hangs up.

He sure didn't seem too happy. I better find a box for this dress.

I walked back to the store I bought the dress at. "Can I get a box for this dress I bought earlier?" the same cashier was there.

"Yeah. Sorry. I guess I was a bit out of it earlier with that crash." I grab the box from him and walk out the door.

Though I haven't finished the cigarette I lit coming out of the clothing store, I toss it in the street outside of the deli. This is important. This could change tradition.

I unclasp her bra. The back straps fall and sway in the air. Her head is tilted forward, her back bent away from me, my grip around her waist tightens. Her bra is sliding down the front of her body. Her breasts are exposed. I kiss her neck, I slide her bra to the left and drop it on the floor. I have my right hand at the small of her back, and lay her to the ground.

I walk into a crowded shoebox shaped, and as it feels, shoebox size, joint. I look around at the grotesque looking crowd.

Do I take a number? Who the hell did I talk to on the phone? There sure are a lot of guys working in this joint.

"Number 116. Hey, you number 116?" a bald, portly man points at me.

I look down at my ticket. "Uh, yeah." I look up as I crumble the ticket and drop it in the basket. "Are You the owner, the guy I talked to on the phone?"

He walks to the side of the counter, goes under a board, and comes up to me. "What do you need guy?"

"Well. Suzanne." I begin speaking in a mumble. "Uh. I mean. Can you put this box somewhere that Suzanne will see it when she comes in? Like a locker or something?" I realize how bad I am at talking under pressure. How poor I speak when not in my comfort zone.

"Sure. And who shall I say this is from?" Shit. I haven't thought about that.

"Hold on." I run outside and grab a copy of the flyer to the Sparkling Opera opening. I guess this will have to do. I walk in and give it to him. "Just put this in the box. I think this will do."

"That's it? No name?" He seems confused.

Then again, so am I.

"Yeah. Thank you kindly. I appreciate it." He takes the box and goes into the back. I guess I should leave now?

I walk outside and light a cigarette. I'm low. I need to go get more.

Her nipples are hard between my teeth. She needs this. Keep it sensual. She needs this physical release. I kiss her navel. She tilts her head back and gives a soft, stern, "Mmm." The moonlight gleams reflections off of the photographs on my wall, shadowing Suzanne. Silhouetting her figure, her features, creating a sensational feeling of desire. This is exactly what she wants. This is exactly what I want.

"Shit. What the fuck am I going to wear?" I put the act of sensation on hold.

## Chapter 10

I grab some more money from my lock box. That's what it's here for, right?

"About \$2,000, that should be enough." I speak to myself.

The phone is ringing. Samantha? Has to be.

"Mr. Jones. Don't hang up." Not Samantha. The obese lady on the other end must be trying to ruin my date.

I need to stop this aggravation. "I cannot acknowledge the whereabouts of Mr. Jones. It has been rumored that he may be dead. Did you try his home number?"

This should buy me some time from the ugly women of credit services.

"His home number? I have this listed as his home phone number. Are you a relative?" The fat lady speaking sounds to be a professional at my phone dodging.

The way that I answer this question is crucial. If I say yes and acknowledge that I know his whereabouts, then I am legally obligated to pass on the news. If I lie, I may drastically shorten the matter of time in which I have to pay this broad, before the court documents show up from a uniformed officer.

"Click." The phone makes a soft noise as I lodge it in the cradle.

I decide to simply hang up the phone. I need to find a nice suit anyways. I don't have time for this crap.

I recall the location of a gentlemen's dress shop a short walk away, one that I had passed on the way to a bar a few weeks back.

"I have nothing but time now until the opening tonight. I already gave the dress to Suzanne, at least I hope she got it." I should walk by the deli just to make sure Suzanne is at work today. That bald stubby man sure didn't seem to want to give me the right answer.

I start my journey. First stop is for some squares.

I expect a cliché older Indian male behind the counter but run into an attractively youthful dirty-blond woman with a taught figure. "How are you doing?" I continue speaking without waiting for an answer. "Can I get a pack of Camel Lights off of ya?"

"You got it." The saleswoman says, reaching behind the counter. "Oh shit. Sorry man. We don't have any more."

She is just staring at me. Normally a person would offer an alternative. I see a cardboard sign for Lucky Strikes above the lotto scratch-off tickets on the counter, behind the bullet-proof glass. If they were good enough for my grandfather, they should be good enough for me.

"Can I get a pack of those Lucky Strikes? Unfiltered, please." The perky breasts of the saleswoman push closer to my face as she reaches up for the Lucky Strikes.

"Just one honey?" She asks, her arm still reaching above her head.

I pretend to think a moment, "Uhm, no. Gimme two please." I make a signal of two with my hand, extending my pointer and middle fingers.

She reaches a higher, her shirt gets tighter against her breasts, and she hands me two packs of Lucky Strikes. "\$13.76 buddy." The saleswoman extends her left hand, ring on her finger, and takes my cash. She makes change, hands it towards me and says, "You have a great day now honey."

I take a book of matches from a basket full of them. Whoever owns this gas station still has the mentality that it is okay to not fuck everybody on everything possible. Free matches are all right by me.

I walk outside as I pack my cigarettes on my palm. I open the pack, pull out an unfiltered Lucky, open the match book, and strike it against the sandpaper. Deep inhalation, deep satisfaction.

I try to use a match on the first cigarette from every pack. It reminds me of my first smoking experience, when stealing my mother's lighter was the first way to surely get caught smoking and the junk drawer held an abundance of matches and candles in case of a power outage.

"Hey man," a voice comes from behind me.

I don't even look, I just pull out a cigarette and hold it over my shoulder.

"Thanks dude."

He surely has to be an asshole punk, I can hear it from the distress in his voice.

I start walking straight ahead, even though it would be easier to get to the high end clothing store by turning around. I don't even want to see the hooded skater punk that took my Lucky Strike.

I take a decent drag. The unfiltered Lucky hits me like a brick. I feel like I'm drowning. "Boy these sure are good." Must be a reason they have been making these toasted dandies for more than half a century. "L.S.M.F.T." Those old monochromatic commercials were onto something.

I spot a man putting a sign in front of a record store that read, "Few things left. Take what you want."

I walk in. The store is empty of people, and scarce of records.

I reminisce coming in here when I first moved to the city. Reasonable prices, nice workers. Wonder what went wrong.

I pick up a lone record on a shelf towards the back right corner. "The Temptations on 45. Wow. I wonder how much this was going for." I caress the cover like an infant's face.

I open the lid of the record player. I put the record on. Turn the volume up, just a little bit. Just a little bit. I look over my shoulder to Suzanne at the table. Red really does compliment her physique well. "Care to?" I ask as I extend my right hand to her. She drags off of her cigarette and smolders it out in the ash tray, red lipstick on the filter. Suzanne puts her hand out to mine. I grab her hand, pull her up from the table, and she puts her left arm around my waist. We sway to the rhythm. She whispers in my ear, "Thank you." I feel empty, refreshed. I've never felt like this. All that I was is gone, and all that I am is here.

"Hey! You want that record?" A tall man in a dago tee shouts from the back room in a deep, raspy voice. He can see me through the saloon style doors.

"How much for it?" I am going to pay whatever he says, but it is always best to act interested, however, still giving the illusion that you might just walk away. I'll play the sales game every now and again.

"Take it. Take whatever you want! Didn't you see the sign out front, man?" he seems quite upbeat for a man that just lost his business, at least I assume that's what is happening.

I suppose he can just be moving or retiring ownership of the property. There are a lot of things that can be happening.

"Really? Thank you. This is all I need though." I feel satisfied with just this album, but I really want to know what the few records left on the shelves are. However, I don't want to be that asshole that just takes whatever they can. I start walking out when I see the register slightly open. It is empty. I put a \$100 bill in it and close it so that the next street rat won't steal it. Fucking hoodlums. The streets are full of them. They never respect any thing, or any one.

We sway side to side, her breasts against my chest, her head on my shoulder. I see our reflection in my window. Damn, she is beautiful. Her hips are perfectly shaped for my palms to rest on. I gaze slightly downward to her eyes, her up to mine. The music plays gracefully, "Tonight you're mine...completely. You give your love...so sweetly. Tonight...the light of love is in your eyes..."

I notice a dog pissing on the sidewalk, not in the grass, not on a tree, not on a hydrant or sign, but the sidewalk. I'm not walking through piss, not today. I walk east another street and then to the high end suit boutique. I can see an elegant black suit in the window as I approach. The sunlight glares off of the storefront windows. I open the brass plated glass door.

"Good afternoon sir. How may..." A short woman, nice body, bad face, greets me.

I interject, "That one, in my size." I point to the velvety suit in the window.

I wonder if that one on display fits.

"What size sir?" She inquires sternly.

Really? That's the first question she asks me? Not even tell me the price, the designer, or ask me, 'would you like to sign up for a credit card with us?' I can get used to a place like this that lacks the scent of a used car salesman.

"I have no idea miss. Can I try that one?" I ask as I point to the window suit again.

"I'm sorry sir. We don't allow that. Why don't you come back here and we will get you fitted." She gestures with her hand to walk to the back of the store.

I meet with an elderly white male. "Can you fit me?" I ask.

He pulls out a measuring tape and smiles. "My name is Alphonse. What are you looking at today sir?" Alphonse shakes my hand.

The moonlight is translucent blue through the window. Candles are lit, emitting a yellow glow from the kitchen. Sounds of a past generation being revived by the discourse of modern technology from the living room. I see by her comforted expression and tight hold of me that Suzanne is expressing passion. I lower my hands to her thighs, not squeezing, but letting her know

they are there. Suzanne lays her head on my left shoulder and says, "I've been waiting for this. I've been dreaming of you."

## Chapter 11

"I do look good in this suit." The mirrors at the store are quite flattering. I pull the suit down by the single-breast opening and tighten my abdominal muscles. "I do look good Alphonse."

I decide on a black silk suit coat, silk pants, maroon shirt, black silk tie, and black and white wing tip shoes, the kind swing dancers would wear antebellum.

"Sir, perhaps some pomade for your hair?" Alphonse nods his head to his right.

As I look to the right, I see an illuminated wooden showcase of hair products. The dark stained pine boards and non-frosted incandescent bulbs give an old time feeling that makes me feel at home.

"Thank you Alphonse. You have been great." I shake his hand and walk toward the hair products, Alphonse follows.

"The orange tin will be sufficient for your hair sir. It will hold any style, for any length of time. Good day sir." Alphonse turns and walks away.

I open the lid of the orange tin and touch the grease. It feels more like candle wax. Closing the lid, I notice a black couple in the portrait on the cover. "If it works for black people's hair, it has to work on mine."

I check out at the store and wear my newly acquired attire home.

That damn smell of fish.

There is a yellow sheet of paper, legal size, flapping in the breeze against my door.

Surprise, surprise, it is from Samantha. I pull it off. She taped it to my door.

"Did she bring her own fucking tape? What a loon." I let out a slight laugh.

This ought to be interesting. I grab the note off of my door. The note is written in abnormally poor penmanship and black ink.

Johnny,

I am still upset that you played with my emotions like that. I can get over it though. It is partly my fault for jumping to conclusions, and for that I apologize. Lets work things out.

Always looking to be yours.

-Samantha. XOXOXO

"Partly her fault?" I read the note again. "Partly her fault. That is what it says."

I guess I was kind of at fault. Fuck, who cares. Samantha is too much to handle sometimes.

I look in the refrigerator to see what I have for tonight. The food situation is good, I have to see what I have to drink though. Who knows what this Suzanne girl will be into?

I look over at an empty wine rack on my countertop. "Great. I drank all of my wine during the week. Unless Suzanne grew up on skunk beer, she is not gonna like my Old Style shelf of self amusement."

I take out a piece of paper and start writing a list.

1. Merlot, or something like that
2. Get more cigarettes

I pull out my pack of Lucky Strikes and light one with my free matches. I notice that my pack is nearly gone. "Never know when enough cigs are enough. I'll be done with these by dusk." I sit at the table with my coffee and freshly lit cigarette.

I look over to the living room. The site of my couch reminds me to fantasize.

I put pressure on her right nipple with my teeth. She is pleased. I move my left hand to her inner thigh. I slowly move it higher and higher while putting a bit of pressure on her muscles. I kiss her sternum and continue kissing up to her neck. I take my right hand behind her neck and support her head like an infant and start to make my way to her lips. She turns her head back and to the right. Her hair sways. Her face turns to a grin, a grin of happiness. A pleasing expression.

I get up, walk to the refrigerator, and grab a beer. "I have time for a few of these," I grumble to myself.

I need to relax. I turn on the radio.

"This is KRUV with your song in history for the day. Today's hit comes from a band you may have heard of, they go by the name The Drifters; and their hit, *Up On The Roof*."

I've always loved this song. There is something so beautiful about escaping from the world. Relaxing after a day of taking shit from people and just sitting back to watch some of them without them knowing that you are. Something about being able to analyze their actions without their knowledge is a feeling that can't be duplicated. In some ways it was the precursor to reality television shows. Real people, real families, real lovers, real situations.

I spent a great deal of my childhood at the park, watching the clouds, looking for familiar shapes and images. When I was at the park, I took time away from watching the clouds to watch people. I remember one time seeing a young girl, about my age at the time, go into one of the portable toilets. A few moments later, a man that I assumed to be her boyfriend, went in the same one. They were in there together for well over a quarter of an hour. When they came out, they were happier than I'd ever seen a young couple. It was obvious that some kind of sexual act occurred in there, but what confused me was their secrecy of going in. They went in at separate times, keeping a watchful eye on others in the area, looking for 'scouts'. However, when they exited the love machine, they didn't have a care who knew it. That, I never understood. Disguising the act prior to the coitus, but advertising recent copulation afterwards. A disgusting place to do something like that, but at that age, there aren't many options.

It was then that I got the idea to photograph people; everyday people, in everyday situations. Taking a picture or two of them going in, separately, and then coming out together with their smug, "I just got some" expressions: that's just true emotion, such raw animal feelings. You can't duplicate feelings like that in a studio, the look of such raw emotion on someone's face; not even the best actors and actresses can duplicate that look. It is difficult to capture a 'reaction' to something, but that is just what this raw emotion is.

Reaction is truth, truth is reaction. And I have to capture it on film.

Later on during that day in the park, I see a toddler go down the tallest slide at the park. I always liked watching parents' actions with their children. The difference in animal instinct of an adult with a child, and an adult with their child, is quite intriguing. Anyway, this little kid was waiting to go down the slide. He was obviously fearful of the journey that awaited him. After a short while, what could only be his mother, walked up the stairs, smiled, and pushed him down the slide. This child was screaming, whining, and bawling his poor little eyes out.

Was he crying because he was scared? He had already completed the act that he feared. I imagined he was so full of tears because he began to lose his trust in his mother, the bearer of his life, instead of fearing the treachery from a trip at that height. Though he didn't know it, he was in for a long series of losing trust in his caregivers. This poor bastard had no idea what was in store for the rest of his life.

What the fuck would Freud think of this issue?

It was this particular day at the park that sparked my interest in untrained psychology. One way that I could try to study events of pure animosity was to take pictures. Though they can't tell the whole story, photographs can open up one's mind to thoughts much further than reality ever can. I really don't like questions and events that can be summed up in such few words. I guess that's why the future seems so much more optimistic than it really is; it seems like there are so many options, but in the end every person's life can be summed up on a few pages of a journal. Everything is broken down in such simple terms. That's the way that people want their information, summarized, with all of the depth taken out of it; insert the rise of internet articles opposed to magazines or books in the modern age.

It really does hold true. Think back to Clinton's presidency: the man ran the most powerful nation in the world for almost a decade and it is written like this: His foreign policy- let them deal with it. He was impeached for perverted acts, yet remained in office; that led to perjury. He left the economy and America's wealth in good terms, so it seemed at the time. Eight years of power summed up in three statements, how much more pathetic can life get? But that's how people want to hear information, short and simple.

"That was Imagine by John Lenon." The radio transition disrupts my thoughts. "Stay tuned after these commercials for a song that never hit better than number four; My Way by Frank Sinatra."

We climb the stairs up to the roof. We dance in the moonlit rooftop garden, the radio playing softly below us, through my window, and reverberating off of the building across the street; "And now, the end is near; and so I face, the final curtain..." Her clavicle makes me lascivious in this pale gleam. A slight indentation between her shoulder blade and her neck is calling out in a shadow, "This is where you make contact. Put your lips here. Seduce me." Her Bordeaux glass held in her fingers, looking for a place to set it down.

## Chapter 12

Take me! Here. Now. I can't wait another moment. This is what she is saying with her silent utterance. She is screaming it, though she is not saying a word.

"Pshh." One more beer while I clean myself up. "I'm starting to sweat with all of this beer in me. I feel way too clammy." I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand.

It's getting dark outside. "It must be close to opening time for The Sparkling Opera." I pull out the orange tin. I take off the lid. I grease up my hair, using the mirror as a second set of eyes. Straight back? Slightly raised in the front? Spiked, like I just got out of the shower, and ran my fingers through my hair?

"Damn." This shit is so thick that the comb is pulling hair straight out of my head.

My hair is not long enough for the pompadour I imagine. I slick back the sides and rear of my head. I comb the front forward and make a kind of wave in the front, cocked slightly to the right. "This will do." I look at the clock on my bathroom wall, "This will have to do." At least it suits me well enough.

My hair is dark brown, but with this grease it shines like black satin. It does make me look very handsome. I can get used to this. "It's going to be a good night." I speak to myself with a grin on my face.

I walk to my bedroom. The previous owner of the condo left a full-length mirror against the back wall of the closet. I've never used it before, but this is as good a time as any. From head to toe, I look like a true gentleman. I am in love with this look; shiny, black false pompadour, smooth dark jet-black jacket, maroon shirt, vertically creased slacks, and wingtip shoes. I could have come straight out of a Dean Martin album insert, though I can do without the sweaty armpits and neckline.

Take me! Here and now. I need you, now.

I cover the mirror back up with my black and white clothes on wooden hangers, such monotony, such lack of color. At least tonight I break my routine; Wet dream, shower, coffee, cigarettes, wealthy assholes buying the latest colors on canvas, wet dream. "Tonight I break tradition. Tonight I paint myself red."

Now! I can't wait. Now! Lay me, here. Here! Take me now!

I have a decent buzz at this point and decided to keep it going. I shotgun a beer at the sink's lip, in case of a spill. Not that I am an amateur to the youthful drinking method, but I don't want to chance a mess, I don't want to spill on myself. I walk to the fridge and open it without even thinking, "One more for the road." I take another can of the Blue Ribbon and head to the door.

I chug a beer on the way down the stairs, towards the front of my condo; the back alley can get a little bit questionable on weekend nights.

The garbage can outside of the Chinese Fish Market Store has a sticker on it. "Give me a camera, I'll shoot the moon." I made a bunch of stickers like this years ago. I handed them out in an effort to advertise my magazine, but it was to no avail. I still find them at odd places around the city, but never this close to home. Perhaps an admirer?

I stop in at a tobacco shop up the road before getting to the opening.

I feel myself to make sure I have my wallet, to my surprise, this suit coat has pockets all over. I buy a pack of mints for my inside right pocket. Peppermint. "I wonder what the original flavor mints were." Two extra packs of cigarettes, inside left pocket, left pants pocket. I grab a Pabst individual tall boy as well and begin drinking it outside of the shop while passers by judge me repeatedly. Time is flying by as I people watch.

The fruit scented micro-brew from the pub next door wafts towards me. Who puts fruit in their beer? This is too weird for me. I walk a little further down the road to the Sparkling Opera.

I stop and throw my right hand on my forehead, like pressing a button that will make me have an epiphany, "Fuck. Samantha. I hope she's not here yet."

I don't remember putting any cigarettes out on the way here, nor lighting new ones, but my pack from earlier is empty. I throw it away as I pass a sticker riddled trash can outside of the Sparkling Opera.

"Hey there, you need a square?" This semi-attractive blonde actually offers me a cigarette.

Offers me a cigarette? That's quite a change of pace. Tonight I break tradition.

"Yeah, thanks." I give her a thank you wink as I ask her to light it too. I hope she doesn't get the wrong impression. Tonight I have plans to work on. Tonight I break my tradition of one night stands.

"Where are you from?" For once a smoker actually initiates meaningful conversation, at least more meaningful than 'how are you doing?' or 'what's with this weather?'

"Uh, Paris." I know what is coming, no, not France.

"French huh. When did you lose the accent?" She takes a drag off of her cigarette.

"No, not France. I should have been more specific. Illinois. I think many states have a Paris though. It can get a bit confusing." I never have looked into how many places are named Paris in the U.S. "What about you? Where are you from?"

"Here, born and raised. **Somewhere** down the line one of my ancestors made **something** that helped **someone** that did **something**, and we've been able to live off of the patent funds for decades. Some people are just lucky I guess." She emphasizes her vague descriptions and drags them on.

I don't need to know that, but at least she has the mind to know she lucked out and not act as if she was owed financial success for no reason.

"I'm Ally." She puts her hand out to shake.

"Johnny. Pleasure to meet you." It is at this time that she decides to go into the venue. What weird timing she has. Start a conversation, give a brief history, and then just leave. I don't even bother to finish my cigarette. I'm not sure what the rules are in this place with all of the new

smoking laws, but I need a beer, and I'm loaded for bear with smokes, so some can go to waste. I wait momentarily to go in, so that Ally doesn't think I am following her.

A quick glance around and I don't see Suzanne. "Old Style, two of 'em." I really should settle down on the booze, but I need to calm my nerves. God, I feel like a boy with a childhood crush again; too much adrenaline and alcohol in my system.

"You all right buddy?" The bartender looks more confused than I am nervous.

"What do you mean?" does he know something that I don't?

"Oh, well, you really downed the hatch on that one." He put one more beer down on the bar.

I drank a beer without even realizing it. I need to slow down. The opening act must be ready to go on because I hear the never-ending tuning coming from the back corner. Bands always seem to tune and retune their instruments, even the drummer. In reality, once all of the instruments kick in, the audience can't tell the difference. These assholes are just wasting everybody's time.

Where the fuck is Suzanne?

"One more for the walk," I tell the bartender. "You see a tall brunette in a red dress around here?"

"You meeting her? She sure is beautiful. You're the lucky guy, huh?" He gives an excited smile.

Does he think he has a chance with her? What kind of a dick gives a look like that.

"Uh. We'll see man. Where's she at?" This dick better not string me around the bush.

"Not sure. Came in asking if anyone said anything about meeting her here. That was like, uhm, twenty minutes ago." He takes my tip and moves down the line to the next alcoholic trendy guy down the bar.

"I hope I didn't miss her." I slam my beer and give a good look around the bar, but I don't see her anywhere.

I walk outside to see if she is out there. I can hear the band start through the door opening for each stinky individual that goes into the venue. The band has a softness to their tone. They might turn out to be all right.

I light a cigarette, no one else around to ask me for one, so this one I can enjoy. I am sweating a little bit, actually, quite a bit. I wipe my forehead with a napkin that I think is a handkerchief that I find in the back pocket of my pants. I don't remember it being there earlier.

"This must have come with the pants?" I whisper to myself, not realizing that there is a cute redhead smoking at the corner of the building.

"I don't think so. You have ink on your face." The redhead smirks a grin from her break between drags off of her cigarette.

Her smirk is not a sign of humiliation for me, it is more comical. I look at the napkin. "Meet me in back if you are who I think you are" is written on the napkin in pen. The name is smeared vaguely and ill eligibly, and apparently on my forehead, if I am to believe this cute stranger.

"Come here," the redheaded stranger says with a tone in her voice of 'let me help you out there buddy' in her voice.

I walk over to her. "Do you mind?" she asks as she licks her thumb.

Someone this good-looking hasn't touched me in quite some time.

"Please." I say as I tilt my head downward. "Thank you."

"Love note?" She seems like she already knows what the napkin says.

"Um, no." I look away from her eye line, "You see anyone go around back lately?" My words are starting to stumble around. Shit. Now I'm hot, and sweaty, and drunk. This isn't going to help me break tradition.

"No. Not since I've been out here. Why do you ask?" I hear it in her voice again. She knows.

I really hope this isn't one of Samantha's childish games.

I have a nervous tone in my voice, "Thanks." I mean for cleaning off my head, but she must be taking it wrong.

"Sorry man. Don't get rude with me." She thinks I am being sarcastic.

"No, I mean thanks for cleaning me up." I really am hard to understand when I drink. "Do you know Samantha, by chance?"

"Suzanne? I think you mean Suzanne." She straightens out my collar with a cigarette in her mouth bouncing as she talks.

Suzanne. Tonight might turn out all right if this is the kind of company that Suzanne keeps.

"Yeah." I play it off like it is the alcohol screwing with me, that I really do know what I mean. "Suzanne. That's what I meant."

We can see the moon beautifully from the roof. I lay her on a forest green blanket. I grab her hand, and we both look at the pretty blue illumination placed by God's hands. I turn her face towards me, gently with my fingers on her chin. She giggles in relief. I push back her bangs. I move my lips closer to hers.

"She's around back." The redhead points to the corner and bends her finger towards the side street, motioning that I should go around the corner.

"Thanks. Johnny." I put my hand out to shake hers.

She looks at her watch. "You should probably go now."

A cold move.

I turn the corner and catch myself as I stumble. "Straighten up" I say to myself, quoting my father's words precisely.

I can see the shadow of a hand moving towards a mouth. The shadow of the body portrays the position of someone leaning on a building. I crumple the napkin in my hand. I gain my composure. Deep breath. I will be fine.

"Hey!" An excited female voice comes from around the corner to my left. "What took you so long? I thought you got cold feet." The shadow sticks out her arms, to hug me, or maybe someone behind me?

I look up to see that it is Suzanne talking, but I am not sure it is to me. I turn back to her. She still has her arms outstretched in my direction.

"Can I thank you? This is from you, is it not?" She sounds as though she is almost to the point of getting angry and going inside, or at least away from me.

"Absolutely." I think I say absolutely, but I'm sure it sounds more like abtutely. I walk into her embracing arms. I haven't ever felt so loved in ever so short of knowing someone.

"Thank you." She whispers in my ear as she holds me tightly and repeats, "thank you." Her grip gets tighter around me.

I imagined her being appreciative as I was buying the dress, but this type of situation and wooing only works in dreams, and movies: this doesn't happen in the real world. "Thank you," I say and immediately correct myself, "I mean, you are most certainly welcome."

I think to myself, "Please, never let me go."

Just as I think this she pulls away, not in fear or any kind of bad response, but as if we have been holding each other long enough for kind gestures and first meetings.

Suzanne stands back a step and says as she lifts her arms up and gives me a ocular once over, "you really clean up well. I'm not used to seeing you this fancied up, unless, maybe, I need to clean the windows at work."

"Sorry," what did I say? Sorry? I am way too drunk. What the fuck is wrong with me, where is my self-control?

"Sorry for what?" She looks confused, one wrong word here and the conversation will surely end.

"I'm at a loss for words. This dress is much more flattering than your work attire." I put out my hand, "Johnny." Boy, I really have introduced myself a lot today.

"Suzanne, but I think you already know that. How'd you know that I wanted this dress?" She really must not have seen me when she walked out of that store.

"Well, I thought, stunningly beautiful woman," I raise my right hand up and then down, gesturing that I mean her, "gorgeous dress," I gesture up and down with my left hand, "it was the perfect fit."

The real version of the story is far too creepy.

"I love it. Shoes, they're amazing. How'd you know my size?" She doesn't seem thrown off at all that I am a complete stranger.

"Lucky guess. I'm certainly glad they fit." Her cleavage is very pronounced with either her dress or bra or a combination of the two. I catch myself staring. I look up at her eyes. Beautiful, light green. Beautiful beady, light green eyes. "You really do look beautiful. I kind of didn't expect you to show. Thought maybe it would be a little bit weird."

"It was a little disconcerting. But, really? You didn't expect me to show? I thought you would have had a complete dossier on me." She looks at her watch. She grabs a beer from on top of an alley garbage can and points it towards me. "P.B.R.?"

I graciously accept it. Only a woman of great taste and low societal standards is familiar with Pabst Blue Ribbon and it's acronym. "Thanks." I truly am gracious. I need to get more drunk.

She grabs my hand and pulls me in the back door. "You can sit here if you'd like." She continues walking onto the stage, giving me a glance over her shoulder as she walks away. The previous band is just finishing wrapping their chords.

The Camaros in Santa Monica? 'Feminist vocals and anonymity,' I recall the article in the free hipster magazine from the outdoor bin. Fuck, I hope not.

I run my hands down the side of Suzanne's body, around her waist and over her thighs. She doesn't stop me. She grabs my hand and guides it toward

her bellybutton. She forces my hand down the front of her pelvis. She is lacking undergarments.

The sound of an acoustic and an electric guitar start, drums being gently played with brushes, steady, deep bass lines coming from the stage, soft sounds from a keyboard. Suzanne looks over her shoulder at me and winks. She begins to sing. She has quite a set of lungs on her. The mix of instruments and vocals is very well composed, very nice to hear.

Her body is well-fit to the dress. The opening below the straps on her back reveals an angel tattoo. Her calves are very smooth and defined, her ankles trim, and her hair lays flat on her shoulders. The back of her shoulder blades bump slightly from her body, but she isn't anorexic looking, nor overweight. She has a very well-proportioned body. Her breasts are not as large as I figured them to be from the street looking into the deli, but they are just the right fit for her, for me.

I see a sticker on the drummer's set and realize Suzanne is not in the "Camaros of Santa Monica." The sticker says, "Ill Shoot The Moon."

The music continues, and it is pretty good, but I really have to let out some of the beer that I've consumed. I walk out the back door and piss in the alley. "I hope nobody comes back here."

I grab a beer out of the open van right outside. There is another sticker that says, "I'll Shoot The Moon," on the back door of the van. I pay little attention to it.

I reclaim the seat given to me by Suzanne. She looks in my direction, and I nod my beer towards her. She smiles.

She smells of a sweet perfume, not like the flower perfume women usually adorn. My fingers are still at work. The moon is shining as high as I feel.

## Chapter 13

Suzanne's set is over, and I enjoyed the music and the view. The venue really filled in with spectators. It is most likely a combination of no fee at the door, cheap beer, grand opening, and critics to see the Camaros in Santa Monica.

I decide to wait out back, smoking and watching Suzanne and her band fill the van with their instruments. I grab another of their beers, not introducing myself to the rest of the band, though they acknowledge that they have noticed me with stares and whispers; I don't care, I am here for one reason; change of pace, change of tradition.

She comes by and lights up with me. I am quite intoxicated at this point and my shirt is well unbuttoned, revealing my medallions, cross, and a beer stained dago tee.

"So, Mr. Christopher, travel much?" Suzanne picks up my St. Christopher medallion on my neck and grasps it in her hand.

"Grew up Catholic, huh?" It seems that only Catholics know the Saints.

"I'm a product of Catholic parents and Catholic school, yes." Suzanne looks down in thought, as though she is about to present me with an opportunity. "Listen, my band wants to go to a party, and I'd like to listen to a little bit of the next band. Would you want to stay with me?" She asks with complete confidence.

Suzanne is expecting that I am not the creep that I could very well be.

"Of course. I'd obviously like to get to know you better if that's all right," and in great timing, as Samantha always has, she walks by the alley. Samantha by passes the building, and I can only pray she keeps going. She is with her junkie friends, great people to be around when you are a recovering addict, such as Samantha.

Suzanne speaks, "Sounds good, it's a beautiful night. I must give my compliments on your attire and your choice of dress. I'm absolutely awestruck at how good we look." She playfully bumps her hip into mine.

I interject my drunken thought, "We do look great, we look magazine model great." I give a smile.

"So, I don't want you to get the wrong idea, but if you can't tell, I'm pretty easy going. I don't know how many girls would have taken a chance like this, but I really like to try things at least once, and I need to try something new with my life." Suzanne isn't making eye contact, looking left to the brick building across the alley and fondling her beer can.

I begin to get the feeling that this is going about as good as it can go.

Before I get the chance to respond I hear, "Johnny?!" Samantha has slowly backtracked her way down the side street to completely devastate my evening.

I address Samantha with an open hand, then Suzanne. "How are you doing Samantha? Samantha, this is Suzanne, Suzanne, Samantha." I see nothing good in Samantha's eyes.

"Not bad Johnny." Samantha looks Suzanne over. "This is what you ditched me for tonight, aye?"

Here comes the blowout, my foundation for the evening is about to crumble beneath me.

"Suzanne, huh? You look good. Did Johnny tell you that he originally got that dress for me? Of course he didn't." Samantha turns and looks at me. "Cocksucker! Burn in hell!" She starts to walk away.

"Samantha, please. Go home, sober up, and we can talk tomorrow." I suddenly feel like I haven't been drinking at all, like the designated driver that mediates best friends about to throw fists over a bar floozy.

"I believe we got off on the wrong foot," Suzanne walks over to shake Samantha's hand, "I'm Suzanne. I just met your friend here this evening." Suzanne reaches out to Samantha.

Big mistake. Samantha doesn't take kindly to those that belong to the same sex.

"Fuck off!" Samantha spits phlegm and mucus on Suzanne's dress, right by her navel.

What happens next is in Suzanne's hands. If I step in I'll get stabbed by Samantha's junkie friends, and if that doesn't happen, I will surely be obligated to walk Samantha home to end the confrontation and this will also end my night with Suzanne. If I let Suzanne make the next move then I can re-assess the situation and follow Suzanne's lead.

"I'll be inside," Suzanne looks at me and walks away, through the back door of the venue, and lays out a path for me to follow.

I don't say anything to Samantha. I just give her a stern, angry, disheartened look, her junkie friends directly behind her. She starts to cry and lays her head on one of the guy's shoulder.

I follow Suzanne's path inside. I hear the sink in the bathroom running and walk in as I knock.

"I'm so sorry. Let me explain..." Suzanne stops me by putting her hand on my mouth, but not in the sensual manner I have hoped for.

"Not here, your place?" She asks. I can see in her eyes that this is not the place she wants to discuss the previous events.

"Let me get that," I grab a paper towel and wet it. Suzanne allows me to wipe off Samantha's brown, tobacco filled saliva from her dress, right above her navel. I look up to give her an inquisitive look, letting her know that while one hand is wiping the outside of her dress, I will need to use my other hand to create a backing to apply pressure on, meaning that my other hand will have to go up her dress.

"Please," she says and grabs her hair in a sign of frustration.

I slide my left hand up the bottom of her dress, working it up in between the tight layer of the cloth and her stomach. Though this isn't how I imagined things, it is more than sufficient for the situation at hand. I see her thighs all of the way up to the muscle at the groin; that little pencil sized muscle. Such smooth skin.

Suzanne lets go of her hair and says, "Well, since I can't walk around looking like I wet myself, I guess you have time to explain now."

I look at the mess that I created. I wet the paper towel far too much for the task at hand, and it crumbled all over her dress. I better make this conversation work out in my favor.

"Uh, well, you just met Samantha, a recovering addict. Seeing how things went tonight, probably a re-recovering addict in the morning. I only met her a few weeks back at a dive bar by my condo. She has had a thing for me since. As I am sure you've noticed, she has a bit of a temper problem." I

can see that this explaining and dress drying will be a while, so I take out some paper towels and lay them on the edge of the sink and I motion for her to sit. She does.

"Well," I continue my story of grief because it is far too late to plead ignorance, "since then she has left me a few messages on the phone and notes on my condo door explaining her story. We kind of had a nonverbal, more like a written relationship. She would put a note on my door or leave a message, and I would write a response, leave it on my door and she would write or call back. It is really a weird relationship now that I look back at it."

I pull out a pack of cigarettes, light two, and hand one to her. "She is a very depressed and angry lady." Lady is one of the worst words to describe Samantha; lady implies a sense of civility.

Suzanne breaks her silence, "And that's it? She felt betrayed? Hurt?" Suzanne has gotten quite comfortable by kind of leaning, kind of sitting on the sink's ledge, her palms bracing her from swaying.

I lay my jacket on the ground by the wall, in part to get comfortable, but mostly because the low cut in the back of her dress reveals the small of her back in the mirror, one thing I cannot think straight with in my eye line.

I need to end this conversation about Samantha as soon as possible; it is really depressing. "Well, today, after I bought that dress for you, I called Samantha for some advice, and, well, it may have seemed to her like I bought her the dress. It was on the couch when she showed up, and I never really got the right moment to tell her what was going on. She kind of got the idea that I was planning on taking her here tonight, but when I delivered the dress to your work, I didn't have anything to write with, so I opened the box and put in the flyer to the opening in hopes that I would meet you here. And then I handed it to your grumpy boss. I had no idea..."

"Wait, my boss? Short, wide, bald man?" She puffs off her cigarette, it helps to alleviate the tension.

"Yeah. Really grumpy?" I puff my cigarette, it helps to calm me down.

"That's my father, so watch your tongue on further remarks." She kind of smiles sarcastically.

I get the point.

"I apologize. I had no idea." Good God do I need another beer. "He was a little short with me on the phone, that's all."

"I'm only joking, he can be hard to deal with. That's it though? No relationship history with that crazy lady?" She puts her hands down on her knees.

"That's it, no history. She kind of has a special attachment to me because I wrote and listened to her, but I saw it more of like a pen-pal or older brother relationship. Does that make sense? A great deal of things in my life don't add up to what most people would consider normal." I put my cigarette out on the sole of my shoe and toss it in the stall.

Suzanne's cigarette is one long ash. She must be too concerned with the story to ash it. "Anything else I didn't make clear?"

Suzanne drops her butt in the sink and says, "For now. How about a beer and a fresh start?" She pushes off of the sink and stands in the middle of the bathroom.

I welcome the idea with open arms, but mostly, I just needed that beer. I crawl up from the floor, using the wall behind me as a stabilizer.

I put my arm on her shoulder, "How about that beer?" I try to keep the focus away from our conversation and onto getting Suzanne eased up.

I push open the door, "After you."

The sounds of Camaros in Santa Monica can be heard clearly, a little bit too clearly.

"How about that man?" A female vocalist with a shaved head screams into the microphone, "he's just a slut, a bag of waste, fuck 'em and leave 'em, no morning after..." the free magazine's article is right, feminist sounds and lyrics that don't make sense.

Suzanne is walking straight passed the stage. I follow her towards the door but stop at the bar. "What do you want?" I ask, expecting a response, but she keeps going towards the door. I follow her out. We get outside and I light another smoke.

I hand the pack to Suzanne, but she puts up her hand like a crossing guard signaling children that they need to stop. "You really live on those things, huh?" She asks.

I look in the pack that I'd opened upon arriving here, three left. "I guess so" I say as I give a shocked look. No use in arguing that point, her sarcastic remark is taken in stride. We stand there momentarily, and I realize that she doesn't know which direction to go.

"Oh, this way," I point down the street towards the scent of fish, as though it is so thick of a smell that one could almost see it. That damn fish smell.

She pulls her dress back over her no longer exposed breasts. I try to moisten her chest with my mouth, but she pushes me away. I put my hand behind her neck so that I can pull her towards me, she rolls away.

Fuck, I can't see it anymore. I lost the lustful images.

## Chapter 14

Walking up the stairs on the outside of my condo I see a yellow piece of paper on my door, blowing in the breeze. Shit. Damn it Samantha. "You want first crack at this one?" I say as I pull out my keys and to unlock the door, nodding my head towards the note.

Suzanne took the yellow legal size paper off of my door, "Johnny," she begins to read the note aloud. "I'm sorry. Please forgive me. It wasn't me talking. I wasn't in the right mind. Give my apologies to the lady in red."

That is a good and proper use of the word lady.

"Hope to see you tomorrow, Samantha." Suzanne hands me the note, I crumple it up and toss it over the railing.

"See what a mess I've gotten myself into?" I chuckle a little bit, luckily, so does Suzanne.

"I see," she says with a sense of apathy.

We walk through the doorway and into my condo, Suzanne first, then me. I shut and lock the door behind us.

"Wow. I see how you could afford to buy these clothes." Suzanne's eyes are wandering around at the paintings and photographs on my wall.

"Well the photos are mine, but the paintings were done by others." Most of the paintings are just contemporary art, the kind of pieces that you would see in a museum, but done by local artists and others I've met throughout my life. Mostly colors over colors, with added colors.

"How much did these set you back?" Suzanne's voice still has a sense of awe to it, as if she has never seen a child's finger-painting done by an adult.

"Well, most of them I bartered for, doing portraits and head shots for guys and their girlfriends or families. I give them prints, and they give me paintings and sculptures and whatnot. Most artists don't have much money, so they barter or work for their shot at fame." I walk into my kitchen and turn on the kitchen light. I grab a beer from the fridge, hand it to her, and then grab another for myself. I turn on the living room light as I pass the switch on the wall.

I sit down on the couch but have no vivid imagination lapses. The couch is dead, for now.

"Ha, Old Style. I grew up on this trash." She opens her can of beer and begins to drink it like a thoroughbred after a race.

"Please, sit. You know about my crooked and crazy friends. How about telling me a bit about yourself." I figure I better get the conversation rolling, nothing is going to happen tonight, not the way I want it to.

Suzanne sits on the couch next to me, angles her body towards me, crosses her legs, and puts her hands on her knees, the way that a middle aged mother does when she sees a friend at the mall. This is not a good sign.

"Well, I work at my father's deli, obviously. I'm working on a degree in public relations at NYU. It's taking a bit longer than I want, but I figure it has to get done." She keeps gazing around the room at the paintings lining my walls.

"Why is that? It has to get done?" I ask to get her true opinion on this issue. College makes sense to some people, but going through it myself, it seemed like a bit of a joke.

"Well, the deli doesn't show a glimmer in my future. It gets us by, but I want to move on to bigger things, something stable. Isn't that why people go to school? To do something better with their lives?" The moonlight is shining bright on the couch, giving a sense of existentialism to the rest of the excessively dark room.

I get up and turn on the chandelier. "That's what I was told. Really though, it only helps some people. For most kids, it's just a four year vacation before the wall of reality stops them in their tracks. Finish school, and then, well, then you need to break down the wall to be able to move on. Seems easier to just get a job right out of public school. It seems like those that just get out of high school have a higher manipulation rate to employers. Employers can train them to do as they want and they are more likely to stay and work the ranks."

"Really?" She has a sound of partial agreement in her voice, but isn't fully sure of what I mean.

"Yeah. If you get work directly out of high school, then the foundation for your future is already laid out. You know what you are going to do for the rest of your life, and you get it done. Most jobs don't benefit from third-party training. A person with four years on a job is better off than a person that has four years of training in school, in the eyes of an employer. The best way to learn something, a trade or job, is full immersion, for instance, public relations. You'd be better off working up the ladder at a radio or television station than a person who gets a degree and tries to find work that they are either overqualified or under-qualified for. They end up working up the same ladder that you would, but now they have to play the debt game. Indebted to tuition, credit cards, car loans, and so on. They are obligated to find work where they can to pay their debt, whether it be fast food, retail, or whatever. It becomes a horrid cycle. The person right out of school is free to find placement where they please because they don't have to worry about debt. For the first time in history, it is financially not worth it to go to school. It costs more to go to college than the extra money you make in your lifetime, that is to say, if you do find decent work." I take a breath.

"But how would one get into the door of a profession without training? Without the piece of paper that society worked so hard to require?" She focuses her attention more on me than the paintings that she was previously stuck on.

Suzanne must think that I'm experienced in life matters, at least more than her. Although, that is the way I made it sound, like I know what the fuck I am talking about, like an economist.

I have to cut this short, getting too involved in this conversation can lead to a bad impression. Never talk politics, religion, or sex with any person that you want to remain on good terms with. "It takes time and effort to get a degree. What society no longer realizes is that most people are no smarter or better off coming out of college than they were going in. The degree is only worth what each individual puts into it. There is no determining factor that an employer can use to decide what a person learned

from school opposed to what a person taught themselves. Or, for that matter, how much better a person will be at a job that has a degree compared to those workers that came up the ranks with experience. At least an employer knows a person that has been in the field for some time is somewhat capable at a job. Businesses only long for degrees because suits write it in the paper or periodicals or say it on the television. That piece of paper is no judge on someone's ability to perform a job. That piece of paper was given by a class of elitists that make judgments on a person, judgments that are often unwarranted. I taught myself through school. It was easier to learn by reading and doing than listening to the opinions and rants of a professor that told me what a book or self experience taught him or her. Granting oneself the knowledge of a source by self research and examination is much more educational than the banter of a person. You only learn what you want to learn." I am taking this too far. I finish my beer and get up to go to the kitchen. "So where are you from?"

"Jersey. It's like one giant suburb of New York City but with more bums than a normal suburb. I moved here with my folks about six years ago to help with their business. My mother died shortly after. She was mugged visiting her friend in Chicago. My father never forgave himself for letting her go. That's why he is, as you so delicately put it, grumpy." She finishes her beer and shakes the can at me. "Can I get another one of these?"

I give an awkwardly creepy smile though I don't intend to, "By all means, take what you'd like."

This is not how I expected tonight to go. Only a girl with some real problems drinks this much. It's much more normal for a guy to enjoy such pleasures than a woman that is in the companionship of a strange man that she only met at a bar.

"What about you, what's your history?" She asks as she bends down and towards the fridge, displaying her slightly bent legs above the knees and the tightness of the dress around her youthful ass.

I can barely concentrate with this display of sex in front of me. Anxiety boosts my adrenaline and breaks my concentration.

"I'm from Paris, Illinois. Small town. Went to college out in Wisconsin and hopped a train here. My senior year, both of my parents died in a car wreck. Only thing they gave me was their life insurance policies. Ha," I chuckle, "as a matter of fact, it was in my brother's name since we were young, but he hung himself in high school. Guess they either forgot to change the beneficiary or didn't really care. Anyway, as the next of kin, it became mine. I took the checks and made the journey here. Never looked back, never had a second thought." All of this beer is really giving me loose lips.

There is a pause of silence in the air as I recall the sticker on her band's van. "You know you're band title? That's my line; I made that up."

"What? Our guitarist said he read it in some magazine, a poem in there." Suzanne speaks as she opens up her beer and begins to drink from the can.

"Yeah. It was a short-lived magazine I started. It's from one of my poems. Give me a camera, I'll shoot the moon, on New Year's Eve, all but without you." I pause and wait for some kind of epiphany from her that doesn't come. "I'm happy at least somebody liked it."

"What a small world. Well then, I guess you deserve some of the pay from tonight's show. How much of nothing do you want?" She begins giggling like a school girl that just got noticed by her crush. I can tell that she is getting quite drunk.

I know bands don't even get paid gas money for most of their shows, it happens, but it's a rare event. "How long have you guys been together?"

"Few months. I know the guys from school. They all share an apartment. Nice guys. Talented." She pauses, relocates her eyes to my necklace. "So, St. Christopher. You didn't plan on staying here very long, did you, travelling man?"

Suzanne seems to pick up on things pretty well. St. Christopher is the Patron Saint of travelers, as she hinted to earlier, and the precise reason that he shares my neckline. "No, not really. I was gonna take the insurance checks and go enjoy life. See all of the big cities. Leave everything behind, hold no attachments." As I look down at St. Christopher, I see a pack of cigarettes in my chest pocket. I pull out the pack of Luckies and light one. I hand the pack to Suzanne.

"Good God. Lucky Strikes? They've stood the test of time." She lights her cigarette off of mine. I can hear her voice fluctuate. She is definitely getting drunk. "So what's the deal with your name? Any history to it?"

Tell the truth. Tonight I break tradition. "I changed it. My real name is Anthony Fontini. Johnny Jones just holds no attachments. There are so many Johnny's in the states, and Jones, that's about as common as it gets. I just wanted to start new. I couldn't very well create a new life with a name given to me by my parents. I just wanted to get away from that, my past." She walks back into my living room and looks at my photographs. I get up with my beer and cigarette and stand next to her.

"Who are these people? Their faces look so raw. Not like someone posed them, like they don't want to be there." She sees what I was going for when I took these photographs.

I point a finger with my right hand while holding my beer at the same time, "I like to take pictures when people don't expect it. The pictures come out so much better when there is little reasoning or planning behind them. They just look true, or as you put it, raw. They tell the story in media res." I take her hand and walk her over to one of my more recent ventures. Her hand is so warm, so smooth, so right.

"When I was a kid, I used to spend a lot of time by myself at parks reading, writing, and just watching people really. One day I saw a few events that struck me. Some kids were lighting rockets, not the fireworks, but the kind you get at retail stores, the ones you can get engines for." I drink some of my beer. "Anyway, they were having the time of their lives. No one telling them what to do, not a care for the future, not thinking about life. No worries, just sheer enjoyment. I don't know why, but they were the happiest kids in the park. Well, about a month ago, I went to the park down the road and there was a man with his son, or step-son or something." It really is hard to tell these days who actually has kids and who married into a family and whoever else adopted. "So, similar situation, right? A kid and his rocket, but this kid had his father with him. It was no longer a carefree environment. Now this boy had his father watching over him, telling him how to do things, to be careful, and so on. Well, that takes most of the fun out

of it. Of course the kid is going to be careful with explosives in his face, but every father feels the need to reiterate this point. When you are told to do something that you already know needs to get done, you feel a little bit demoralized, at least that's what I've found to happen. So this new kid, with his father, had the enjoyment of shooting rockets taken away from him, the other kid, a long time ago, he loved it. He had a great time. The same event but with an overbearing father figure added to the story and freedom and pride withdrawn."

"You really do like psychology, huh?" Suzanne interjects.

I tilt my head down in typical philosophical thought. "Well, not so much what others like Freud or Carl Jung have written about, I think they are pretty much bullshitters. I like to figure things out on my own. Really there isn't a lot of evidence to prove a quick judgment of why people feel the way they do or do the things they do, it seems to be left up to perception. It's hard to justify an action by one past event or even a series of events. Freud and Jung were just the first to really research psychology, thus what they said was king, and will be, until someone else comes along with more evidence."

I need to get off of this politicized topic and finish my story. "So, this boy got frustrated with his father's presence, but the dad was still having a good time, assuming his son was too, not even knowing that he sucked the life right out of the kid. So I got this picture at just about that moment." The father is setting the rocket on the guiding rod and just behind him, to the side, is the boy, arms crossed, mind wandering, trying to figure out when that rocket extravaganza was going to be over and hoping for the time that he can shoot rockets on his own. "And that's the kind of emotion that can't really be staged, though it can look propped and planned to an untrained eye. That's what I try to capture with these pictures."

She is intrigued by this story, but I can tell she doesn't completely understand it. What artists try to portray in their work is rarely fully understood, even when explained. Shit, sometimes artists don't even understand their work.

"You've got quite a unique style here." Suzanne continues walking my walls.

I grab a couple of more beers. This might be a long night, and I need to keep my buzz going. While Suzanne is looking at my pictures and beginning her next beer, I walk over to the record player.

"Do you mind? I found a Temptations album on vinyl today. I'm curious to see how it plays." I look at the track list, *Just My Imagination (Running Away With Me)*, great song.

"Oh, please. I like them. Something about that old stuff just seems more pure and innocent. Don't know if it's true or not, but it satisfies me nonetheless." She is now looking at an old photo album by the television of my abstract images from when I was inspired by early 20<sup>th</sup> century photographers like Stieglitz and Weston.

I walk up behind her. "Would you?" I put my hand out, the international sign that I'd like to dance.

Suzanne looks over her shoulder as replies, "Sure." She sets her beer on one of my decorative end tables, the cheap kind you get at IKEA or some other place like that.

I set mine down too.

We dance slowly, but not holding each other too close. How did we get from not knowing one another to this in a matter of hours?

"So," I say as Suzanne is still viewing images around the room over my shoulder, "I don't mean to ruin the mood, but what made you come out tonight, not knowing me and all?" God I hope this doesn't ruin the mood.

She looks me in the eyes and stares silently for a short while. "Well, to be honest, I don't really have anything else going. Most girls probably would have stayed as far away from you as possible, but I've seen you around the shop just about everyday for the past few weeks, and I just imagined you to be harmless. I thought about it for a while, and it isn't much different than being asked out at a bar, still someone you don't know. Instead of cutting out the middleman, you kind of added one."

I understand what she means. I could have just walked in and asked her out at the deli like a number of other normal individuals would have done, instead of going through what turned out to be her father.

Suzanne continues speaking, "Honestly, I was involved until about a week ago, so I guess your timing is either really good or well planned out." She gives me a playful nudge with her fist.

"Oh, I had no idea." I really didn't. "Normally I wouldn't have even tried anything like this. It just seemed to fall into my lap today." It really did. Things just kind of worked out, really well actually.

"What do you mean, fell into your lap?" She sounds curious, or maybe even offended.

"Well, this morning, work had a bomb threat. Odd, right? Well, then I was coming home to figure out what the hell to do today, and I saw you going into the store down the street. You seemed to want the dress, but you didn't leave with it." I pause for effect, like Clark Gable. "So, I got it, brought it to your work, had nothing to write with or on so I put that advertisement in the box; ironically enough, you were going to be playing there anyways. And then I showed up. Nothing seems to work out that way. For some reason, today did. Today just kind of fell into place. And, now we're here, and I am glad things worked out this way." If I'd known things would work out this well, I would have bought that dress weeks ago.

The record ended. 45's really don't hold as much music as anyone would like. Should I go flip it or continue dancing here? Suzanne let go of me, I guess I'll go flip it.

"You seem really nice. Humble and honest." Her words are beginning to run together. It sounded more like 'humlenest.'

I guess her last beer was a bad idea. This is getting really unattractive.

"Thanks." We should really continue breaking our sexual tensions or go to sleep. It is getting late and she is getting too drunk to look beautiful anymore. Ironically enough, I'm partial to the latter idea.

Suzanne inquires seductively, "Johnny?" Her eyes are wandering and her head is bobbling.

"Yeah?" This is the first time she calls me by name. It feels good.

She kind of plops down on the couch, her upper-half strung over the arm rest. She doesn't say anything else. I guess she found her limits on beer tonight.

I turn off the record player and walk over to her. I pull off her right shoe and set her leg on the couch. Red panties. I guessed wrong. I take her other shoe off and put her left leg on the couch. I reposition her body to lay down and get a blanket and a pillow from the closet.

While I am at the closet she repositions herself in a drunken sleep to get more comfortable.

I whisper to myself, "Tonight, I'm a gentleman." I guess some traditions are hard to break. I grab my camera and snap a picture of this, this is too real to pass up.

I leave her snuggling my couch.

Turn off the lights, head on my pillow.

## Chapter 15

Upon awakening the next morning, I roll out of bed. I walk to the kitchen and start a pot of coffee. Suzanne is still sprawled out on the couch, her breasts pressed closely together, the blanket over her legs.

Grab some clothes, head into the shower. Cold water.

"What the fuck?" the orange tinned hair grease is not coming out easy. Three sessions of shampoo and it's still there. "I guess I'll leave it in? Fuck."

I comb my hair, straight back. Get dressed. Get coffee. Suzanne isn't on the couch. "Suzanne?" I ask from the crossway of my kitchen and my living room.

There is a note on the table, I guess some traditions aren't going to break.

This piece of yellow paper I am happy to read.

Johnny,

Thank you for a delightful evening and wonderful set of garments. I hope all went well last night. Hope you don't mind, I took a cup of coffee for the road. Strong. Call me.

Suzanne

5557259 XXXX

"Hugs? Well, at least she didn't just book it out the door. What time is it?" the clock reads 11:49. Seems about right. "This coffee isn't too strong. Guess people have their own preferences."

I clean up the cans and cigarette butts from the night before. As I open the door to get the morning paper, I see a note on the door, yellow paper, something I surely don't want to read. Tradition.

Johnny. I stopped by and knocked on the door, but you didn't answer. I'll stop by later.

-Samantha XOXOXO

"Oh great, she's gonna be pissed next time I see her." I think over my two options: seek out Samantha and solve this problem now, or let her find me and bring her emotional baggage with her. If I go to find her, I will seem overly interested in her problems. If I wait for her to find me, I risk another case of bad timing and her being even more angry with me for not calling her.

"Fuck this."

I bring the morning paper to my table. "Feds Pushing Limits?" is the headline. The article is about where the limits stand for government nationalization of companies and banks and where tyranny breaks the barrier. "I am too out of it to think about this."

I walk down the hall and pick up my cell phone from my dresser. I call up Samantha. I figure a call is in between me seeking her out and her finding me. Sometimes it's best just to stay on middle ground.

"Samantha. Leave a message." Her voicemail is short and simple, kind of a rare thing with cell phones.

I don't bother to leave a message. She will see my number on her missed calls and get back to me back right away, or she will decide to stop by. Whatever, I'm not going to waste time worrying about it.

My stomach is grumbling.

I need to go out and get more beer for tonight, and I should go eat something anyways.

As I am walking to a greasy spoon down the road, I notice a headline on one of the local 'scene' papers about the Camaros in Santa Monica. "Band Performance Well Received by Local Fans." Surprising, they have fans. Not surprising, the critics like them.

I catch the door of the restaurant as a tall gentleman is walking out. I make my way directly to the back corner. I always take the corner booth seat, even though I eat alone. It's nice to not feel cramped when I eat my eggs.

The waitress comes over to me with steaming coffee, no notepad, and asks, "Mr. Jones. Will it be the usual?"

This waitress serves me every Saturday. Christina. A very attractive college student. Very attractive.

"Yes. Please. Oh, and Christina, can I get a new ash tray?" I ask, the same as I always do on a Saturday.

For some reason, this place doesn't like to keep empty ash trays on the tables, no place does.

I find myself coming here for the outfits that the waitresses wear. They have a classic 1950's feeling to them, pantyhose, skirt, heels.

As with most things, the outfits here really turn me on and send me on my day with a smile on my face.

Christina takes my order and walks to the counter. She never goes around, but instead bends over to leave the order on a stack behind the counter. This gives me a chance to check out her legs and ass, another reason I take the corner booth; high visibility and low profile, a splendid view.

I lift Christina up on the counter. We start hot and heavy, lips locked, bodies tense. I run my hands down her shoulders, over her busty chest, down her waist, take off her lacy underwear. The restaurant is empty. Her head tilts back as I glide my hand up her inner thigh.

"Here you are Mr. Jones. And a warm up for your coffee." Christina pours some steaming coffee into my cup.

"Thanks." I say as I hold the cup steady for her, as if there is a risk of it going somewhere.

The peppers and eggs are fine as usual. The diner is just a good place to pass the time when I need to. I leave a fifty on the table and walk out of the door and, after pausing momentarily, decide to walk towards my work. I might as well get the story of yesterday's assumed terrorist invasion, like everything is these days.

"Hey man." There is a younger sounding man behind me, watching me walk away, hoping I will turn around and acknowledge him.

I just toss him the rest of my pack over my shoulder. I have more.

## Chapter 16

I can see a man in business attire through the window of my work. He is with what can only be either a trophy wife or his daughter. I hear him speaking as I walk in and pass behind the couple.

"Yes, I like the use of negative space." He sounds like all of the other spectators, looking at something that they surely don't understand.

There really is no use of negative space. It's usually not used for the purpose of making a picture or painting seem larger, or give an existential feel, or purposely given a visual intellectual feel; it's often because the artist really had no idea of how to fill in the space. It's a rare time when negative space is planned before a work is created, and is actually aesthetically pleasing.

"The artist's use of complimentary colors is extravagant. The clash here between the blazing red and this oak wood brown. Oh, I love it." He claps his hands in excitement, flamboyantly.

Another fish on the line. This guy has no idea what he is talking about, nor what he is in for.

As I walk by him, I see his hand on the lady's rear and wonder about the validity of their relationship. Is she even of age? She looks young. Real young.

I continue walking and pass another couple looking at a darker, more macabre piece.

"Oh my. I'm awestruck by the vast area of black on this piece. I really get an uneasy feeling when I look at this." He is holding his hands in a square shape and looking through his hands at the piece. "Not a very well-balanced piece, but for some reason it works." Another man dating what is probably a college art student looking for gifts in trade of favors.

Though I doubt he knows his art, he is right. That's just it with art, either it works for you or it doesn't. It's often as simple as that. The piece is off putting, but pleasing at the same time. It is all up to the viewer. This guy summed up six years of a college master's in art. A person's artistic knowledge and education in art history matters not.

I see one of my colleagues at the information desk. "Abigail," I speak sternly for her attention.

Abigail works as a customer servant, walking potential buyers and donors around the building, giving them whatever it is that they want in order to make a purchase.

"What happened yesterday?" I ask her.

"Hey Johnny," she always addresses me with the same perky voice. "Um, nothing really I guess. Some punk kids called in a scare. Cops traced the line and got them. Some high school kids bored with their summer I guess. They called into a few places yesterday."

"Sounds about right, kids will always raise their havoc. Anything unusual happen today?" I enjoy talking to Abigail. She is well spoken and always has a good disposition.

"Well, actually yeah, somebody in a dress, a nice dress by the way, stopped in. She looked kind of classy. Well, she left this. Something I should know? She was really pretty." She reaches under the counter and grabs a folded piece of paper.

Abigail hands me a note, folded into a little square. Nothing written on the outside. "Nothing you need to know, just a friend. She say anything else?"

"Nope. Just to give this to you if you stopped in today. Thought maybe she was your cousin or something. Too pretty for your usual run of the mill floozy." She nudges my arm and winks.

She has a point. I keep my real-life standards pretty low. I've shuffled through a fair share of women lately. Nothing to write home about though. "Thanks Abigail. Do me a favor, educate these saps on art, would you?" I make a hitch-hiker's fist and shake it at the two couples in the building.

"Sure thing Johnny." She must be taking me seriously because she walks right over to the second couple that I saw and immediately starts talking with them.

I walk outside and light a cigarette. Good thing I bought so many packs yesterday.

I unfold the note.

Hey. Thanks again for last night. Nice place. I need your help though. I'm at work and really don't want to be. Call in and get me out of here. My father can be a real pain with me.

Suzanne

This is a good sign. I guess I really didn't creep her out last night.

As I leave my work I walk to a store down the street, between work and home. I pick up a case of beer and some more squares and go back to my condo.

As I approach my condo stairs I pull out the note and reread it. "What time do I call in? What time did she leave the note? What do I say?" Talking to myself is pointless. "I'll figure it out after I calm down."

As I round the corner and walk up the stairs, I see Samantha smoking outside of my condo. I quickly stuff the note back in my pocket before I approach her.

"Samantha. Fancy you being here." I say as I set the case of beer down.

"I, uh, I have to apologize." She stutters, but I can tell that she is at least free of any kind of inebriants.

"Inside. Come." I open the door and let her in. I pick up the case of beer and walk directly to the fridge and start to stock it with my pleasureables in cans.

"I'm so sorry about last night. I truly am." Samantha speaks with sincerity in her voice. "Please do forgive me. You're all I have here, as little as it may seem to you." She sits at the table.

"I do Samantha. But you have to drop those junkies you're with, or you are headed for disaster kiddo." Kiddo is a nickname I use for her because she came to me for advice for so long. I kind of think of her as a little sister, probably why I put up with so much of her shit.

She makes some hand gestures, looks up at me, and says, "I know. I mean I did."

I give her a stare as she talks and I sit at the table.

"I will. I w-i-l-l." Samantha drags out the last will.

She seems to be getting the point, I'm not going to deal with this shit much longer.

"I don't have a problem helping you, being there for you, but you need to shape up. You almost ruined a good thing for me last night." That may not be the best choice of words, but it works. I have to get MY point across.

Samantha snuffles, then says, "I appreciate it. I really do, you giving me another chance. Hug?" She pushes away from the table and stands up.

I do the same.

She puts her head on my shoulder and starts to tear up.

I grab her sternly and say, "I need you to do something for me though. Tonight has to be my night. No interruptions from you. No hanging out with those addicts either. Understood?" She is a good kid when it comes down to it, just needs some guidance.

She smiles, "You got it. Thank you so much."

She wet my shoulder pretty well with her tears.

I grab her some tissues. "Here." I grab her some coffee too. "Drink this. Settle down." All she wants is someone to care, I see this more and more as our friendship goes on.

"Thank you Johnny. I'm taking a train to Connecticut to see my parents tonight. Maybe getting out of this place for a few hours will do me some good." She sips her coffee.

It really would, for me. Just get away for tonight, I need tonight for me. Just get the fuck out of my face for a night.

"How are your parents?" I ask, as if they mean anything to me.

"They're good, thanks." She says and then sips her coffee.

I never got around to telling her about my parents. She probably just thinks they retired to Arizona or something, like all elderly couples from the Midwest tend to do.

"I'm glad I caught you. My train leaves in about an hour. Don't want to miss it." At least she still has a sense of time, if nothing else. "Say, can I borrow a few bucks? I didn't pick up my check last night."

"Sure. Here." I give her two-hundred from my pocket. This sure is one expensive weekend. "Enjoy yourself. When you get back we can talk some more. Be safe." I stand up, kind of my way of letting her know it is time to leave.

I kind of feel bad for pushing her to go, but I don't want to deal with this shit right now.

"Thanks. I'll call when I get back." She hugs me again.

I can hear the money crumpling in her hand by my ear. She is fucking counting it in front of me, I think to myself. She grabs me tight, releases her hold, and walks away.

Good riddance. I grab her cup and put it in the sink. I can hear the door shut as I walk down the hall to the phone to call Suzanne's work. I'll wing it, off the top of my head. I never have been good at planning a conversation.

"Hello. Photzky's deli." It isn't any voice I recognize.

"Hello. This is one of Suzanne's teachers at NYU, Mr. Smith." Keeping the information as vague as possible will be best. "I need to speak to her about one of her assignments for next semester. A book she is supposed to read by the end of summer. This is the number she gave me. Is she in?"

He doesn't even pause the conversation, "Sure pal. Hold on."

He won't remember what I say after he makes his next sandwich, it isn't important enough.

"Hello?" Suzanne must be a good actress because she sounds surprised to be getting a call.

I can see her rolling her eyes in my mind. Bending her arms at the elbows and twisting her hands, palms facing up, to look confused for anyone that can see her.

"Suzanne. It's Johnny." I say.

"Uh huh. Really?" She pauses momentarily. "Is it that important?" She pauses again. "I'll be there in twenty minutes." She hangs up.

That didn't go badly at all. She did all the work. Hopefully I get all the credit.

I slide her underwear slowly down her legs, around her ankles, and drop them on the floor. She unbuckles my belt and unzips my pants. Her hand slides from my navel to my groin.

## Chapter 17

The long awaited knock comes to the door. I put my cigarette out and hop up. I walk over to the door and open it, grinning like a perverted old man that sees the newspaper delivery boy. "Suzanne. Come in." I sway my hand towards the living room.

"Thanks for doing that. You know, calling in for me. What did you tell him anyways?" She lays her purse on the couch.

I laugh a little, exposing my weak integrity. "I was Mr. Smith, one of your professors for next semester, and I needed to talk to you about a book you need to read."

"Ha. Nice cover." She sits down on the couch, making herself at home. "Sorry about this morning. I had to work, obviously."

"No problem at all. You kind of dropped like bricks last night. Glad you got off all right this morning." I grab her a cup of coffee from my third pot for the day.

"Thank you. I need this. I hope I'm not being too formal showing up like this. I couldn't very well go home if I left work early." She speaks without even looking at me. She is holding the coffee cup like a mug of hot cocoa.

"It's my pleasure to have you again, anytime, really." I sit down next to her on the couch and turn on the TV.

"Oh. Is it all right if I use your shower? I didn't get a chance before work. I hope it's okay." She gets up as she asks me.

"By all means." I stand up and grab a clean towel from the linen closet. "You've got to run the hot water for a little while. Everything you need is in the medicine cabinet. Anything special you need, something I am forgetting to tell you about?"

"No. Not at all. This is good, thanks." She slowly closes the door, staring at me directly while doing so.

I am slow at backing away from the bathroom. I must look like a degenerate to her.

I sit on the couch and turn on channel 7. "Stand By Me. Good Saturday movie." I get up to close my windows and draw the shades. "It is hot today." I turn on the air conditioner. I sit on the couch and relax my mind.

Suzanne is completely in the nude, lying on my couch. She is laying across the couch, twisted at her hips. Her head is kept up by the armrest. I take off my shirt and move towards her, crouch over her, kissing her navel, her stomach, her chest, her neck, her lips, I nibble her right earlobe. She begins to fondle me.

I awaken from a short catnap and hear the water shut off in the shower.

"Showering at my place so soon, life doesn't work like this." There has to be something really wrong with Suzanne. As much as I imagined this situation working, this can't be my reality.

Her purse is sitting next to me on the couch. I open it up, just to take a peak; to explore what reality actually is. There is a bottle of pills, prescription. The label reads, 'Xanax.' A sticker on the bottle says, 'do not mix with alcohol.' "These little things must throw all inhibition to the wind. Also explains why she passed out so damn early last night."

I can hear Suzanne close the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. I put the pills back into her purse and close zip it back up. I can't chance her seeing me looking through her things. I really shouldn't have done that.

The bathroom door opens. Suzanne comes out with a towel in her hair and another around her body, covering her from mid thigh to chest. She walks right to me on the couch, not saying a word. Straddles me, her knees at my sides. I can feel the warmth from her body heat radiate onto me. I begin to get aroused. She kisses me. The steam is still coming off of her body from the shower. I sit back. She unbuckles my pants. She drops her towel.

"Johnny?" Suzanne peaks her head out of the bathroom door and shouts down the hall.

I get up from the couch and walk down the hall, maybe I can at least sneak a peak. "Yes? Something wrong?" I can barely sustain from shoving the door open and taking her right here.

"I know this sounds stupid, but I don't have a change of clothes and these stink of deli meats. I really should have thought about that before I got in here." She pulls the door open a little bit more.

Suzanne is wearing nothing but a towel, just covering her front.

"Do you have anything I can wear, and then maybe we can go shopping? I need a new outfit anyways." She says while giving the beady eyes that any girl gives when they really want something.

"Uh, yeah." I grab an old outfit of mine from the closet. It's just a t-shirt and dress pants, a pair of boxers, but that's just about all I own.

She sure is going to look unattractive in this outfit.

I say as I walk from my room toward the bathroom, "Here you go. Sorry I don't have anything better."

The medicine cabinet is slightly open, and, in clear view. I catch a look in the reflection. The back of her towel isn't wrapped all of the way around her body with the small of her back and the upper part of her butt exposed. She really has a nice ass, as expected. It looks so delicate and smooth.

"Thank you." She shuts the door, slowly, keeping eye contact with me the whole time. "These will do," she yells from the other side of the door.

Am I supposed to buy her clothes? I grab some more money from my fire safe. This sure is an expensive weekend. I walk to the couch and sit back down.

Suzanne walks out of the bathroom. She has lost all of her beauty in these clothes.

"Not my style, but they'll do, for now." She laughs as she remarks about her attire.

Suzanne looks shy and out of her element.

"Ha. I think we need to get you changed, quick." She just seems so normal in these clothes.

Just normal.

"All right, let's go." She grabs her purse.

Maybe I won't have to pay for anything.

"Where to?" I ask her, really having no idea where we are about to go. I have no idea where a woman would go to shop in this area.

"Grab a cab to Fifth Ave? Take it from there I guess? Deal?" She doesn't seem so sure.

I assume she knows what she is talking about, I sure don't.

We hail a cab from the side of the road, it doesn't take long. The cab smells like the body odor of young boys. We must be at the end of the cab driver's shift. Usually the cabs are clean and don't have an unpleasant odor, something that you wouldn't expect if you haven't been in one.

The entire ride downtown, the driver is giving me a weird, inquisitive look in the mirror. I realize that he thinks she is my purchased pleasure for the evening because of what she is wearing; her 'I have been shamed' clothes on.

Maybe tomorrow his assumptions will become a reality for me.

"Thanks." I give him forty dollars. I really should carry around smaller bills.

Suzanne gets out first, being the one closest to the sidewalk. She holds the door open for me.

I can't even get a good look at her ass. These clothes are so unflattering.

"Uh, this way I guess." She starts off northward.

"You usually shop around here?" Really, it doesn't make a difference to me, but I figure that I'll initiate some kind of conversation.

"Not too often. Outlet stores fit my budget more. I need some classy clothes anyways though." She points at a store on our side of the street. "Here. I usually only window shop here, but I like the looks of that outfit."

The store has some trendy retro clothing. Normally, I'd dislike this decision, but I get a kick out of women in retro clothes. I get a kick out of women in any stylized outfit. Like I said before, just about anything turns me on.

The store has a musty smell to it, not like the smell of old clothes, but as if the shop hasn't been kept up to par.

Suzanne starts handing me some outfits, a lot of dark clothing. I'm sure she looks good in these clothes, I'm sure she looks good in anything but my clothes.

"I'd better get some underwear too. Mind helping me pick something out? Grab some outfits while I go look for a nice pair. It'd be nice to have an outsider's opinion." She is still looking through the racks while she talks and doesn't bother to look at me.

"I'd love to," I say with a glee in my voice. In actuality, I would. I don't know why I like clothes shopping, must be watching women change into whatever I tell them to, like being able to dress your own personal, sexual mannequin.

We spread apart from each other. The clothes she gave me have her size on them.

Nice black halter top. Black looks good on almost any woman. I walk the racks alone, creating an even larger pile in my arms. White tights. Black skirt. Black high heels. Wonderful. This will do just fine.

I've found over the years that white stockings and black clothes give "The Anne Frank Effect." Most guys don't admit to it because it sounds so negative, but a lot of men like pale skin and dark hair, white stockings, "The Anne Frank Effect."

"So, Johnny," Suzanne walks up next to me, "care to help me decide on some clothes?"

"Sure." I say.

We walk to the dressing room. She takes the clothes from me, and I wait on a bench in the 'waiting area'; the place that poor male souls have to sit when their girlfriends shop. It doesn't bother me, I enjoy this kind of thing.

I take this break in tradition. You normally don't get this kind of interaction with one night stands or working girls.

Suzanne walks out of the dressing room door. "Yes, no?" she wavers her hand left to right. She is unsure of this outfit.

I take her visual clues and respond, "I don't know. Doesn't suit you well." Hopefully I read her right.

"Yeah. I don't think so either." She walks back into the dressing room.

Suzanne peaks her head out of the door. "Can you come here Johnny?" I stand up and walk into the small room. It is about a four foot by six foot room. There is a mirror on the back of the door. She is in only a bra and panties. She pushes me against one of the sidewalls, kissing me frantically. I unclasp her bra. She pulls down her panties and kicks them off to the side. I take off my pants. She grabs my crotch.

"Johnny?" Suzanne peaks her head out of the doorway, "can you come here a second?"

I look around to see if anyone is near us. "Sure." I walk in cautiously.

"Can you zip up the back of this dress?" She has one hand behind her back, holding the zipper, and her other holding up her hair.

I make a noise, "Mhmm." The dress is tight to her figure.

I zip it up and put my hands on her shoulders from behind, pushing with my left hand and pulling with my right. She turns around, and I step back to get a good look.

I speak, "Now that is you. It fits great and looks adorable."

"Let me see." She turns to the mirror. She swivels her upper body sideways and looks herself over. "I do like it. Thanks." She pushes me towards the door.

I sit back on the bench. Moments later, she comes out in the outfit that I chose. She looks amazing. "That, is gorgeous. You look amazing. Absolutely stunning."

"Really? It doesn't look too casual? You think I could wear this to any occasion?" She is trying to see her back by tilting her head over her shoulder and looking at the mirror through the open dressing room door.

I realize that I am quickly becoming a friend to her and no longer a viable option for dating, or screwing. If we became friends too quickly, I won't get the chance to move into a relationship.

I say assertively, "I like it. Why don't you wear it out?"

By pushing her to leave, I am seen as an authoritative, more intimate friend. I can move out of this awkward friendship stage that we are rapidly approaching.

"You don't think I should try on any of the others?" She asks as she walks towards me. "We've got all day?"

"Yeah. Wear it out. We'll go watch a movie, grab something to eat..." I try to suggest to her things that seem more intimate than friendly.

"All right. I suppose I can just shop some other time." She pulls the tags off the clothes that she has on.

When we get to the register, she pulls out her credit card.

"I got it." I say.

Friends don't buy clothes for one another; buying clothes for each other is something people do when they are in a relationship. This is the move I make. I pull out some cash, my gangster roll.

"You sure? It wasn't my intention to have you pay." She keeps her card out. "I got it, put it on my card." She says to the cashier.

"Please," I hand my cash to the clerk, "it's her birthday. I can't have her buying clothes on her birthday." I say a little fun fib to lighten the mood.

"Well, happy birthday." The cashier speaks as she takes my money.

Suzanne chuckles briefly. "Thank you." She punches my arm, harder than a friendly nudge.

"Here you go." The cashier hands me the change with a congratulatory smile.

I take my money and turn to Suzanne, "Any movie in particular you want to see?" I hold the door open for her as we exit the store.

"How about we pick one up and head back to your place? We don't even know the times for any shows and I don't want to wait around a theater." She grabs my hand and leads me down the street.

I am playing this hand perfectly.

## Chapter 19

We walk to a small scale movie store in the area. The prices are high, but they often have movies you can't find in your typical chain store, and I like that; it's why they continue to get my business.

"You like dramas?" Suzanne asks me as she turns towards me to judge my reaction.

"It all depends. Why don't you just pick out a movie and I'll let you know." I let her wander around the store.

I don't bother to see what she is getting. Maybe she will like the sense of surprising me.

As I walk towards the popcorn display I see that there is a section of movie posters in a bin. Scarface is the front poster, Pacino in black and red trim around the poster.

Though it's a great movie, every asshole in college and living in poverty has one in their bedrooms, or kitchens, for that matter. It's like a sign to show how big of a fuck you are, like any of those dicks are ever going to start a drug cartel and take over Hollywood from the ground up. What a bunch of assholes.

I see Suzanne walk over to the register and pay for a movie. I wait until the transaction is over and then approach her. "What did you get?" I am kind of curious, but at the same time I really don't care because all I want to do is get in her pants. All I want to do is break tradition.

Suzanne replies, "You'll find out soon enough. Keep you on edge."

She is playing mind games.

"Ha. I'm very curious." I play along. "You play rough."

The credits seize and the opening scene begins. Suzanne leans her head onto my lap. She puts one hand on my knee. The lights are dim. Popcorn scents the air. I put my left hand on her side. She slides her hand up the top of my thigh. I slide my hand down hers. She unbuckles my belt. I slide my hand up the front of her skirt. Her breathing is heavy. Her breath is hot.

## Chapter 20

As we walk back to my condo, I make Suzanne stop with me at a fine wine shop.

As I hold the door open, she lights a cigarette and says, "I'll just wait out here. Pick something good, something white, something sweet."

I don't think much of it and I walk in at my lonesome.

I really don't know much about wine. There is a lady behind the counter, but she looks rather young to be a connoisseur of such a vice. I walk to the back corner where they keep moderately priced wines. Luckily there is a man stocking some bottles.

He looks to be in his forties. He can help me out.

"Can I help you find something in particular?" He is still stocking the bottles as he asks.

"Uh. Yeah. I need something sweet, maybe something white." I figure that by giving him more information than just sweet, it doesn't make me look like a complete novice, but as if I know something about the subject.

"Any particular price range?" He turns to look at me, face to face.

It's a common practice. By staring at a customer when they are put under that kind of pressure, they tend to spend more than they had initially planned.

I say, "What do you have in mind? Show me a few choices." If I set a limit for him, he won't go under it. In fact, he will go slightly over it.

He shows me three bottles, three very different prices. I take his middle priced choice, and for that, I am a sucker.

Salesmen will usually give you three choices: one at the high price end, a middle ground, and a cheap choice. The high price is more for people who are with their significant other; not wanting to look like a cheapskate, a man will often buy the high end bottle. The cheap choice is put into the mix to make you feel like a poor fuck if you buy that one. It really isn't an option in the eyes of a salesman. However, the middle priced bottle is slightly over half of the price of the expensive one. Since it is almost a guarantee that the customer will buy it, it is better for the salesman to push the price up without making the bottle look too expensive, at least in comparison to the high priced bottle.

I fall for it, knowing the setup.

"Thanks for the advice." I buy the bottle and grab the bag from the young cashier.

Suzanne is still smoking as I walk out of the door.

There was a decent walk back to my condo, so I suggest to Suzanne that we make a stop at the park.

"That sounds nice. It's a beautiful day." She is very compliant with anything that I offer.

As we are walking, she tells me stories of her childhood. From what I gather, she kind of lost a role-model in her mother's death.

"It was like I was supposed to grow up at that point. But really, I couldn't." She continues her story. "I was only fourteen. It was real tough on me."

Holy shit. That means she is only... twenty. I made a rule about not getting involved with anyone more than four years younger than me. Normally

it wouldn't bother me so much if a woman was younger, but there are a lot of life differences between twenty-eight and twenty. How old does she think I am?

"I imagine it was pretty tough." I respond.

I need to re-evaluate this new information.

I ask, "So how long have you been in college?"

Suzanne slaps her hands on her hips, like she just told a joke and says, "Coming up on senior year. I know. How can I be so young as a senior, right?"

She says something about graduating high school early because of her grades.

I guess I should have known she was pretty young when she told me last night that she is in college, but she seems pretty mature and doesn't look that young, not really anyways. Does she?

As we approach the park, I tell her that I need to use the restroom. She says she will be by the grass.

I need to think about this. This is something that needs to be taken seriously, not a light situation, at least not for me.

"All right, I'll meet you over there." I point to a grassy hill. I walk around the back of the bathroom and light a cigarette.

"OK, she's twenty. That's young. She hasn't even really dealt with real life yet. How much life experience could she have had?" I am talking aloud as I pace back and forth along the brick walls of the lone building of a restroom. "But she doesn't act young, does she?" It is beginning to make a little bit more sense. That's why she took the dress and a chance with me, a stranger, someone that could have been a psychotic killer. She is naïve to the world around her.

It was like buying toys for a kid to win his affection, like a stepfather or businessman that's never home. "That's why she didn't drink in the bar, why she didn't go inside the wine shop, why she's on those damn anti-depressants. She can't cope. She's from the Prozac generation." I make a tally sheet in my head of positive and negative things about Suzanne, kind of like a married couple with children would do when they are thinking about divorce. She comes out in the positive side, so far as I can tell. I never was good at math.

"What the fuck am I doing? She's gorgeous, mature, intelligent." As far as I know at least. Besides, I just want to get laid. "Why should her age matter so much?" There is a man walking by with his son, balloons in hand. He looks disgusted in my conversation with myself.

"I'd better just play this thing out. I'll get over her age." I'm sure the man and his kid will be thinking about that statement for a while.

I light another cigarette as I walk towards the hill so that I look more natural. Suzanne is a smoker, she'll know what I am doing. All smokers light up when they get out of an outdoor public restroom, force of habit.

I sit down next to her, a grassy hill, right under the clouds.

"I figured you would like this spot. Right under the clouds." She looks at me.

I smile as I say, "You were right."

We lay down on the hill. Suzanne puts her head on my chest. We are laying perpendicular to each other. I can fall asleep here forever.

We haven't spoken much, so I bring up some more history of my previous life. "You know, I am a twin, was a twin. My brother died at birth."

Suzanne looks at me, confused.

"I'm sorry. What was his name?" She asks cautiously.

It is really odd timing for a story of this nature. I don't know why I decide to bring this story up now, when we are both in a great mood. Subconsciously I know it is to show vulnerability.

"John." I say as I look up at the sky. "My mother always blamed me. She never said it aloud, but with her actions. She always expected more out of me, like I owed it to John and her to make something of my life. Since he didn't have a chance at this world, I had to live to twice the standard. Sometimes I think they crashed on purpose, my parents, a way to get out of their lives without ruining their legacy to others. I think they couldn't handle it. I don't know how I would handle something like that." I stay quiet for a moment.

She says, "Well, you seem to be doing all right for yourself."

She gives me reassurance, reassurance that I've needed since the crash.

"You don't talk about yourself much to others, do you?" Suzanne asks.

I don't. I ran from everything I could have had. Everything I had, years ago: family, extended family I mean, and friends. I started new. But I guess your past really does shape you, no matter how hard you try to get away.

"No. No I don't. I'm sorry. Not something we should be talking about." I start stroking her hair. She really must be trying to get away from something herself, taking a chance with me and all. A normal woman, an older woman, would not be this attached after such a short time.

"Look at that one. Kind of looks like a train blowing out smoke." She points to a cloud at three o'clock.

My three o'clock.

"Yeah. It does." This is a good break in conversation. I vented my piece for today. It'll be nice to just relax.

Suzanne points out a few more. They are all spot on to what she says she sees in them. Our cloud psychology is copasetic. She can see that I am content.

After a while of lying, we sit up. She leans her head on my shoulder. I support myself by straightening one arm to the ground and locking my elbow. I keep my other hand stroking her hair.

"Ha. Look at that couple. He looks guilty of something." She points out a younger pair of coeds.

They look to be mid teens I suppose, maybe late teens.

She asks, "What do you think he did?"

I take a good look at him. "I don't think he did anything. He looks like he is holding a secret though. He probably plans on breaking it off. I don't think it's so much of a guilty look, but depressed. Like he doesn't want to do it, he is having second thoughts about breaking it off. They've probably been dating a while."

"I could see that." Again, she is compliant with almost every word I said.

Naïve.

## Chapter 21

A lot of time has passed here at the park. Watching people without their knowledge and viewing clouds really isn't the same with someone sharing the experience with me. My mind isn't as open and free as I like it to be.

"Let's get some takeout and head back, cool?" My hand is still planted in Suzanne's hair.

"Sounds good. I'm really hungry." She says, annunciating the hu in hungry.

Her stomach has been growling. I felt it with her laying so close to me.

"What do you have in mind? Chinese? I love the boxes that the food comes in." She says as she places my hand on her stomach to feel the rumbling, like a pregnant woman holding her husband's hand to feel the baby kick.

We stand up, I grab the bags, and we start walking away from the park.

"Chinese? I really haven't had Chinese food since living above that market. Kind of ruins my longing for Chinese." That damn fish smell. "Pizza? There's a place by my condo that has some decent Chicago style kind of knock-off pizza."

"Sure." She says, compliant. "Who doesn't like pizza?"

"It's hard to find some good Chicago style pizza here in New York. Some things are just better in different regions I guess. My grandmother always said it was the water used, specific to Chicago, New York, Italy, wherever." God, sometimes I really do think like a wop, a real grease-ball upbringing.

"You should have brought your camera to the park. Some good facial expressions were there." She says as she readjusts her foot in the heels we just bought, while walking awkwardly and bracing herself with one hand on my shoulder.

"I should have, but I probably would have focused it more on you." I set the line. Now, quickly divert the conversation. "Let's get a cab, those heels have to be painful to walk uptown in."

"Oh God yes. Thank you. I thought you were going to make us walk the whole way." She says, as if asking to get a cab has not crossed her mind.

We hail the first cab we see. I get in first so that, when we get out, she will get out first, and I can watch her from behind.

"So how'd things go with Samantha? Did she ever get back to you?" Suzanne asks.

Why is she bringing that up? Really ruins the mood.

"Yeah, this morning. She went to see her folks, so she won't be invading us this evening, no worries." I hope she caught that damn train. Now I'm worried.

"Good. No interruptions tonight. She's gone." Suzanne seems extravagant about it, and she should be. "No worries. Just us."

I'm glad that conversation is over.

We pull up to my condo. Suzanne looks great in those clothes, quite flattering. I grab our bags, exit the cab, and we walk up to my door.

"What about the pizza?" She is confused asking this.

"I'll just have it delivered. We gotta get you out of those heels," I comment.

She is still walking like she's missing a toe.

"Great. Great idea." She walks in and takes off her shoes on the couch and lays down, legs draped over the armrest of my couch.

It is cold in my condo. I forgot to turn the air off before we left for the store. I open the windows and cut the air. "You like incense?" It smells musty.

"Yeah. I love 'em." She says from the couch, lying on her back, staring at the ceiling.

I grab my phone and hit speed dial one. How sad is it when your only speed dial is a restaurant?

"What do you like on your pizza?" I am willing to go along with anything on it. It's not the pizza that I'm concerned about.

"Sausage?" She asks insecurely.

A man on the other end of the phone answers, "Alphonso's Pizza, pickup or delivery?"

"Delivery." I give him my phone number, it must be attached to an address on their computer because he doesn't even ask where I live.

"Large. Sausage. Two liter of Pepsi. Thanks." I turn toward the living room and yell out, "It's going to be a while. About forty minutes." I say as I hang up the phone.

I sit down on the couch next to Suzanne. I figure it would be improper etiquette to start the movie while we wait for the pizza, so I just turn on the TV. "Anything in particular you watch at seven o'clock on a Saturday?" I glance over at Suzanne's face.

"Nope. Anything is fine." She rotates her body and puts her legs on my lap and leans her upper body over the armrest.

I start to rub her feet. She is not offended, and seems to be enjoying herself. As thirsty as I am I can't get up and ruin this moment.

"Here, pick what you'd like." I hand her the remote.

I stop rubbing her feet and instead keep my hands resting on her shins. Freshly shaved. Pinching them slightly with a soft grip.

Suzanne flips through the channels. She stops on a classic game show, 'You Bet Your Life' with Groucho Marx.

"Do you mind?" She asks, staring at the T.V.

Why does this feel so right? So comfortable? Why does she feel so comfortable? How did we move right into relationship status so fast? Why do I care? This is what I want. I speak the words loudly in my head and continue the conversation with myself. I just want someone to hold, someone to make working worth coming home to, someone to care for, someone to care for me. Fuck this. This is what I want. This is what I need.

"No. I grew up watching these old time shows. My grandfather spent a lot of time with me as a child, and, well, this old time humor still amuses me." I state while still looking at the TV. I smile at Suzanne. "What about you? What do you like about this show?"

She looks up at me. "We didn't get cable growing up, so all I watched were these classic shows late at night on the local channels." She sits up and curls her legs sideways and underneath her body. She puts her left hand under her chin and her elbows on her knee.

She looks so damn adorable. So damn cute.

We stay silent, chuckling at jokes on the television and Groucho's movements with his cigar. Suzanne points out the sexual innuendos in the show. I appear ignorant to them.

"I don't really understand why people say the old shows were so much more innocent than today. Groucho hit on that girl all night. He even tried to get her to go home with the guy contestant." She has an emotionless face. Even though she just had an epiphany, she looks emotionless.

She is right. There is lots of sex talk from Groucho to the southern belle on the show. If he'd done that today, the contestant surely would have sued him.

The long awaited knock comes to my door.

## Chapter 22

I grab two plates for our deep dish, Chicago style pizza. Two forks, two knives, and two glasses with ice for the Pepsi. I walk everything over to the couch. We haven't conversed since Groucho verbally molested the female contestant on T.V.

"This pizza is good. Nice choice Johnny." She rubs the back of my neck, tightly, like a father letting his son know that he's done something wrong or someone showing humility; letting you know you were right.

I accept it.

"Not as good as back home, but it beats everything else out here." I tell her as I think about how things are going so fast. How did we revert to small talk? "So, your surprise movie, what is it?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" She does some weird move with her hand, like a witch putting things into a spell or potion. "Just kidding, let me grab it."

I want to get up and get some wine, but I sit and watch her bend down to put the movie in the player.

I can tell that I am not going to get my moment, seeing that she is rifling through her things looking for the movie, so I get up and pour two glasses of wine. I have the time, or so I think. Popping the cork takes much longer than I expected, so I miss my chance at a gawking gaze. I'll await another chance.

She is sitting on the far right of the couch. I'm used to the right side of the couch. Reluctantly, I sit on the left, more like middle-left. Suzanne lays with her head on my lap, her legs strewn across the armrest. She holds her wine glass on her stomach, clasping the base of the glass with an open hand, the handle between her index and middle finger.

I ask, "What kind of drama might this be?" Now, I actually am curious.

"Who said it was a drama?" She looks up at me, I down at her. "I simply asked if you liked dramas. You'll see what it is, soon enough."

As the opening scene comes up I immediately see that it is '*A Christmas Story*.'

"*A Christmas Story*, aye? A bit early in the year for that." I pinch her cheek and shake it ever so slightly.

"Who doesn't like Christmas? Snow, bundling up to go to the store, shopping, the sales. What a wonderful world it would be if Christmas came every month. Don't you think?" I can see the youthful glee in her countenance and hear it in her words.

"I suppose. It is a beautiful time of year. Everyone does seem happier." I can't argue this point, even if I want to. Who could? Suzanne is absolutely right.

"And the music. Such beautiful music." She speaks, and it is quite apparent that she is very much a holiday person. "I don't mean to sound hopeful, but it would be nice to spend Christmas with someone this year. Not too hopeful I hope."

Only such a young girl speaks those words aloud.

"Not too hopeful." I repeat her words. Reassurance.

I've often wanted to spend Christmas with somebody, somebody besides a bartender. Only the loneliest are out on Christmas. A sad scene for anyone looking in, a day in the life of anyone living it.

I wake up on Christmas morning. Suzanne is in lingerie, sitting on the couch with my morning coffee. There are candles going on the table, our little fireplace is lit. She stands up and gives me a long, good morning hug, and an even longer kiss. I take the coffee from her hand and set it on the end table by the couch, not even looking. I lay her down on the couch slowly, supporting her with my left arm at the small of her back. She pulls one strap off of the lingerie on her shoulder, I push it back. I cusp her breast with my hand. I pull down my boxers. She grabs my ass.

Whoah. Whoah. I grab a throw pillow from the couch, lift her head, and put it on my lap. "Here, it's more comfortable." Crisis averted.

"What is the obsession with boys and their Red Ryders? Is it true?" Suzanne is intent on watching the movie.

"It is. For me at least it was." I take a sip of wine to try and settle my little self down. "My grandfather got me one when I turned eight. All of my cousins too. Part of male nature I suppose. A right of passage." That may be why this movie is such a loved film by youthful boys, something to relate to.

"Johnny, you are full of secrets. Unusual secrets." She is still watching the movie intently and commenting in a second-handed manner.

"That we all are." I say sipping more wine. I'm so philosophical when I drink wine. "You know, Louis Pasteur said that there is more philosophy in a bottle of wine than in all of the books in the world. You believe it?"

"I suppose." She shows me her disinterest with her short answers. Tonight is not the night to be talking philosophical wisdom.

"Indeed." I say, stroking her hair.

"Ha. Ha." Suzanne bursts out laughing. "Do boys fantasize about being heroes and saving the day too?" She comments at the scene where Black Bart and his gang of hoodlums try to infiltrate Ralphy's home.

"Actually, yeah. Pretty much." Her hair is so silky. "What else do boys have to think about at that age? Saving the day and avoiding cooties, the two avenues of boyhood mentality."

"You must have been a weird boy Johnny." She suggests.

I imagine a camera pulling wide on the living room, moving behind the couch and showing the back of my head and the television screen. It really is a movie moment; the scene in a movie where the boy finally realizes that he gets the girl.

We sit quietly for just about the rest of the movie.

As the credits began to roll, I spout, "Good choice of film. It's nice to dream of Christmas in the summertime."

She smiles at me and sits up. "More wine?" She grabs my glass, walks to the kitchen, and tops us both off without my answer. "Put on some music."

"No problem." I shuffle through my records and find some old Sinatra albums. Maybe she wants to dance, I know I do.

She walks over to me standing by the record player. She hands me my glass. She brings the bottle over in lieu of her glass. She puts her arms

over my shoulders, bottle in hand. I put my hands around her waist, glass still in hand. We dance through side 'A,' drinking the whole bottle along our journey.

"I feel like I'm dancing in a ballroom with the chandelier and the art everywhere. I feel beautiful here." Her eyes don't leave mine.

I walk to the record player. I flip the album. She sets the empty bottle down on my coffee table.

"I'll be right back." She walks down the hallway and into the bathroom.

I look over side 'B' and dislike my options. I find my Dean Martin Christmas album. "She'll like this. Keep the holiday spirit alive." I speak aloud.

I turn around to see Suzanne walking my way. She grabs me and pushes me down on the couch.

She speaks sternly, "I'm sorry, but I have to do this."

She puts her mouth on mine. She grabs both sides of my shirt and rips it open, I can hear the buttons bounce around on my wooden floors. She pulls up her skirt. She kisses my chest. I take off her bra. She unbuttons my pants. I pull them down to my knees. She pulls down her underwear. I let her control me. She is passionate. It is just what I'd wanted it to be, it happens.

Chapter 23

I wake up alone on the couch and see a note on my kitchen table.  
"Suzanne? Suzanne?" I speak it twice, out loud, but to no avail.  
I walk to the note.

Johnny. Thank you for a lovely weekend. See you Monday?

-Suzanne XOXO

Finally, a note I really do enjoy reading.  
"Monday?" why not today?  
The phone rings.  
"Johnny?"  
It is Samantha.  
"How was the parent's place?" I ask.  
Why is it Samantha?  
"Good. Settled down a lot. Can I stop by?"  
Why is it Samantha?  
"Sure. Door is open. I'll be in the shower."  
Fuck, Samantha?  
"Thanks." She hangs up the phone.  
I take a hot shower. I'm doing well this week. It feels good.  
I've turned a new leaf. I've broken tradition.  
As I get out of the shower, the phone rings.  
"Creditors on a Sunday?"  
I let it ring and get dressed. As I walk back down the hall the phone rings again.  
I finally pick up the phone, "Hello?"  
By the immediate silence I know it isn't creditors.  
"Hey. It's Suzanne." She sounds upbeat.  
"Hey." My voice is awkward in surprise.  
Suzanne continues, "Sorry I ran off this morning. I have to go out with my dad. We made plans a while back, and I can't just blow off my dad."  
Samantha walks in the door as Suzanne is explaining herself.  
"It's no problem. Have fun today. I'll see you tomorrow?" I don't mean to rush the conversation, but it sounds that way.  
"Yeah. Seven o'clock? I'll meet you at your place? All right?"  
Compliant to the situation. Compliant to everything that I say.  
"Of course. I'll see you at seven tomorrow. Have fun."  
She hangs up the phone.  
A shrill voice calls out from the kitchen, "Things go well with the Red Dress?"  
Samantha is making coffee. She didn't bother to ask me.  
"Yeah." She can hear it in my voice, or smell it in the air, but she knows. She knows.  
"I'm glad for you." She sounds like she is going to throw the pot of coffee at my head. "Want a cup?"  
"Sure. Thanks." I say.

She brings two cups to the table, and we sit down as I ask, "How'd things go last night?"

"Good, but not as good as yours I suppose. Cleared my head a little bit. Got some time away from the city, got some time to think." I can see in her face that she is lying when she says this.

"Oh yeah? What about?" I don't mean to be an ass and pry, but I don't want another blowout like the other night. I want to let her vent like a normal person. Like someone that isn't hopped up on cocaine.

She thinks momentarily and responds, "Stuff. Life. You know. Stuff."

She sips her coffee.

It is still piping hot.

"What'd you guys do?"

She already knows, I can hear it when she speaks.

"Watched a movie, got some pizza. She left early." I can't be the one to tell her.

"That's good. Sounds like a nice night." She reaches into her purse. "Here. Thanks again."

She gives me my two hundred dollar loan back. "Got my check this morning. I left early too." She gave me a smirk. She knew.

"Thanks. Glad to help." I put it in my pocket, crumpled up. I know she didn't go to Connecticut. She couldn't be back so soon. At the same time, I don't want to call her a liar.

The sooner she leaves, the better.

"So what are you doing today?" She doesn't say it like she wants to spend time with me, but to keep the conversation going, a kind 'how's the weather' conversation.

"Gonna go shopping. My cabinets are bare. Real bare." This is true, they are bare, but I am not going shopping.

"Good plan, good use of a Sunday." She sets down her coffee. "Listen, I gotta run. I gotta go pay some bills. Thanks again."

And just like that, she is gone. Out of my condo. Out of my life. Out of sight. Out of mind.

I spend the next couple of hours cleaning, deep cleaning. Vacuuming, sweeping, laundry, dishes, cabinets... I need to keep busy, or I'll keep thinking about Suzanne, about last night. I can still smell her in the living room, which means Samantha could too. She knew.

I put on The Temptations record again as I finish cleaning. It is still early afternoon, and I still need to pass some time. Every time I got a free moment all I think about is last night.

"The park." I grab my camera.

As I hail down a cab I notice that it is the same guy from yesterday, the one that thought I'd slept with Suzanne. The one that thought Suzanne was a lady of the night. What are the odds? Almost non-existent. This time I don't have her to show off, though I actually could this time.

"The park up seventh." I figure that this guy doesn't even remember me with all of the passengers he picked up yesterday.

Shit, he's probably been working since yesterday. Cabbies get such strange hours.

He pulls over at the park.

"Thanks." I pay him, well.

I grab a seat on the hill that we sat on yesterday. I immediately see the young couple from the day before getting hot and heavy. I get a picture.

As I keep watching, I pretend to take pictures of other things around them so I don't draw attention to myself. They probably wouldn't even notice me though, the way they are making out.

About fifteen minutes into their public display of affection, I see it coming. He is going to tell her, tell her it is over. I steady my focus directly on them. He looks at her, stern. She looks back at him, confused, heartbroken.

I am getting some really great shots. He stands up, she puts her hands in the air and I could see that she says something along the lines of, "What? What are you doing?" He gets down on one knee. He proposes to her?

Boy, were our assumptions wrong.

I come to an epiphany. The difference between love and guilt is slim. Every person in love felt, or feels, some guilt about how they came to that euphoric feeling of passion and desire. Tricking a girl into love, cheating on a significant only to find out your feelings are stronger for your original committed relationship, feeling like you are holding back a woman's love by simply being with her, not letting her love anybody else; by guilt, better yet, through guilt, comes love. Raw passion. Raw emotion. Why the caged bird sings.

These young fools in love proved me wrong. Knowing the second half of their story doesn't complete anything, there will always be another second half of their story, of every story. Nothing just ends. Nothing is that simple. I wish I could follow their story with my camera. I wish I could follow their demise, the same demise that all relationships end with, deep bottles and full ash trays.

It is this realization that gets me over Suzanne's age and insecurities.

I think to myself, "She'll grow in age and in feeling of self-worth. She will become her own person, and I will feel guilty for holding her back. She will feel guilty for growing, for changing, not being the same person I always knew. But we have the chance to feel guilty together. We have more chances to judge others, as others will judge us. We can feel guilty together. Fuck her age."

I sit at the park until dusk, taking pictures of everyone I can, anyone that looks like they have a secret or feel guilty. I find myself taking a lot of pictures, lots of people. Everyone is guilty. Everyone is in love.

I decide to kill time and walk back to my condo instead of grabbing a cab. It is a nice night to walk anyways. It is a beautiful night to clear my mind.

As I round the stairs to my condo, I am expecting a note from Samantha. Something that shows some emotion, something that shows she is real, that she is able have feelings.

Nothing. There is nothing there. She feels nothing.

I sit down with a beer and watch 'A Christmas Story' again. It brings me back to a simpler time, a time that I didn't have to take responsibility. When the highlight of my day was walking to the corner store and buying a candy bar for a quarter that I stole from my parent's change jar. When I could amuse myself by playing with free things, earthly things, hand-me-

downs, marbles left on the street by the neighbor's kids. When I got my Red Ryder, when I defended the honor of my family by shooting tree bandits in the backyard. When I didn't have to drink to pass the time or forget about life. When the holidays were a time for friends and family, and baking, not for drinking with thirteen drunk Santas at the pub. When grades were my only real worry, the only thing I was in charge of.

I turn off the television, set my alarm, and lay down to sleep. I am going to sleep well. I am going to relax. I am going to wake to Monday.

## Chapter 24

I wake up, noticing stains from a dream well spent. The shower is a cold one. The coffee is strong. As I walk down the hall, the phone rings. I answer it. I have time to kill.

"Hello. Mr. Jones?" There is a large woman on the other end.

Her breath stinks of whiskey and the lie that she doesn't eat as much as people think for her to be so large. That she has an abnormally slow metabolism. That science is wrong. That she is an exception to the rule.

"Yes ma'am. That's me." I can hear her lies. I can feel them.

"Mr. Jones, I'd like to inform you that your account with Metacard has been closed. I'd like to help you set up a payment plan to get this cleared up."

She is lying again. She doesn't care whether or not I pay. She is just being recorded by a larger man with bigger lies and worse breath.

"Sounds good. Set it up." I hang up the phone. It rings again.

The morning paper reads, "Give Me Your Taxes, I'll Create a Deficit." Surely a pun of Patrick Henry, "Give me liberty or give me death." A pun of the rising costs and more rising national debt. It isn't clever at all.

I comb my hair, turn off the lights, and start my journey to work.

I stop at the glass window outside of the deli. Suzanne smiles and gives me a wave. This time it means something. This time we have a history. I light a cigarette, give her a smile, and continue my walk and eventually arrive at work.

Monday mornings are often slow because we haven't received the mail of numerous artists with a hard-on for the wealthy of NYC.

I walk up to Abigail.

"Busy weekend?" I start with the usual emotionless question.

"Same as always. Sold a few paintings. Expensive ones. Good commission." She says, sounding proud.

Abigail always loves her commission base. She knows how to flaunt her assets when it comes to money.

"Good. Good. How was your weekend other than being here?" I ask.

Abigail knows how to have a good time when she isn't working, when she doesn't have to worry about responsibility.

"It was good. Lot of drinking, even more sex. You know, normal weekend." She says through her passionless smile.

She knows how to use her assets to have a good time as well.

"So humble and full of humility you are." I smirk. "Looks like you have your first one on the line."

A tall man with a very attractive lady walks in through the doorway. Kind of early for a Monday, but then again, his wife probably thinks he is at work.

"I'm on it." Abigail says as she walks up to them, fixing her bra and perking her breasts along the way.

I walk out back and light a cigarette. There are broken bottles everywhere in the alley. Typical after the weekend.

The back door swings open, "Johnny, mail's here. Whenever you're ready." Allen, my boss, mentor guy, gave me a heads up.

"In a minute. Thanks." After he shuts the door, I toss my cigarette and walk in.

There isn't a lot today. About half a dozen letters and prints of work, and two boxes, presumably paintings.

"I'll start on the paintings. You want to give the letters a once over and see if there is anything worth reviewing?" Allen loves getting first crack at the paintings.

They are more exciting than these letters of untalented waste.

"You got it Allen." I say as I open the first letter.

To whom it may concern,

My name is Matt Zinter and I am a sculptor from Maryland. I have enclosed pictures of my most recent works and a resume of past exhibits and education. I thank you for your consideration.

-Matt Zinter

Same old crap. Resume full of cafés and school shows. These small museums are like cesspools.

His work is done with cardboard and glue. A heavy coat of spray-paint on the outside. Terrible. Most of the sculptures don't even portray anything. One did, it was titled "Chastity" and was just an open box painted white. Terrible.

This is how every morning starts. How every day goes. I sign a rejection letter and put it in his SASE and into the outgoing mail. He won't be happy, but neither am I looking at this shit.

I repeat this process four more times. The sixth letter and work is decent. Not the same generic crap everyone else seems to write. It is decent. I open up the prints. Photographer. My kind of work.

This girl, Theresa Clarovski, Richmond, Virginia, has some talent, or at least some thought behind her work. Abstract expressionist. I write down her return address so that I can contact her about trading some work. It isn't legal, and can get me fired, but artists seem to think that I am the gateway to fame because I work here. They never complain when I contact them.

"Anything worth spending time on?" Allen walks over to me, disappointed about today's take in paintings. "A lot of abstract color blots, again."

He is disappointed nearly every day, but recent art-school grads think that work from the 1950s and 1960s seems to be relevant today. Revisiting old styles of artwork are pretty much what art school graduates are taught to do, as if art hasn't progressed any in the last sixty years.

"I didn't get anything either. Sorry Allen." I put in a rejection letter that I have John sign.

If I get caught contacting an artist, I always blame it on the other curators. It makes me look good.

"I'm gonna go work on the archives then, all right?" He asks me like I am his boss.

"No problem Allen. I'll watch the floors." I walk the floors most of the rest of the days while Allen looks at old Elvgren and Varga pinup paintings.

He gets off to that kind of thing all day. I let him.

I hear a voice from the other room, "Do you notice how the contrast of shapes evens out the painting?" A man with what I assume to actually be his wife because of the rings on both of their fingers and their relative similar age, is explaining an unknown Picasso, a permanent piece at our museum.

"You have great taste," I walk by him, being the salesman that I'm supposed to be, "You should look at this new set of works we got in last week. They're over here, kind of a mix between Rembrandt and Picasso. Very hot items." I walk them to one of the artists we reviewed last month. His work is a mix between Alexander Calder and Yves Tanguy. "He's an emerging artist from New Jersey. We don't expect these to last long." I show him around. Most of the paintings are labeled as 'sold,' though they aren't.

It is a trick used to make buyers think that works are moving fast. As we sell some paintings, we remark the 'sold' with a price and by the end of the week, they are all usually sold as well.

I inform the man that "I'll send in Abigail. She knows more about these works."

You never ask a potential buyer if they would like help or input on work, you just do it. You don't give them the chance to decline.

"She'll be here in a moment." I say as I walk back out to the floor and tell her the situation. "In room five. Old married couple. I told them the work was a mix of Rembrandt and Picasso. They don't know."

"Thanks." She walks back there, swinging her hair back, jutting her hips, pushing up her breasts.

I already know she clears the deal. She is that good.

The rest of my day is the same situation: different men, different college mistresses, same bullshit.

Chapter 25

Five o'clock finally comes, about as slow as a four-banger car idling up a steep hill. Two more hours to go until I meet up with and indulge in consented bliss.

I check my watch, 4:57. I leave without saying a word to my co-workers.

As I walk to my condo I stop in at a wine and spirits shop and pick up some more sweet wine, white.

"I'll take the middle bottle" I say to the salesman.

I turn down a side street and take a longer route to my condo. I need to kill some time. As I take the alley towards my condo I notice a man patting down his pockets, the closer I come the more frantically he pats.

"Here." I hand him a cigarette.

"Thanks man, I'll hit you up next time around." He speaks with the cigarette already in his mouth.

"But of course," I say with a smile on my face.

After walking into my condo, I light some incense. It smells musty again and some odorants can't hurt. I open the windows all over my condo. The smell of Autumn is coming through, that lovely smell of fall. I sit down on the couch and have a couple of beers, a couple of cigarettes, and let a couple of minutes pass by.

Time passes by absurdly slow. It seems that the more I drink, the slower time goes, but I continue drinking anyways. I keep checking the clock. I keep putting on different records. I keep drinking. I keep smoking. I keep drinking. I keep checking the clock.

"7:38. What the fuck?"

I try calling Suzanne's phone. No answer.

As I come out of the bathroom from a piss, I hear some rustling at the door, as if something is brushing against it, kind of like at tree that brushes a window in the wind. I open the door to check out the noises. Samantha has left a note.

I try Suzanne's phone again. No answer.

I take the note down from the door and grab another beer.

I open the note, not thinking it odd that Samantha had not knocked. The note is crumbled, on yellow legal paper.

Johnny,

I'm sorry. I had to do it. I need help. I had to do it. I couldn't stand the thought of you leaving me. I need help. I need to get help. I'm so sorry.

-Samantha

No XOXO? Sorry for what? Why is this note crumbled? It's as if she had it in her pocket all night, unlike the crisp notes she usually leaves.

"Sorry for what?" I call Samantha's phone. The answering machine simply states, "I'm sorry Johnny. I'm sorry." Followed by a long pause. It is obvious that she was crying when she recorded it, I can hear it.

"What the fuck is going on?" I see flashing lights reflecting on my window and hear sirens screeching down the street.

I run down the stairs and out the front door of my condo, that damn fish smell. "What the fuck is going on?"

I turn the corner and walk past the Chinese Fish Market Store front.

As I walk down the street, I see faces I would normally photograph; pure shock and terror. Some looking straight ahead, some looking at the ground, some looking right past me.

I don't bother to ask the passers-by what happened. Somehow I already know.

I approach a police barricade just past a swarm of people gossiping about what happened. I don't need to hear it. I don't need validation. I already know.

As I got a glimpse over the barricade, I see the dress, the shoes, an unrecognizable face.

I start to tear up. I open Samantha's note in my hand.

I'm sorry. I had to do it. I need help.

The tears stop. Reality sets in.

I throw my St. Christopher medallion over one of the cop's shoulders and onto Suzanne. It lands on her chest.

Suzanne will be traveling for a while now, she will need it more than I do.

I walk a desolate walk to my condo. I see no faces, no people, no buildings, no life. It is the longest walk I've ever taken up my steps. My door is still open. I sit down on the couch. I drink a beer. I smoke a cigarette. I grab my money, my suitcase, my photos and paintings, my records. Everything I own, everything I need, I can carry in one trip. I have led a lonely existence. I have few mementos, few memories worth keeping.

I tape the note from Samantha to the front of my door as I close it.

I walk down the stairs from my condo. I hail the first cab I can, interjecting a young couple waiting only a few feet behind me. They have the right to the cab, but I have the need to escape.

Fuck them.

"Where might you be heading this fine evening?" The cabbie calls out to me as I get in the back seat.

"Penn Station." My voice cracks as I speak.

I walk quickly through the station, as if I have some place to be, as if I have a prior commitment.

As I come up to the teller I pull out my wallet.

"Where to?" The clerk asks.

I pull out the return address. Theresa Clarovski. "Richmond, Virginia. One-way, as soon as you can get me there."

The clerk asks, "Your name sir?"

I reply, "Paris. Paris Johnson."