

DROWNING IN THE SEA OF LOVE

“**T**hree hundred and fifty dollars,” Katie thought. “Three hundred and fifty dollars and nothing more.”

All around her was a whirlwind of frenetic activity as technicians scurried around: A thin balding man wearing round eyeglasses was taking a reading with a light meter; another man smoking a clove cigarette was consulting a clipboard; a young fat man in a madras shirt and shorts that unfortunately showed off his pale and fleshy white calves who was doing pretty much nothing remarked to no one in particular: “Ugh. I ate a whole pizza for lunch and I can feel my pores actually *sweating* cheese.”

The man holding her elbow and escorting her through the room smiled widely and said, “Welcome to the wonderful world of show business.”

“Three hundred and fifty dollars and nothing more,” Katie thought.

When Katie realized she needed to do something to get some money quickly, she turned to the ads in the back of the free weekly, and decided to answer the one that seemed the least creepy, which read: “WANTED. Pretty, clean young ladies for lucrative modeling assignments. You be pretty and clean (no fatties or intravenous) and we’ll be professional and respectful to your limits.” And, then, the one sentence that catapulted this ad from the level of complete creepiness (although what did they mean by “no intravenous?”) to definite interest: “Same day payday.”

Katie called the number listed, and after confirming Katie was indeed over eighteen and had the requisite governmentally issued proof of same, the woman who answered gave Katie an address and a time and hung up.

After getting off the bus, Katie walked to the address, took a deep breath, pulled the door open and marched inside. Katie found herself in an exceptionally small reception area, consisting of two plastic chairs and a glassed-in window like at the currency exchange, behind which sat a young man so deeply engrossed in reading, he didn't even look up when Katie came through the door. Through the walls, Katie could hear the sounds of men working – hammering, large items shifting, the beep-beep-beep and whine of a forklift backing up – which seemed more suited to the inside of a Home Depot than a same-day-payday modeling agency.

“Um, excuse me, I'm here about the modeling?”

The young man still did not look up from his magazine. “That so? You have an appointment?”

“Yes, 9:30 a.m., I know it's a little early...”

The young man cut her off, opening the window and handing over a clipboard. “Fill out this application and when you're done attach your ID and bring it back to me,” which was delivered all in one breath without his raising his gaze from the magazine, which Katie now saw was *Screenwriter's Monthly*.

“Than you, sir,” she said politely, and this caused the young man to look up startled from an article on “Rising Action and CGI: 10 Things You Need to Know.” He did a comical double-take and gaped at Katie for a few moments. Finally, he seemed to find himself and stuttered out, “Um, hold on a sec, wouldya?” Picking up a phone, he dialed two numbers and then said, “Um, Mr. Lomax, there's someone out here I think you should see.” He paused for a moment and Katie could hear a loud voice, not shouting exactly but loud, through the receiver. “Uh, no, sir, not a process server. Uh, I think you'll see what I mean when you talk to her.”

“Come on, I'll buzz you in,” the young man said, gesturing toward a door.

Through the door and she followed the young man down a narrow hallway. Boxes and boxes of VHS tapes and DVDs lined

the walls, all with lurid covers Katie deliberately didn't look at too closely. Past several small offices the young man pointed at a doorway at the end of the hall. The door was slightly ajar, and Katie could hear some not quite shouting coming from within. “This is as far as I go,” the young man said.

For a moment Katie was alone, and her nerve almost failed. She looked between that slightly ajar door and the one that led back to the street. Only the length of a small hallway of a building in some corner of an industrial park somewhere, but Katie thought it was more like a span of the known universe.

With a long sigh, she walked forward and knocked softly on the door, which opened a bit more, revealing a man standing up talking on the telephone behind a large cluttered desk. Cradling the phone between his right ear and his neck while lighting a cigarette, his eyes momentarily widened when he saw Katie, but only momentarily. He motioned her in the room and toward a chair in front of the cluttered desk while never interrupting his steady stream of verbiage, which drifted over Katie like a mad-deningly incomprehensible foreign language:

“He what? He didn't! Arrgh, alright, put him on. Yes, I know very well how much a half day's rental of the stable is. Put him on.” Pause. “Hi Buck, how's it going? Yeah, I bet you know why I'm talking to you. Do you know how much money you are costing me? Let me go over this one last, final time, Buck. What are we paying you for, and if you say “acting” I am gonna have Lefty break your leg. Right, we're paying you for a pop shot. How much are we paying you for the pop shot, that one little thing? That's right, Buck. That's a lot of money for one little thing. Now, what's the name of this production, Buck? Right again! ‘Chin Omelettes 6!’ And what do you think the discerning consumer who purchases a title called ‘Chin Omelettes 6’ wants to see? A chin omelette? Very good! Now, tell me what use is a pop shot of the girl's chest, over her head entirely or, worst of all, all her hair, when the title of the production is ‘Chin Omelettes 6?’ Right! No use! No fucking use at all! Now, there's the big money question, Buck, so pay attention: What use is the dumb fucking lummoX who can't get a pop shot – the one thing and one thing only he is being paid to do – is the right place on film? I'm sorry, I didn't hear that? Right! No use at all. Do I make myself clear?”

Alright. Look, if you have a trajectory problem, just aim at the collarbone, you'll do fine. OK? OK. Go drink a Red Bull and get back to work, and don't let Danny have to call me again."

The man abruptly hung up the phone and turned his attention to Katie. "Yeah, I can see why Tommy wanted me to talk to you. You're over eighteen, right? You got four forms of ID, all government issued?"

Hesitantly, she help up her hand, listing the contents, "Nooo... I don't, I just have a driver's license, a copy of my birth certificate, and my Nine West preferred customer card, do I need four?"

The man shook his head, "Naw, nobody I know has four forms of fucking government ID, unless they're a Fed. I'm Freddie Lomax, ringmaster of this here circus. Hand over your bona fides and answer a question for me: You're a pretty girl, you don't seem overly fucked up, tell me why on Earth you wanted to get involved in this."

"Well, Mr. Lomax, I really need the money."

Without looking up from the form he was copying Katie's information onto, Lomax said, "I see." Mr. Lomax paused, and Katie saw he had filled out all of the form except for one line, the "NAME" section at the top. He followed her gaze. "Yeah, I was wondering what we should call you."

Katie was happy to finally be prepared for a question. "Buttons Highway 5."

"Buttons Highway 5?"

"Yes."

Mr. Lomax sighed, a much longer one than Katie had allowed herself. "That's very good. Let me guess, your first pet and the street you lived on when you were little?"

Katie nodded, a bit uncertainly. Lomax shook his head slowly. "Buttons Highway 5. Jesus Christ." He stared into space for a moment in the direction of a push-pin filled wall map of the United States with the word "DISTRIBUTION" printed over it. "How about Tracey Nevada?" You got objections to that?"

Katie didn't think it was much better than her suggestion, but she nodded.

"Alright, Tracey. That's out of the way. Do you know what you wanna do for us?"

Katie blushed again. "No, not really."

Far from exasperated, Mr. Lomax seemed to be expecting that response. He pulled out a mimeographed sheet from his desk and uncapped a black Sharpie. "This is a call sheet of productions we currently have in progress – how about this, tell me what you won't do, and we'll work backward from there."

Katie paused. "Well, I don't want to do anything that my brother would find out about."

Lomax paused and then nodded sarcastically, "Of course, and this brother, I don't suppose he's ever been on the Internet, right?"

"Look, Mr. Lomax, this is really, really hard for me. If I didn't need the money more desperately, I wouldn't even be here. All my brother and his friends do is to smoke pot, play Playstation, and surf the net for porn. Hopefully, he and his friends would never find out about this, but I'd like to make it that way as much as possible. Oh, and no sex."

"I see, Lomax said, and looked at her speculatively. Then, with another long sigh, he bent over the list and began drawing thick black lines through items. He had crossed off about 70% of the titles when the phone buzzed and budding screenwriter receptionist voice came over the intercom, "Mr. Lomax, Teddy Field from Professional Modeling International is on line one, returning your urgent call."

Lomax handed Katie the paper. "Here, I have to take this call. Look this over and see if anything there looks probable." Without waiting for an answer, he picked up the phone and immediately began shouting.

Katie blocked out the booming voice and considered the few remaining titles on the sheet. Much like the earlier conversation she had overheard, it seemed to be made up of some secret language that she was not privy to. *Spank me spank me spank me!* seemed unappetizing but straightforward enough, but who were *Fisted Angels* anyway? And *Cameltoe Cuties* didn't seem any clearer. And she didn't even want to ask what *Cleveland Steamer Surprise* was all about.

Near the bottom of the page, there was a title crossed out, and handwritten in was *Drowning in the Sea of Love*. Kate was dubious about the whole "Sea of Love" part, but it sure sounded