

# THE ADMIRER

I like the way she walks from the bar to her car, east to west swagger in her hips; I can't help but stare – all the guys do. I love the way she smells, when I have the nerve to get close. Sometimes I listen to her, talking to her friend with a cute snorty giggle. I love to hear her voice. She comes here every Friday, and every Friday I follow her to her car: A two door sporty thing with a ribbon and tassels hanging from the mirror.

There's plenty of pretty girls here, but there's something in particular about *her*. There's something in particular, I don't know what it is. She doesn't know my name just yet. But I know in my heart: I've *got* to make her mine!

Most nights she leaves alone, but tonight she's leaving with *him*. He's everything I'm not: Strong and handsome. His hair has gel, his ears have diamonds and his arms have trendy, tribal tattoos.

I follow them to her place. She just met this guy, and yet his hands are *all* over her.

"Stop it!" I hear her say, but that cutesy giggle tells me she doesn't mean it.

He knows too, because he grabs her and carries her to the door. Suspended in his arms, she puts her key in the lock, and the two disappear inside.

Soon after, a light upstairs comes on, and I see her flawless silhouette.

"Come on up and climb me," Big Oak Tree, that runs along the side of her house says, in a tone so affable, I have to smile back and say, "Thank you, Big Oak Tree. I will."

"You can see everything from atop my branches," Big Oak Tree says.

Big Oak Tree is right. Once up in his hearty branches, I can see into her room with ease. They don't bother to dim the lights

or close the blinds. They're too busy tearing off clothes while drooling on each other.

He removes her tube top, and I see how incredible her breasts are – even better than I imagined. As is her bottom half. Her legs are slender, but not too slender. Her hips are full and round, but not too full, nor too round. She is stunning...absolute perfection.

I cannot hear her through the closed window, but she yells something like, "Come get me, big daddy!"

"Fuck yeah!" he yells back, or something equally inarticulate. He is not perfection; he is far from it.

They don't use the bed, instead sinking towards the floor. His ass pops in and out of view, but I can't see her any longer.

"Thank you, Big Oak Tree," I say as I shimmy down.

"You're welcome. Come back soon."

"I will."

I walk down the alley beside her house and pass dented garbage cans.

"Hey! Look in here!" Tin Trashcan calls to me.

"Thank you, Tin Trashcan. I will."

Inside, I find used tampons and condoms. "Yuck!" I cry, about to walk away.

"No. Keep looking," Tin Trashcan insists.

So I keep searching for a morsel – any item from her life will do. I find a copy of her phone bill. "Karen," I say her first name aloud. "Karen," I repeat.

★ ★ ★

"Hello," she says when I call her the following day. "Hello?"

I don't know what to say. She hangs up, but I call back.

"Hello!"

Oh that bubbly voice, even when she's nervous. I've got to make her mine!

I love her. I need her. She'll love me. She'll need me. I love her. I need her! I know that I'm good for her!

There's something in particular about her, to you it may seem strange, but I'm back up Big Oak Tree, staring at her window, and today, Nice Window is open.

"Come closer," Nice Window says.

"Yeah, go closer," Big Oak Tree agrees.

"Yeah, she wants it!" Tin Trashcan adds.

"Yes, I want you," Karen says, wearing just bra and panties.

"Come on up here big fella."

"Me?" I say. Could she really mean it?

"Yes, you," she laughs, but *with* me, not *at* me, like all the others do.

I climb higher. The branches are thinner, but still support me. I am at Nice Window, looking in at her, yet I hesitate.

"Go on," Big Oak Tree encourages.

"Yeah! She wants it." Tin Trashcan barks.

I've got to make her mine!

"Well?" she asks with a shrug, pressing her boobs together perfectly, "are you coming?"

"Sure!" I say, climbing through Nice Window.

She screams!



# BURIED A MAN I HATED THERE

The drive is always the best part. The anticipation. The tingles in my fingertips. The sweat in my palms. I wipe my hands on my pants while peeking in the rearview to see my clean-shaven reflection; a picture of them hangs from the mirror, bouncing off the dash. The weather is nice – balmy; the February snow is melting a bit.

It may seem strange that I should find joy in this ride, being what it is and all...but I do. I always do. Stranger still, perhaps, is that the four-hour drive is the only time I'm happy. Ever. I suffer through three hundred and sixty-four miserable days and twenty hours a year simply for these four hours. When I'm in my car on the way there, I am happy. This is the tenth year I'm making this trip, and I plan to make many more. I will make this trip every year on this day until the day I die. That is a promise I made to them ten years ago. That is a promise I will never break.

She will be waiting there for me, I am quite sure. She is very dependable. She was always the reliable sister. The good sister. My wife, Jessica was the wild one. Not too wild, thank you very much. But when we first met she could be really impulsive. I remember once watching the midnight showing of...ah, hell, I don't even remember what movie it was. But I do remember sitting in the back row staring at the screen, but not really staring – more like looking in that general direction. Jessica's hand slid under my shirt, then down into my pants. Well, you can guess the rest but suffice it to say it was a good thing the theatre wasn't very crowded.

Heidi, on the other hand, was always, and still is the reliable twin. My wife's identical twin and every bit the spitting image. I

mean identical. I could tell them apart, of course, but not by looking at them. They look that much alike. Light brown hair, hazel eyes, shapely curves like a woman should have – thin but not too thin. Funny though, when you get to know people – even twin sisters who grew up together and shared a bedroom for nineteen years – there are always little quirks and gestures that make them unique. Jessica talked more, and smiled more, too. Heidi has a certain glare when she gets mad or annoyed that only she can do. Jessica’s voice was a hair higher in pitch. There are always little things that make up the individual. Those quirks should never be taken for granted; they should be cherished.

I pull up Route 9 East in Brattleboro the same way I always do. The same way I’ve done for the last ten years. The same way I did that day, when I frantically searched for them...then found them.

Right off Route 9 is a side road. It’s a great shortcut that saves about ten miles off the drive if you’re heading northeast. I make a right turn onto it. Cherry Hill Road, it’s called. It’s a dirt road – doesn’t see much traffic. I pull to the side and park my car right next to the telephone pole. There are only two houses on Cherry Hill Road, and only one telephone pole.

I get out of my Honda and start up the path. I used to drive one of those SUVs with a nice burgundy paint job. Now I drive a plain black Honda. The SUV was great when I had a kid. Roomy, so all her toys wouldn’t clutter things up. Plenty of storage in the back, ‘cause even a weekend trip with a kid means lots of baggage. And best of all, the DVD player. Man! When you make the four-hour drive from just north of the city to Brattleboro, Vermont, that DVD player is golden. Used to keep Emily busy the entire ride. And busy meant quiet. Sure, I got sick of watching the same Elmo video over and over again – it was only half an hour long. But it was worth it.

There’s a big field just off Cherry Hill Road with a *Private Property* sign out front, but no one ever bothers us. Every year, Heidi and I meet in the field and have a picnic. It isn’t a celebration, but she tries to treat it like one.

“Hi, Jack,” Heidi says with a wide smile – a genuine one. She isn’t capable of being anything but genuine. Heidi is happy to see

me. It’s a nice sentiment, but it isn’t one we share.

“Hi,” I say back. I smile too, but mine isn’t sincere.

She knows. She looks down at the ground. For a few moments there’s a painfully awkward silence as we stare at a puddle of melted snow. Then she says, “You got your nice shoes all wet and muddy.”

“I know.” I take a handkerchief out of the breast pocket of my suit and wipe my shoes off.

“I made all of your favorites.”

“Great!” I shout with way too much enthusiasm.

She reaches into her wicker picnic basket and takes out a red and white checkered tablecloth. She tosses it high and it glides down perfectly in a soft breeze. Not so much as a crease or wrinkle shows. Then, she reaches into the basket and pulls things out one at a time, holding each item up like a game show hostess.

“Turkey with Swiss, light mayo. And I brought some Dijon mustard in case you’re in the mood for that special sauce you love to whip up.”

I nod and smirk. I know how hard she’s trying but it’s the best I can do.

“Fruit. It’s all really ripe and fresh. Melon. Pineapple. Grapes. Small slices of apple, peach and pear. The slices are long and thin the way you like it.”

Another nod, another smirk. I really am trying to smile, but my facial muscles won’t cooperate.

“To drink I have iced tea, lemonade, and...” she slowly reaches into the basket then pulls out a bottle. “Merlot. Your favorite.”

“Thanks, but I’m driving.”

“Oh, stop it. One glass with lunch won’t kill you.”

Again, I nod.

“And for dessert, rice pudding.”

I love rice pudding, especially Heidi’s homemade rice pudding. I smile, and this time it’s genuine. “That looks great, Heidi. Thank you.”

“Of course. It’s my pleasure.”

We eat the meal in silence. There is nothing else to say. She tries to make eye contact once or twice, but I quickly look away. When I finish, I smile but can’t find the words to thank her. She

doesn't seem to mind. She reaches over to kiss me on the cheek, but I stand up before she gets the chance.

"Bye, Heidi. See you next year."

"I'll be here," she says, and I know she means it.

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A man has certain expectations for his life. These expectations become more than just potential hopes and dreams. They become our essence. These expectations consume us. They make us what we are...and what we're not.

I stare up at the ceiling of my studio apartment, arms clasped over my head as if about to do a sit up – ignoring the neighbor in 2G who's yelling at the Chinese delivery guy – thinking about these very expectations. Not hope for the future, but the expectations I once had.

"You say white rice. Says right here."

"Fried rice. I asked for fried rice! The girl on the phone can't speak fuckin' English."

When I close my eyes, there are always three people in my mind's eye. Jack Maddox is a husband. Jack Maddox is a father. Jack Maddox owns a house in the suburbs, mowing his own lawn even though he could easily afford a gardener. Jack Maddox is wealthy and attractive. Jack Maddox sees beautiful women every day of his life and never pays them any mind. Jessica is the only woman for Jack Maddox.

"Fine! I come back with your fried rice!"

I open my eyes, and all of those things are gone. Jack Maddox no longer is a husband. Jessica is dead. Jack Maddox no longer is a father. Emily is dead. Jack Maddox no longer owns a house in the suburbs.

I roll off the bed and walk towards the window, stepping over the pizza boxes and ignoring the piled up dishes in the sink. Through the metal security grate I see the Chinese kid mutter to himself then hop on his bike and pedal towards Foo Chow on Second Avenue.

So, who is Jack Maddox if not those things?

Jack Maddox is dead. He died ten years ago. Jack Maddox is

buried in a field on Cherry Hill Road just off Route 9 in Brattleboro. I am what's left.

\* \* \*

There's a light snow falling as I park my car in front of the telephone pole. I walk past the *Private Property* sign and my shoes sink into the fresh snow.

"Hi, Jack," Heidi says with that pretty smile. She is a year older than the last time I saw her, but her beauty has not diminished in the slightest. I want to tell her that, but I can't find the words. And I guess, on some level, I'm afraid she'll misinterpret what I mean.

I keep that to myself and simply nod and say, "Hi, Heidi." We embrace, and she tries to kiss me but I turn to the side. Her lips hit my neck. It tickles, slightly, but I don't laugh.

She does laugh, perhaps out of embarrassment. Hearing the familiar perky giggle forces me to turn towards her. Her hazel eyes are so striking. Her lips are thin but not too thin. She is a beautiful woman. She is my wife's sister. My wife's twin sister.

"I brought all your favorites again this year."

"Thank you."

We eat in silence, like we do every year. But this time, just as she unwraps the tinfoil from the bowl of rice pudding she says softly, "Jack?"

"Yes."

"It's been eleven years."

"I know."

"You're still a young man."

"I suppose."

"Jack, I just can't stand to see you like this."

"Like what?"

She pauses and as much as I don't want to, I look directly into her pretty hazels. She is every bit as beautiful as Jessica. If I close my eyes, I can almost fool myself into thinking she is Jessica. I shut my eyes and inhale. They wear the same perfume, and use the same shampoo. With my eyes closed, I can almost make myself believe it's her.

Until she says, "One day you need to get over her."

"What did you just say?"

She grabs my shoulders as if about to shake me and says, "You need to move on with your life, Jack. You need to move on. It's natural."

For an instant, I get angry. My impulse is to smack her arms right off of my shoulders. But I pause, and take in a heavy breath of *Honey* brand perfume and that shampoo with the kangaroo on the bottle. How can I be mad?

"I can never move on." I stand up and start walking slowly towards my car.

"Jack!" she says in a frantic tone filled with crackling phlegm. I turn and she outstretches her arm and says, "Your rice pudding. Don't forget the rice pudding. I made it just the way you like it."

I nod and smirk, then take the bowl from her and say, "I'll bring the bowl back next year."

"Keep it. I have plenty of bowls."

★ ★ ★

Every man needs certain delusions to survive. Some deny it. Others simply choose to call it something else: a daydream; a fantasy. But in reality, we know they are delusions. They are things that aren't true or real but we cling to them in order to survive. Kids have the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus, adults have God. I have the field on Cherry Hill Road.

It was in that field that I found my wife and child murdered. It was there that I first realized things could never be the same.

That I could never be the same.

I eat the rice pudding directly from the oversized bowl, slowly and deliberately. Then, I pull out my scrapbook. I look through it just once a year even though I carry it with me everywhere, sort of like a security blanket. After I get home from the picnic, I look through the album. It's a routine that I need in order to get through the next three hundred and sixty-four days and twenty hours without blowing my brains out. I often fantasize of suicide but know I'd never really do it. It wouldn't be right. Jessica and Emily were taken before their time, how can I voluntarily end

mine? It just seems an injustice to them.

The scrapbook has pictures – lots of pictures. Me and Jessica. Jessica and Emily. Me and Emily. Jessica, me and Emily. Birthdays. Anniversaries. Mother's days. Father's days. I captured them all, and I treasure these pictures.

The last page of my scrapbook is a newspaper clipping. It is the only thing in the album that doesn't make me smile. Yet I must look at it every year. Once a year I review the entire scrapbook. It is part of my routine.

The headline reads: *Valentine's Day Massacre in Vermont: Father finds bodies of murdered kin.*

The article goes something like this, I've scratched out the names because it's too painful to read them:

*A wealthy Westchester businessman found the mutilated bodies of his wife and daughter in a field in a rural area of Brattleboro. <illegible>, age thirty and <illegible>, age three were raped, brutally sliced then their bodies were dumped in a field. "We have no suspects at this time," Sheriff Ronald F. Hartman told reporters, "However we have several leads and are vehemently investigating each one."*

I stop reading there. I always stop reading there. Anyone who reads the newspaper knows that all the important stuff is in the first paragraph. I have the entire article clipped, but I never read past the first paragraph. It is part of my annual routine.

★ ★ ★

"Tough ride up?" Heidi asks.

"Yeah, hit a lot of traffic."

"Me too."

"Took me four and a half hours."

"Close to five for me," she says as she bites into her sandwich.

"You should have taken my short cut at Queechy Lake, saves a good fifteen minutes."

She nods, takes a sip of Merlot, then says meekly, "Jack?"

"What is it?" I snap. I hate to snap at her, but I just can't help it. The tone of her voice lets me know I'm not going to like what she's about to say.

"Jack, how come we never speak?"

“Nothing to say.”

“How come we never meet more than once a year?”

“Once a year I visit. I like having you as company. But if it’s too much trouble...”

She cuts me off and says, “It’s no trouble. But what I mean is, we live less than twenty blocks from one another, and the only time we meet is here. Can’t we meet on nicer terms?”

“I don’t think so.”

She sighs loudly and says, “How about now, can we talk now?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll talk. You never ask me about my life.”

I realize how selfish that must seem to her. The last thing I mean to be is selfish where Heidi is concerned. She is without a doubt the nicest, most unselfish person I’ve ever met.

“Okay, Heidi. Tell me something about your life.”

“Ask me something. What do you want to know?”

“Where do you work these days? Still a paralegal for Himmelfarb and Schier?”

“No! Don’t be silly. I graduated law school years ago.”

I laugh, then scratch my head and say, “You’re right. I’m sorry I never take an interest in your life. I just get preoccupied sometimes.”

“I know. I understand. Ask me something else.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?” It’s a natural question, but as soon as I ask it, I wish I could take it back.

“No.”

“Not lately?”

“No. Not ever.”

“Never? Come on, Heidi. You’re a beautiful woman. Talented and smart. Well off. There must be tons of guys asking you out.”

“There have been a few. But I always say no.”

“How come?”

Very quietly, almost inaudibly, she says, “Because my heart belongs to someone already.”

I look down at the picnic basket, then reach over for the bottle of wine. I take a long swig right from the bottle and ask, “Do you believe in love at first sight, Heidi?”

She shrugs. “I suppose.”

“I fell in love with your sister the very first day I met her.”

“Really?” she says, now smiling that great smile as her voice perks up. “That blind date that Jenny McGrath fixed you two up on!”

“Absolutely. From day one I knew she was the only girl for me.”

“Man. That was so long ago. You two were just kids. You couldn’t have been thinking about marriage at that age.”

“Not in that sense. But still, I knew. It’s weird. I mean, you know me, I am the least spiritual guy there is, even before all this happened. But when I first saw your sister in that black and pink polka-dotted shirt...I knew.”

“Oh my god! That shirt. I remember that shirt.”

“So do I. I’ll never forget that shirt.”

We smile at each other and finish our meal. The rice pudding is just as tasty as ever.

★ ★ ★

Being alone in a big house is unbearable. I’ll never forget when I bought my house. I expected to live there forever, but once I was all alone, it was too big. I wanted something small. Something that would look full. I don’t really like it, but I stay here anyway. I doubt I’ll ever move.

It’s noisy, but I like it that way. There’s a baby crying. The neighbors upstairs are shuffling around, as usual. The guy next door is yelling at the pizza delivery guy.

“I said no anchovies!”

“Sir, you specifically asked for anchovies.”

“No you dipshit! I specifically said no anchovies.”

“Alright. Alright. Take it easy. I’ll go get you another pie.”

“Hurry up, man. I’m hungry.”

It might sound silly, but I enjoy listening to my neighbor holler at the deliver guy every night. It reminds me that I’m still on planet Earth. My neighbor is great for keeping my focus on the present.

I walk past the mirror, ignoring the straggly-haired, unshaved

man in it, and yell into the security grate of my opened window, “2G, keep it down.” We’ve been neighbors for a decade, and I’ve never learned his name, nor he mine. “I’m trying to get some work done.”

“Hey, fuck you!” he yells back, then punches his side of the wall that separates our apartments.

I open the grate, stick my head out the window and yell, “Knock it off. You’re gonna break your hand, man.”

He sticks his head out and says in a surprisingly calm tone, “I’ll break my hand any time I goddamn please. Okay?”

I throw up my hand in mock surrender and say, “Fine. Just keep it down a little. Please.”

He nods his pudgy face while blowing a lip-fart. I really don’t care if he quiets down or not, I just felt like arguing with him.

The calendar that hangs from my wall reads *February 4*. Better take my suit to the cleaners and make an appointment at the barbershop.

★ ★ ★

“The sky is really gray,” she says. “Sure looks like snow.”

“They’re forecasting a blizzard.”

“I brought all your favorites again this year, Jack.”

“Great!”

“I have something extra special this year, Jack.” I’m fully expecting homemade rice pudding, but instead she pulls off her sweatshirt to reveal a black and pink polka-dotted shirt. One I haven’t seen in about twenty years.

“Wow. That’s the shirt,” I say, sort of dumbfounded but not sad at all.

“You recognize it?”

“Of course I do. It’s the shirt Jessica wore the day we met. The day I fell in love with her.”

“It’s the shirt, alright and it still fits.”

I smile at that. She really is just as thin as she was twenty years ago.

“But the shirt isn’t Jessica’s. It’s mine.”

“What, did she borrow it that day?”

“Nope.” She’s looking at me in a way I’ve never seen before. I thought I knew every mannerism and every facial tick Heidi had. But she is looking at me in a way that she never has before. “I wore the shirt that day.”

“What?”

“Your first date, Jack. It was with me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Jessica came down with the flu the day before your date. She begged me to fill in for her. Jenny said such good things about you and she didn’t want to blow it. So, I filled in.”

I scratch my head, trying to digest what I’m being told.

“It was only that one time, you see. You couldn’t tell us apart yet. You didn’t know us.”

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“Don’t you see, Jack. You fell in love with me at first sight. You fell in love with Jess later, but that first date was me.”

“It was you?”

“Yes.”

“That was twenty years ago. It means nothing.”

“It means everything. It means we have chemistry.”

“No. It doesn’t mean that.”

She wraps her arms around me and pulls me close. I don’t fight, but I don’t exactly go along either. I just lean against her body, stiff as the telephone pole I can see over her shoulder slightly blurred by the crosswind of snow that’s begun to fall.

“I fell in love that day, too, Jack. I, too, believe in love at first sight. I couldn’t hurt my sister, but I always secretly regretted it.”

“Regretted what?”

“Not getting the chance to be with you myself.”

“I’m sorry, Heidi. But it’s too late.”

“No. It isn’t. We’re right for each other. Jessica would understand. She would give her blessing. I know she would.”

“I can’t give my blessing.”

“Please, Jack. It’s time to move on with your life.”

“My wife and child were murdered. I can never forget that.”

Heidi shakes her head, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth again. Her hands go to her face as she starts to sob loudly. For the first time, she looks ugly to me.

“No,” she whispers.

“They were murdered. I killed them.”

“That’s not true,” she says just bawling like a schoolgirl.

I get up and wipe the sweat from my forehead, then start towards my car. She picks up her things and quickly follows me.

When I get to Cherry Hill Road, my car is right where I left it. Parked next to the pole.

“Why did I take this goddamned short cut?” I ask, without turning around to face her.

“You have to move on with your life.”

“The fucking Elmo tape blasting! The kid screaming, and Jessica yelling at me to slow down! I got distracted.”

“Please, Jack. Stop torturing yourself.”

“It was dark. I was tired. But I had to keep my precious four-hour schedule.”

“It’s over, Jack. You have to let it go.”

I turn to face her, the bowl of rice pudding trembling in her hand.

“It was an accident,” she whispers.

“I killed them.”

I open the car door and step inside, then roll down the window. She hands me the bowl with the rice pudding.

“I’ll bring the bowl back next year.”

“Keep it. I don’t want to have anymore picnics in the snow.”

I start my engine and pull around the pole, ignoring the burgundy paint stains. My scrapbook sits in the passenger seat, and I open it to the last page while gunning my engine. There is a picture of a family I don’t recognize. My tires skid against the icy gravel. I pull the clipping from the book, crumple it and toss it out into the fresh snow.



# OLD MAID SYNDROME

No! She didn’t!” I giggled with unmasked joy.

“She did! She did! Sara got engaged,” Chrissy laughed in her trademark mousy tone.

“I can’t believe it, this is soooooo exciting,” I said, tossing my brown curly hair. I could barely hold the princess phone between my fingernails, my hands were so shaky. “Shit! I think I chipped a nail!”

“Calm down, calm down.”

“kay.”

“Guess who’s the maid of honor.”

“Oh my God, she asked you?”

“Of course, we’ve only been best friends for twenty years, if she didn’t ask me I’d never forgive her.”

“That’s so cool, Chris.”

“And guess who else is gonna be asked to be in the wedding party.”

I knew Chris meant me, but I had to hear it to be sure. “Who?” I asked, straining to hold back the giggles.

“You Evelyn, of course she’s gonna ask you.”

“THAT IS WONDERFUL!!!!” I hollered. “I can’t believe this. Sara is getting married.”

After the initial giddiness started to lessen, I admit, a little jealousy kicked in. I just couldn’t help it. Chrissy sensed it and the laughter faded.

“What is it, Ev? You’re so quiet all of a sudden,” Chrissy asked softly.

“Nothing, nothing,” I insisted. Not that there was any point to bullshitting Chris.

“Don’t tell me nothing, sweetie, we’ve been friends too long

for that.”

“You know, it’s just that Sara is four years younger than me.”

“So, she’s two years younger than me, and I’m not married.”

“Yeah but you’ve been with Freddie for three years. It’s just a matter of time for you two. Me, I’ve got no one but Saki to keep me company.”

“So, Saki is a good friend,” Chrissy said with a semi-sincere laugh.

“Yeah, Saki’s great,” I mumbled, as my golden retriever ran over upon hearing his name, “but he ain’t gonna replace my vibrator anytime soon, you know what I mean, honey.” Saki put his head in my lap, and I stroked his furry head while he wagged his tail.

“I sure hope not, that would be way-weird!”

“I’m just really afraid, Chris.”

“Afraid? Afraid of what?”

“Well, when I was twenty, I was hot. At twenty-five, I was a knockout. But now, well, you know.”

“No, I don’t know. You’re still beautiful. Any guy would be lucky to have you. Any guy.”

“Yeah, but that P.P. is kicking in.”

“Come off it, you’re thin as can be, so I don’t want to hear shit about ‘Porker Potential.’”

“I guess I’m okay, for thirty-four. But my ass is a little flabbier than it used to be. And I stopped wearing belly shirts years ago.”

“Would you stop it, Ev. You are still a hottie. And thirty-four is not old. Not even close.”

“I guess.”

“I don’t guess, I know.”

“There’s something more. It’s not just the couple extra pounds on the scale. It’s...”

“What honey? What is it?”

“The bottom line is...well...it’s...”

“Come on, Ev, you can talk to me.”

“I don’t want to grow old alone.”

“I know honey, but things will change for you. Don’t give up hope.”

★ ★ ★

Planning and celebrating led to dress fitting, then before I had time to feel sorry for myself, the wedding day was upon us. Riding in the limousine, I was all smiles. After all, I had so much to be happy about. As the white Lincoln stretch began the two-mile journey of transporting the wedding party to the reception hall, we all looked out the window, cackling a happy cackle. We were unabashed at times like these. Who cared if we looked ditzzy to the farty old driver?

“Who was that guy?” I asked.

“Which guy?” Chris responded without any attempts to mask her excitement.

“You know, the tall guy with long dark hair in the wedding party.”

“Ohhhhh, that guy. I always knew you had good taste.”

“Well, who is he?”

“I think he’s Johnny’s cousin. Do you wanna meet him?” she asked playfully.

“Yes, I want to meet him!”

“When we get to the hall I’ll see if I can work some magic.”

“You better be subtle about it, or I’ll kill you, Chris.”

“Of course I will. I’ll tell him that you’re horny, desperate and lonely.”

“Shut up you bitch!” I giggled as I lightly punched Chrissy’s shoulder. I think I was turning red. She just loved to embarrass me.

“I’ll drop a little hint to Johnny that you think his cousin is cute.”

“Yeah right, you’re gonna make me look stupid.”

“No I won’t! Don’t you have any faith in me?”

Chris was talking to me, but I wasn’t looking at her. I was looking outside at the next car. One of the other limousines, the one holding the groomsman, was passing on the left.

“He’s so hot!” Chris laughed. “If you don’t go after him I might.”

“Chris, you’re terrible, you have a man.”

“I’m kidding!”

We stopped talking, and all the girls turned towards the other

car and gazed at the guy. He turned and looked over, and the car filled with laughter.

“Oh my god, I am soooo mortified!” I shouted, dropping my face into my hands.

“Stop it, why?”

“He saw me staring. I’m so humiliated.”

“Stop overreacting, we were all staring.”

Sara’s younger sister, Hillary, turned to her girlfriend and said, “He seems arrogant. He knows he’s good-looking.”

The friend nodded, then said, “Did you see how he flipped his long hair like a girl?”

“How do you know he’s arrogant?” I asked, although they weren’t talking to me directly.

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s just a cocky look he gave us. The way he twirled his goatee. You didn’t notice, Evelyn?”

“No!” I said and turned my back on the other girls.

★ ★ ★

As soon as there was a break at the reception, Chris wasted no time. She worked her magic, and they came over towards me. I was so tingly!

“This is my cousin, Emmanuel,” Johnny said with a smile, then a wink in my direction.

“Hello, Evelyn,” Emmanuel said in a soothing, low tone.

Emmanuel extended his hand and when I touched it, I think I melted. He was so warm and firm, yet gentle at the same time. He kissed the top of my palm lightly, without puckering or leaving any wetness. Me on the other hand felt moisture between my legs and under my arms instantly.

“Shall we dance?” he asked. But I was too dazed to answer. Ever the gentleman, he said, “Perhaps you’d rather take a seat.”

“Uh, sure,” I said, without taking my eyes from his – they were almost magically hypnotic, and a sharp shade of hazel.

Emmanuel led me to his table and pulled out a chair for me to sit in. I followed his lead, and sat. Finally taking my eyes off of his, I noticed Chrissy looking over with a wide smile. Chrissy waved quickly – that rapid circular wave of hers – then turned away nonchalantly.

~b4~

We talked and laughed. Conversation came so easily and flowed so naturally. There never seemed to be an uncomfortable pause. We danced, a long and slow dance. The day flew by and I admit...I was entranced. When it came time to catch the bouquet, it sailed into my hands; I didn’t even lunge or jump, it just came right to me as if shot out of Cupid’s bow.

Emmanuel slid the garter up my leg, very softly and slowly, yet he didn’t seem embarrassed. Me, on the other hand, I was beet red once he finally reached his destination with the lacey belt.

“HIGHER! Go higher!” Chrissy called with glee. That bitch! I told you she loved embarrassing me.

“THAT’S HIGH ENOUGH!” I shouted as the room laughed. It was high enough for a public display anyway! Once in private I knew it would be different though. There wouldn’t be any limits put on him in private. How could I? I was in love. Just that quickly, and I was sure he felt it too.

He was perfect! Good looking. Good job. Never been married before. No kids. No ex-wife. No baggage. I just couldn’t believe it. It was the best night of my life. The man of my dreams had finally arrived!

Emmanuel led me outside, and called a cab. Nobody complained that I snuck off early. They were all too happy for me. He opened the door, helped me in, and got in beside me. We cuddled the entire ride to his place. He never made any moves, didn’t even try to kiss me. Just held me close, firmly yet nicely. The butterflies in my belly were whipping around. My palms were wet and tingly. I was lightheaded.

Emmanuel helped me out of the taxi. There was a small puddle of muddy water in the gutter. Before I had the chance to panic over my apricot dress, he lifted me up and over it – I flew into his arms – then placed me back down. I felt secure in his grasp. He wasn’t overly muscular, but he seemed so sturdy, until he put me back down. He stumbled a bit, and his face grimaced.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Fine. Of course, I’m fine.”

“Not too heavy, I hope,” I said with a sheepish smile.

“Don’t be silly. Just got a little woozy for a second. Had nothing to do with you.”

~b5~

We walked arm in arm into the building. The doorman quickly opened the door and held it for us, then dutifully jogged by us, over to the elevator, and pushed the ‘up’ button.

“Thanks, Charles,” Emmanuel said and smiled.

“Of course, Mr. Appel. You and the lady enjoy your evening.”

“Oh, we will,” I said with a giddy giggle. I guess I should have felt a little trashy under the circumstances. Normally, I would have. I never slept with a guy on the first date, ever. In thirty-four years. But I didn’t feel cheap. Not in the slightest. This was perfect. Anyway, I’m sure Charles didn’t mean it that way. He was just being polite.

We got off the elevator on the top floor. There was only one door. His apartment took up the entire floor! Once inside, I could see that it was something else! A huge fish tank covered the entire foyer wall. Orange, red and yellow tropical fish swam around happily. Art covered the walls; I’m sure it was rare and expensive too, but what do I know about art? The couch was big and cushy, and next to it was a fireplace.

“Wow! A fireplace. Can we light it? Please, please, please!”

“Of course.”

Emmanuel flicked a switch, and the flames shot right up. The warmth and brightness was both alarming and beautiful.

“Wow. This apartment is amazing, Emmanuel. I’ve never been in a place quite like it.”

“Relax, Evelyn. My home is yours. Would you like a drink?”

“Sure.”

“Booze? Wine? What would you like?” he asked as he gracefully glided along the hardwood floor like a cross-country skier. He stopped at the long oak bar and pulled out two glasses.

“Oh, whatever you’re having.” I wasn’t much of a drinker, and I couldn’t think straight enough to choose something.

“Wine then. Red wine.”

“Excellent, Emmanuel. Red wine would be excellent.”

Emmanuel carried over the two glasses. I sipped lightly first, as he gulped. Then I gulped too. It was very sweet, and it went right to my already tipsy head.

“More?” he asked.

“Not for me.”

“Okay, I’ll just have one more.”

As he walked back towards the bar, I turned to the fire. It burned brightly, and the wood crackled. He was quiet, and I was quiet. Just the sound of burning wood crackling, and a soft pouring of wine in the background. It was perfect. I had my share of failed romances as an adult, and plenty of backseat debacles in my teens. Truthfully, I hadn’t had good sex with anyone but my vibrator...ever. Tonight would be different. It was just too perfect. And it couldn’t get anything but better.

Emmanuel walked back, sipping the wine. The glass was empty by the time he reached the couch, and he placed the goblet down on the glass coffee table. He gently slipped off my heels. I’m not sure why I hadn’t kicked them off already myself. But it was as if I needed him to do everything for me. He parted my legs with the grace of a swan cutting a light wake into a clear pond and then slid my stockings down. I never met a man like this. There wasn’t a rough bone in his body. My dress slipped down as if he didn’t even touch it. My strapless push-up slid off like a figure skater on fresh, smooth ice. Then, Emmanuel peeled my panties off.

He dropped his pants and slipped out of his own shirt and cummerbund. Then he disappeared, down into the couch, and into my crotch. The fluffy couch absorbed his head, and I couldn’t even see it. But boy could I feel it. The way he moved his tongue around in rhythmic circles was incredible. It was going in and out of me while his fingers gently rubbed my clit. I was instantly lost, and lost completely. I arched my back, and leaned my head all the way back, stretching and straining uncontrollably. Emmanuel was making these quiet grunts as he worked me, which only added to my excitement. I was usually too inhibited to make noise with a man, but I grunted back at him, he had me feeling so comfortable and relaxed.

The pleasurable tension built up and built up as Emmanuel rubbed and licked. He sucked my lips gently away from my body, and his tongue and fingers entered my insides, then caressed the outsides. It just kept building up and building up inside of me, the friction getting harder and harder, yet just the right amount. I was wet enough to handle it at this point, and he sensed it, picking up

his pace with his tongue and rubbing the top of my lips faster and faster. I kept arching my back further and further, stretching myself at the seams as I quivered and shook. I gripped the pillows and twisted. Just when I thought I'd go crazy from it, when the passion was so fucking intense that I was going to either orgasm or die, at just that moment when I was about to holler, "I can't take it any more! STOP! This is too fucking good, Emmanuel!" finally, I came. I'm sure I screamed from the unbridled passion, although how can I even remember? I was so lost in the moment. I had cum before from my vibrator, and once or twice with a man, but never, ever was I so free that I could shriek like a horny banshee unleashed from a thirty-four-year-old crypt of bad sex. I was always too damned uptight. But not with Emmanuel. He was a pro at oral. And more importantly, he was a pro at making me feel special.

When he came up from the couch, he smiled, and I smiled back. Then he lay down, and took me on him. He didn't ask, and I didn't object. I just wound up on top of him and he lay back, bouncing me up and down like I was his plaything. And I loved it. The sex didn't last long, but at that point, who cared? I could see he was tired, and so was I. He was breathing so heavily and sucking wind that I was alarmed for a second, but he smiled his calming smile, and I fell asleep in his arms, right there on the couch.

I woke up the next morning and smelled coffee. *He even makes coffee!* I still couldn't find a single fault in Emmanuel. He walked over to me very slowly. He was smiling, but looked a little weather-beaten. I guess that wasn't strange, he hadn't showered or anything.

"Evelyn," he handed me a mug of coffee and looked me right in the eye – those powerful hazels just grabbed me.

"Hi, honey. Last night was wonderful."

"Yes, it was."

"It was the best night of my life. Ever!"

"I'm so happy that I can please you."

"Oh, you do. You do!"

"I want to make you happy, forever. For the rest of your life, Evelyn."

"Emmanuel, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying I want to marry you."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course. I want you to marry me."

I was stunned, and speechless. All I could do was stare into those big eyes, and he looked back, never once breaking eye contact.

Emmanuel took my hand firmly, put my coffee mug down, dropped to one knee, and asked, "Evelyn, will you marry me?"

I held his glare, just waiting for him to crack a smile, or laugh. Or tell me he was kidding. It was all so fast, and we just met. But my heart told me this was it. I'd waited thirty-four years, and finally I knew: I wouldn't grow old alone!

"Yes, Emmanuel. YES! Of course I'll marry you." I grabbed Emmanuel and hugged him, the tightest firmest hug I'd ever hugged. Tears of joy watered my eyes.

Emmanuel continued to smile at me, and his eyes stayed on me. Then his expression changed, and he looked away. He stumbled, and quickly sat down.

"What is it, honey? What's wrong?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, Evelyn. I'm feeling weak."

"Is everything okay?" I jumped up and ran to the bar, filled a glass with water and ran it back to him. "Drink honey, you'll feel better."

Emmanuel slugged the water down quickly, and turned to me. "More please," he said as he handed me the glass.

I ran back to the bar and refilled the glass. As I walked it back I asked, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Evelyn, there's something that you must know about me, before our relationship goes any further."

"Of course. Tell me, honey."

"I have a rare condition. A very rare kidney ailment."

"Oh my god! That's so awful."

"It is. It is. It makes me very weak at times, and my stamina is effected."

"Well, have you seen a doctor?"

"A doctor," he said with a chuckle. "I've been to all the best doctors in the country. They can't do anything for me."

"They can't?"

"All we can do is wait. I need a new kidney. And there is a long waiting list for kidneys."

"Well, I'll give you one of mine."

"Oh, Evelyn, that is so nice of you. It's too nice of you."

"Nonsense. We are going to spend our lives together. And I want yours to be a long and healthy one."

"There are risks. To me, but also to you."

"Emmanuel, I will risk everything. I need you to be healthy."

We went to see Dr. Rothman the very next day. The tests went beautifully. It appeared that my kidney would be compatible with his body. I insisted that we schedule the surgery as soon as possible. To hell with ring shopping (oh my god, did I really say that?!). So just a few days later, less than a week after I'd met Emmanuel, I was giving him my kidney.

\* \* \*

I awoke in a lot of pain. I looked down, pulled back my gown, and twisted around, trying hard not to stretch the I.V. line in my arm. There was a huge scar in my side where they'd cut me open. And the scabs around it were gross! They were full of pus. They didn't look right. I immediately buzzed for the nurse. She came, along with the doctor.

"Evelyn, I need you to relax," Dr. Rothman said.

"I'm in a lot of pain, doctor."

"I'm sure you are. There's a nasty infection. We are giving you strong doses of anti-biotics to fight it off. Don't worry."

"Emmanuel?"

"He's doing great, Evelyn. Just great."

"Can I see him?"

"Sure. But you need to stay in bed."

"Well, can I call his room?"

"Actually, he's gone home. I've told him to make sure he gets extra rest and takes all his medications. But otherwise, he should be in great shape."

"Oh."

Emmanuel was home already. It was great news, of course.

But if I was still here, shouldn't he come see me?

I picked up the phone and called his number. There was no answer. He was probably too tired. Just following orders and getting rest.

As the infection spread all over my insides, I spent weeks in and out of consciousness. They had me doped up on all kinds of shit. At times, I forgot where I was. If anyone came to visit, I guess I was too groggy to notice. But daily, I called Emmanuel. I had to know how he was. He just didn't answer. I called, and called. Finally, I realized he must need me. It was the only explanation.

My need to save him gave me strength. Even though it hurt to stand, I stood. I yanked the I.V. needle out of my arm, and looked for my shoes. I didn't bother to dress. I hadn't eaten solid food in weeks, but I managed to walk all the way home. My love for Emmanuel carried me.

I opened the door, and Saki rushed me. He was so happy to see me, and I him.

"You poor thing? You're emaciated." I looked in the hallway mirror and noticed, I was too. I fed Saki, and ate what little I could stomach myself. Then, I showered and did my best to make myself pretty for him. My shaky hands ran my make-up a bit, but I did my very best. Emmanuel would appreciate the effort. When I walked out, Saki followed behind.

I limped all the way uptown to Emmanuel's palace. When I got there, I saw Charles out front, pulling opened the door to a large limousine. I was about to call and say hello to Charles when I saw Emmanuel getting out of the car, and with him was a familiar, pretty face. It was Chrissy. That fucking bitch. She didn't come and visit me once in the hospital. And now, she was with him! They were arm in arm – all over each other! Groping like a couple of hormone-filled teenagers.

They walked inside without looking in my direction, and Saki and I walked up to the front door. I was sure Charles would turn me away, he was so damn thorough at his job. But just as we got to the front, a woman in white fur walked out with her pathetically well-groomed white poodle – they matched. Saki ran at the poodle, and yanked the leash right out of my hands. The woman

screamed and Charles ran over to her aid. I walked inside, unseen.

When I got up to the penthouse, I was pretty sure the door would be opened. I was right. I guess when you have the only apartment on the floor, why bother locking it. I wouldn't know that kind of arrogance, or affluence. But whatever.

I walked inside and stood in the foyer. I didn't have to walk all the way in to see what was going on. The fish tank wall was easy to see through, although the apartment was dimly lit. Emmanuel lit candles and the two sat on the couch. The fireplace burned. Chrissy was giggling her typical, ditsy giggle. I used to think it was cute. That phony!

I watched them sip wine, and Emmanuel did most of the talking. I couldn't hear them through the thick fish tank's glass, other than that bitch's cackling; goddamn did that cut through walls! The two of them began undressing each other slowly, then the mood changed.

Emmanuel ripped her bra off, and Chrissy bit his neck. He yanked her from the back of her panties and carried her into the bedroom like she was his lunchbox. I could see her legs kicking wildly in midair, and I heard that obnoxious giggling, along with, "Oh, Emmanuel, you're so rough." Where did he find this new-found strength? From my fucking kidney that ingrate!

They disappeared down a long corridor, and I began riffling through drawers. I found a scissors. I rubbed it against my arm lightly, and it was sharp. Perfect. I'd cut that bastard's dick right off! And her tits too, while I was at it!

I walked slowly down the corridor, it twisted and turned and there were many rooms along the way: a study, a library, and a playroom with a pool table and such. What a place! I'd never seen it all before. I'd have gotten lost for sure, but I just followed the giggles. It wasn't too hard.

As the giggles got louder, my pace slowed. I was so weak. I stopped and held the wall for balance. Just then I heard, "Fuck me, Emmanuel. Fuck me harder!" and my equilibrium came right back. I walked around one more bend and there they were. What made her so special that she got to see the bedroom? I never did!

Chrissy was yelling and cackling, bouncing up and down on top of him.

"Ooooo, Freddie never fucks like this."

What a horrible thing to say. Freddie devoted his whole fucking world to her! Doted over her every movement. Treated her like a queen!

She hopped up and down, and then he yanked her off, and tossed her down. He flipped her over, bent her hips, grabbed her ass, and put it up in the air.

*Whack!*

Emmanuel spanked her tiny little ass. Yeah, fine, so Chrissy did have a killer body.

"Ouch!" she shot back, but it didn't hurt.

*Whack! Whack!*

He pounded her ass again, then again.

"Oooo."

"You like?" he asked in this evil tone of voice.

"Is that the hardest you can hit?"

*Wham!* He really nailed her, and she clearly loved it.

He started fucking her doggy, wildly. His ass was flying 'round and 'round, as if he was waving it at my face. He was groaning this pathetic groan, making these noises. What a retard! What did I ever see in him? I can't believe I fell for his bullshit Casanova act. Look at what a bully he could be, when he had the energy. She was banging into the wall, and loving it. When he did me, it was like thirty seconds and done. He'd been slamming her around for five minutes already, and showing no signs of slowing.

His balls were slapping around, and I was staring at them, transfixed. I looked at the sharp metal scissors, then at his balls. I entered the room and walked towards them.

"Fuck me, Emmanuel! Fuck me hard!"

And boy was he; she was whacking into the wall, and this grandiose wood headboard and not caring at all. How did she plan to explain those bumps to Freddie? He'd believe whatever bullshit she told him, he was so whipped.

"Harder! Fuck me harder."

“Uh! Uh!” Emmanuel grunted loudly, followed by these soft, goofy little, “ew, ew,” noises.

Mix her yelling, with his groaning, throw in her giggling with the sound of her head smashing that wooden post and goddamn was this something else. His ass was staring at me, thrashing around in circles, and forwards and backwards. On and on. It was the never-ending fuck from hell.

“Fuck me! Fuck me you beast!”

“Uh! Uh!”

“Fuck me harder you bastard! Yank my hair! Spank my ass! Come on you wussy boy, fuck me harder!”

“Ew, ew.”

That ass was still laughing at me, and I was right behind them. It amazed me that he couldn’t feel my breath on his back, or hear me, as I was breathing just as heavily as they were. But those two were oblivious. It just kept on, even as I raised the scissors up over my head.

“Fuck me harder! Harder you wussy boy. Come on, rich man, can’t you fuck a girl any harder?”

“Uh, uh. Ew, ew.”

Finally, I just couldn’t take another second of listening to his thighs slapping her ass. I brought down the scissors, right into his back, and twisted.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!” he yelled out.

I used what little strength I had left to open the scissors and tear away the flesh. I twisted it around and around, just like his ass had been twisting for the last ten minutes. I ripped a hole wide open in him. I don’t know how long it took, but the stupid, spoiled rich boy did nothing but moan. You’d think his reflexes would kick in and he’d either fight back or try and weasel away. But he just squeezed her hips and hollered.

I reached into his insides, and yelled, “Give me back my kidney you ungrateful prick!”

“Oh my god!” Chrissy yelled from underneath.

He passed out, and all of his weight came down on top of her. The poor little petite thing was pinned. But she managed to twist

around to look up at me.

I yanked out my kidney, cutting away at the veins and muscle connecting it to him. There was still a little of his tissue left, so I bit it off, and spit it right in her face. I dropped the scissors, took my kidney, and left.





# EXPRESS DELIVERY

**M**artin looked at the foot sitting nakedly in the box in front of him with a numbness that only true terror can inspire. All he could picture in his head was the way he had smiled at the boy from Express Delivery. He had smiled and thanked him whilst taking possession of the innocuous looking brown box with the blue and red company logo down the side. The logo down the side, and his left foot sitting cosily within. And there was no doubt about it; that was definitely his left foot. The only difference between the one in the box and the one inside his slipper was that the one in the package wasn't attached to the rest of him. Oh yes, and the one inside that padded tartan warmth didn't have a tag tied round its big toe stating in bold black letters:

**YOU HAVE TWO DAYS.**

Even though he'd recognised the landscape and the structure of the foot immediately when he'd seen it, he still pulled off his slipper in the vain hope that the foot had been delivered to the wrong door, that there was someone else in the world that had gotten themselves into some deep shit, and this was just a crazy coincidence. Being very careful not to touch the contents, he picked the box up from the coffee table and placed it on the floor. Feeling the heaviness and uneven weight of the package made the skin between his fingers tingle in disgust. Maybe it was time to put his toes on a diet, ha, ha. Not very funny, he concluded to himself. Not very funny at all.

Looking at the two together there was no doubt about it, they were definitely a pair. The same dark brown mole just inside the arch, and the same little tuft of hairs sprouting from his big toe. If he counted them he would bet his breakfast that there would be the same amount of hairs on each, and each one of those hairs would be identical to that of its counterpart. His mouth dried instantly, and although his face was flushing he could feel a chill

running through his body as his blood pulled back into the centre of him, protecting itself.

He looked at the note again. YOU HAVE TWO DAYS. Shit, oh shit, oh shit. How had he let things get this far? Although dramatically delivered, the words themselves were pretty irrelevant. They were just a time scale, tickety tock said Mr. Clock, and all that jazz. The real message was the foot itself. It told him their intentions more fluently than any amount of words could attempt. The message was pretty simple.

In two days time, if he didn't produce the money, he was a dead man. A dead man, and yet not a dead man. He would cease to exist, be rubbed out, whacked or whatever these gangsters called their form of murder these days, but no one would find his body, no one would grieve for him and more importantly, there would be no police investigation, because, hey, to all intents and purposes he would still be alive. Not the original him naturally. No, he himself would be incinerated neatly out of society. Not him, but a perfect copy. The perfect clone that would visit his children at weekends, sleep in his bed, and wear his goddamned tartan slippers. The clone that would be found a job and would pay a percentage of its salary every month to its creators; partly to cover the cost of bringing it into the world and partly to cover the debts of its dead predecessor. He was only thirty now, so that gave them a good thirty years to get a return on their money.

He stood up on shaky legs and crossed the room. Standing on tiptoes he reached over the top of the bureau, feeling the dust shifting beneath his fingertips. After a few seconds of blind fumbling, his hand found what it was looking for, and pulled down the small tin. Cigarettes had been illegal in England for over ten years, but thank the Lord for small mercies, the government wasn't as harsh about it as they were in the USA. Sure, you could get busted for it, but if you only had a few for personal use, the police tended to turn a blind eye. After all, most of those guys weren't beyond having the odd puff themselves. The end of the Marlboro blazed red as he sucked in deeply, the harshness of the stale tobacco tickling his throat, and as his head began to swim and buzz, he returned to sit on the sofa. Hell, he might even smoke two today. There was a time when the fear of getting busted for smoking

would have kept him awake at nights wondering if the neighbours could smell his once a fortnight law-breaking activity, but those days were well and truly over.

He could feel his panic resurgent within him. *Two days*. Two days to find one hundred thousand pounds, or the clone had his life. He pulled harder on the cigarette, not wanting to waste any of its polluting cargo.

He had been expecting something, but not this. Cloning wasn't the big deal over here, not like in big brother's America, where the surge in the industry had created national paranoia. Was your mother really your mother, or has Dad traded her in for a replacement? For a price, you could have the satisfaction of murder with none of the comeback. There were even strong rumours in many leading international newspapers that the President hadn't really recovered from that heart attack he had last year, and this was in fact, version two, the new model. But here in little England, it had never really taken off. Or so he had thought until now.

It was common knowledge that the Greater London Mafia ran most of the city, and some said the country, but they must have way more money than he originally thought to spend out like this on a nobody like him. A whole load more money.

He could remember sitting in that huge office, with its leather chair, sweating against his trousers, wondering if when he stood up there would be a damp patch there betraying his nerves, his naiveté, his lack of criminal experience. He did not do things like this. He was a LAW ABIDING CITIZEN. He was a respected space-planning officer and he had PROSPECTS. The man who owned the illegally large office had just smiled and asked him the details of the program that he required, and then politely offered him a cup of tea. He imagined a solitary hair falling desperately slowly to the floor as he recalled leaning forward to take the delicate bone china cup. Whether it was a hair, or a flake of skin, it was irrelevant. They had got his DNA from somewhere.

He reluctantly extinguished the smouldering butt. This was all Carol's fault. If she hadn't told him out of the blue she didn't want him anymore, to leave her and the kids to get on with their

own lives, to go and live with his precious work, then he wouldn't be in this situation. There would have been no Express Delivery. He smiled acidly to himself. It was easy for Carol, but then, everything had always been easy for Carol, the archetypal little rich kid who never *had* to work. Daddy had been the creator of the Space Management Council, after all. Revolutionising London's housing situation. Hero of the people, etc. etc. blah, blah, blah. The sharp bitterness in his head felt like it was scraping at his skull.

When they had first met he thought she had admired his ambition, his determination to get on, to succeed, to be SOMEONE. She finally admitted, five years and two children later that all she really wanted him to be was her husband, her companion. Someone to spend all day at the tennis club with. They were never really what they had pretended to be for each other, and faking it wasn't working anymore. That's what she thought anyway. She never bothered to ask his opinion as she virtually shoved him out the door.

Deep inside though, he figured that she just got bored. Simple as that. Bored of her working class toy. Whatever it was, one day she just couldn't stand the sight of him anymore. But God did he love her, spoiled brat or not. Maybe he loved her almost as much as he hated her. It was always rather hard to tell with these things. Different moments, different moods. And these days he was finding it hard to tell if it was virtual Carol or biological Carol that still had the hold on him.

There was a spluttering sound from the box on the floor, and he watched as the foot mulched down into brown gel, folding in on itself from the inside, looking like an old-fashioned rubber veruca sock with no solidity within it, until the outer layer itself melted away, leaving only a damp lump of some glutinous substance behind. Revolting as it was to watch, he wasn't really surprised. A whole spare foot sent through the post could most definitely be used as evidence in a court of law.

He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands like an infant would, tired even in the midst of his panic. He wasn't used to being off-line this long, especially since he'd given up going into work, and although it was definitely illegal to go virtual for more

than five hours a day, that was another rule that he had taken to bending quite vigorously. Most people didn't have a choice, government produced programs had a fail-safe cut out. Five hours out of twenty-four was all they would run, no matter how much you swore, and if you decided to have a little tinker around inside and see if you could extend the program yourself, it would log right in to the nearest cop shop. More than one attempt and it was a custodial for you. There was no turning a blind eye for that one.

But the beauty of an illegal program was that there was no cut off point. Sure, they shut down like all the other programs every five hours, to make sure you eat and don't pee in your pants, but then you can start them up twenty minutes later and you're in for another five hours of fun. And that was pretty much how he had lived in recent weeks. Wired up and playing.

He looked longingly at the door to the bedroom where his system was set up. Maybe he should plug in for an hour and try to relax. Maybe then he'd have a life-saving idea. He resisted the urge, but only just. He thought of calling Carol. She was, after all, the only person he knew that could get her hands on that kind of money, but he could just imagine how the conversation would go.

*Hi Carol, it's me.*

*Martin? What are you calling for? You're not due to see the kids until next weekend. Her voice would be cool. Get out of my life. This is not your allocated day to speak to us. Come back on Saturday, but please don't stay too long.*

*Well, the thing is, it's like this. I've got myself in a bit of a financial pickle and need one hundred thousand pounds, preferably in cash. Ideally today or tomorrow. Definitely no later than that. Any chance of a no-way I can repay you loan?*

*How much did you say? What on earth do you need that kind of money for? What kind of trouble are you in?*

*Ab. You see, that's the really fun part. When we split up, I heard a really hard time trying to cope, and a crazy part of me thought that I might be able to deal with things better, might be able to concentrate on work, on keeping my head above water, if for a few hours a day I could have my old life back. Sad, huh? So I went to some programmers that weren't strictly legal and they put my old life on disc for me. Sure, that means that unknown to you, they have been in our, sorry, slip of the*

tongue, your house, watched the kids at play, filmed you naked in the bath, stolen sweat from your tennis gear to get your smell right, rifled through your perfumed underwear, all that kind of great stuff. But, hey, it was all in a good cause. What you didn't know didn't hurt you, did it?

Carol? Are you still there? Are you getting all this?

Anyway, that's all kind of unimportant right now. What is important is that although I did pay a quarter of the cost up front, these things are really rather expensive, and I promised to pay the rest in instalments, which would have been fine if I'd been going in to work, but our life has just been so good in the program that I didn't think that going into work, (I mean real work as opposed to virtual – virtually I've been promoted twice now– are you still with me?), was really that important anymore, and to cut a long story short, it would appear that I've missed a couple of payments, well, four to be exact, and I have a sneaking suspicion they've found out that I've lost my job.

What was that? What will happen if I don't pay up?

Oh well, this is the really great bit. I, me, the me that is, will no doubt have my neck broken in some savage manner, but don't worry about the kids being traumatised, I'll still be along to take them to McDonald's on Saturday, in a manner of speaking of course. In fact, your life won't be affected at all. You probably won't even notice the change. He will be me, after all. And yes, he'll probably beg you to take him back every time he sees you as well.

He started to laugh out loud on the sofa, sitting there in his dressing gown and slippers. If he told her all that there'd be a whole wardrobe full of feet arriving from her Dad in no time at all. His laughter was taking on a manic edge and he found his eyes straying to the bedroom door again. Maybe just half an hour.

He was distracted by a familiar sound that for a moment he just couldn't place, his brown eyes looked quizzically round trying to locate its source, before realising it was the gentle whirr of his front door opening. But that couldn't be. That couldn't be at all. His heart started to speed up, knocking frantically at his ribs, realising the awful truth of the situation well ahead of the rest of him. The only thing that could open his door was a scan of his handprint. *His handprint. His handprint.* No, no, no. Oh, no. God no.

His brain was slowly catching up as the two men walked casu-

ally into his living room, one slightly behind the other. The first wore a dark overcoat and was pulling a gun with a silencer attachment from its inner pocket with leather clad hands. He was obviously proud of the traditions of his trade. Despite the fact that the man in front was the one with the gun, *Jesus Christ, he has a gun,* it was the man standing slightly behind him that held Martin's stunned attention.

He was about five feet eleven, with dark hair that couldn't decide whether it was straight or curly, creating the impression that it was tugging his skull in all directions, all except for the fringe which hung lethargically over his dark brown Mediterranean eyes. His hands were pushed far down into his baggy trouser pockets, as he looked awkwardly round the flat, trying desperately not to look at its current owner, obviously wishing he was anywhere but here.

Martin couldn't take his eyes off him, for a moment the danger of the situation forgotten. He was him, and yet not him. The new Martin was slightly heavier, his hair longer. He was also slightly more tanned. In fact the clone looked exactly as he himself had when he had walked into that oversized office, back at the end of summer.

A sharp clicking sound emanating from the man in front brought his attention back to the situation at hand. The gun was armed and pointing confidently in his direction. He drew his eyes away from its dark barrel and into the face of the man holding it. This wasn't right. They had given him two days to get the money. In the corner of his vision he saw his carbon copy slipping away into the kitchen. He almost screamed for him to come back, but pure panic squeezed his throat silent. Something about the way the other him had looked terrified him to the core.

It was the same expression he himself would be wearing if he was about to witness something very bad happening to another human being. Something very nasty and definitely very bloody. The thought of blood made him feel sick. The sight of it made him pass out. It had been the same for the past twenty-four years since he had seen some kid knocked down by a speeder. Knocked down never to get up again. That kid's skull had been flattened and his brain spread generously over the tarmac in clumps, like

grey jelly. There was also more blood than he had ever seen, or ever wanted to see again. He could see the look of surprise in those glassy eyes as clearly as he had at six years old. A look that said that a terrible mistake had been made, and that he'd like to change his mind and look both ways now. Martin brought himself back to the present, his vision a tunnel leading into the eternal blackness of the gun barrel that seemed to be oh, so close to the delicate flesh of his face. He could feel his stomach contracting, searching for some hope to cling on to. Please God, he didn't want to be like that kid. Please no, anything but that.

He felt tears springing to his eyes, and could barely keep his trembling lips still enough to force out in a whisper, "But the note said, two days, you said two days, you said..." His voice trailed away as, with the flick of a gloved wrist, the man ushered him onto the sofa.

"Yes, that's right. We did say two days, and two days you would have had if one of the lab boys hadn't got a bee in his bonnet about that mole on your foot."

He didn't understand, didn't understand at all, but at least while they were talking he was still alive. "My foot?" There was more voice than whisper there now, he was pleased to hear, small confidence returning. The stranger wearing the impossibly expensive suit and overcoat, *could you still get real wool these days?*, reached into the open tin box on the table and took a cigarette, sparking it up with a silver Dunhill lighter he pulled from his trouser pocket. He didn't offer Martin one, but started to smoke with a casualness that implied regular use, exhaling a long stream of white chemicals before speaking.

"Yeah, for some reason he seemed to remember that mole. He used to work for the police, so he has a good memory for detail. So anyway, he started checking through the records, and that's when we found out that you weren't Martin 1 at all, but Martin 2." Stubbing out the half-smoked cigarette, he left it alongside Martin's butt from only an hour and a lifetime earlier, and selected a cushion from the sofa, plumping it up.

"Martin 2. What the hell is Martin 2?" Whatever the man was talking about wasn't making any sense, but still managed to make Martin even more uneasy. Uneasy and queasy. His ears had

started to ring. The man stopped shaping the cushion and looked him in the eye. Martin didn't like the coldness that sat there so comfortably.

"Do you remember when you and your wife started having problems a couple of years ago?" Martin nodded numbly, no longer sure he wanted to know where this was leading.

"Well, she'd been reading some of the stuff that was going in America and came to the crazy conclusion that maybe by killing you, she might relieve some stress and save your marriage. Burn out all that anger and resentment in one hit. You know what women are like. Especially the rich ones. Too much daytime T.V telling them how unhappy they are all the time." Martin hadn't eaten for over a day, but was still sure that he was going to throw up. This had to be a dream. Either that or he was still in the program and it was corrupting. This could not be real. This could not be happening.

"So anyway, she orders a replacement, and when it's ready, she murders the real Martin in the morning and you gets you activated in the afternoon." The room was spinning now. "As it transpired, and here's the funny part, she couldn't really deal with what she'd done, couldn't shake herself free of the guilt of killing the original you, so rather than having to face it every day, she just kicked you out. I guess she wasn't as American as she originally thought." He laughed aloud as if he had just told a great joke. "Lucky for her she had so much money, or that really would have been a waste of a small fortune."

*Whatever it was, one day she just couldn't stand the sight of him anymore.*

The man smiled and shrugged. "Ironic really. She should have just saved herself the money and divorced the original you. Anyway, when we called today and told her what trouble her clone had got itself into, she paid your debts instantly. We figured she would, a woman in that position. She even paid for another replacement. Between you and me, I think she's started to think of you as faulty goods. And who can blame her? Living your life on-line is hardly good for your mental health, is it?" He had sat down briefly while speaking, and now rose, still clutching the cushion.

“A new you must seem like the obvious solution to her, wouldn’t you say? Especially as she’s already done it once. The guilt won’t be half as bad second time round.” He was nodding to himself as if speaking from experience.

“She just wants a father for her children who’s decent. Someone they can look up to. I can understand that, although it’s touching coming from the woman that murdered you in the first place, huh?” His voice was light and conversational.

Martin decided that the man was definitely dangerously insane, although that didn’t seem that important as the truth of his words started to sink in. The room was had taken on an edge of too much clarity, and he didn’t know how much more of this dreamy nightmare he could take. Somewhere in his peripheral vision he saw the man hold out the cushion and come towards him. Carol had killed him. Carol. His Carol. He couldn’t get his head round it, and then the cushion was round his head, and the world went black. A fraction of a second later the world went black forever.

Two weeks later and Martin 3 was smiling as he held his daughter’s hand on the way back to the car. Sure, seeing Carol had been more painful than he had imagined it would be; the memory of the break up still so fresh for him. The knowledge that she had murdered Martin 1 surprisingly didn’t ease that pain, but he knew already that he wouldn’t go the path of Martin 2. He had a healthy respect for his ex-wife’s ability to replace him at will. Anyway, he had learnt from the mistakes of his predecessor, and he had a much better plan.

He had found, tucked away in the kitchen drawer with his wedding ring, a lock of familiar blonde hair. Written in his handwriting on the faded paper were two words, “Wedding night.” It was weird the little events that got forgotten. Carol lying naked in their hotel bed, looking at him with *so much love*, her eyes bleary from sex, smiling as he cut the single curl from her head, promising to keep it with him forever. She had loved that and she had loved him. God knows why he had kept it after everything went sour. Maybe he just couldn’t bring himself to let go of those halcyon times. Anyway, there it had been, waiting patiently for him to come up with the idea.

It might take a while but Martin had started saving hard now that he had got his old job back. He reckoned that within three years, he’d be taking that lock of hair back to his other side of legal friends who just might appreciate the sense of irony. Someone had to save their marriage after all, and there were plenty of accidents a girl could have that could wipe out several years of memory, everything from her wedding night, for example. Tragic, but true. Yes, he thought to himself, as his little girl smiled up at him, her eyes just like her mother’s; this could definitely be third time lucky.



# THE FEAR

‘It’s hot in here.’

The writer pulled his tie a little looser, his shirt already sticking to the expanse of belly escaping from his trousers. The sweat stained the red dark silk in patches as if blood was leaking from his pores. God, he needed a drink, a stiff one. How had he got here? And just where *was* here? His head ached trying to remember. It all seemed vaguely familiar, like the hint of a smell long ago forgotten, a sour scent lingering in the stifling air, teasing him with knowledge.

A lazy smile stretched across the tanned Mediterranean face of the man on the other side of the large desk. His manicured fingers drummed out a tango on the worn leather surface as his dark eyes penetrated the writer’s flabby cheeks, looking past the network of broken veins spreading like maddened spiders’ webs, seeking out his soul. ‘You’ll get used to it.’ The voice was slick; like its owner, smooth and dark. Somewhere outside a gun spat out its load and a woman screamed.

The tiny reflection of the room distorted in the bead of sweat trickling from the balding writer’s scalp, a world within a world, its beauty unnoticed. He didn’t like this place. It wasn’t what he was used to. Not any more.

‘Why am I here?’ He resented the whine he heard in his words and his leg beginning to twitch beneath him, he scanned the room in search of liquor. Whiskey, rum, gin; shit, even sherry would do. He’d long ago given up pretending to be choosy. When you were worth what he was, you could afford to drink them all. You could afford pretty much anything you wanted when people would pay to read your shopping list if you decided to publish it.

His head swum momentarily and then he found himself seated in the creaking chair behind the tired desk that now bore an old Royale typewriter and a tidy pile of clean, white paper. It was the DTs. Had to be. This whole surreal mess was a hallucination.

The Mediterranean lounged on the desk, cool in linen. ‘Why am I here?’ He chuckled, repeating the words, tasting them. ‘Isn’t that the age-old question? So dull and unimaginative. So human. You’re all so unsatisfied, aren’t you? Always thinking you deserve more. Why can’t just *being* be enough?’

Sighing, he stood up, moving like fluid mercury, all ease and sinews, and the writer felt the searing heat of the man’s breath on his face.

The man wore snakeskin shoes. They suited him. He gazed out of the small nailed down window, unaware of the scurrying people so far below. A lifetime away. ‘You really threw it all out, didn’t you? You could have left your mark. You could have touched people, made a difference, but it was all just too much hard work, wasn’t it? So, instead you took the easy road and filled the world with more meaningless words for the masses. What a waste. What a failure.’

The writer snorted, jowls wobbling. ‘My books make millions worldwide. My readers love me. I’m one of the biggest successes of the twenty-first century. Hardly a failure.’

Still, the words rankled, making a place deep inside him smart and flinch.

A dark eyebrow arched as the man turned back to him. ‘Shit sells, baby, shit sells.’ His teeth sparkled. ‘And you chose shit over substance. That’s why you’re here. That’s why you’ll be forgotten in two years.’ He snapped his fingers. ‘Resigned to the bargain bins.’

The writer’s mouth felt too dry for a hallucination. ‘What do you want?’

‘What I want,’ he pulled a cigar from his top pocket and lit it, the aromatic smoke absorbing the last of the moisture in the heavy air, ‘is a short story.’

The writer laughed, relief flooding through him. A story. A short one at that. He’d be out of here in twenty minutes. He hadn’t been quite sure what the man would ask for...but this, this

would be easy. He used to write short stories all the time when he was a kid. Before he realized there was no real money in it. He giggled again, and for a moment almost forgot the increasing *need* that was itching at him.

‘What did you think I was going to ask for? Your soul?’ The amused words drifted towards him from the other side of the room. The man was walking towards the door. With one hand casually tucked into his pocket, he turned and spoke. ‘But I don’t want shit. I want a story that is true to you. Remember your youth? When your dreams were of Bookers and Pulitzers instead of blondes and Porches? I want a story that will entertain me. I want it to be perfect. I want it to be art.’ He paused. ‘And when you satisfy my criteria, then you can have that drink you need. In fact, you can have several. Anything you want. As much as you want.’

Watching the man’s tapered fingers reaching for the door handle, the writer licked his lips. ‘Could I have a small one first? It helps me to write. I...I..I need it.’ The words were out, his tone as imploring as his eyes. Just one. That’s all he needed. Just one long swallow.

For a brief moment he shut his eyes, almost tasting the fiery liquid, imagining it slipping down his tight throat. When he opened them, his thirst teased alive and unforgiving, the man had gone. More worrying than that, so had the door. The space it had occupied was now just tatty, chipped plaster, blending with the rest of the wall.

The writer’s giggle held less humour now, the sound jarring against the emptiness. This craziness was getting weirder and he wondered if he’d finally cracked. One drink too many. One drink too *little* was probably more apt, considering the way his hands were shaking. The keys of the typewriter seemed to blur as he stared at them, but still he took a sheet of the crisp paper and fed it through the roller. A short story. How hard could it be? *I want it to perfect. I want it to be art.* The words echoed in his head. A few plotlines sprung to mind, but he rejected them all. Each one was straight from one of his novels. If he was being honest, then each one belonged to several of his books, reworked slightly and churned out over and over again. Still, how does that saying go?