

Illusion of Luck

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Books by

ROBERT BURTON ROBINSON

Greg Tenorly Mystery Series:

Bicycle Shop Murder

Hideaway Hospital Murders

Illusion of Luck

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Robert Burton Robinson

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SYNOPSIS

As Greg Tenorly was about to marry the woman of his dreams, he figured he was the luckiest man in the world. Until he got an anonymous phone call warning him about his bride's shady past.

Larry had been lucky all his life. He had everything he could possibly want. Except a publishing contract. So, the fact that his first six mystery novels had been rejected did not dissuade him from starting on book seven. Ironically, he finally found success when he began to publish an online account of his own downward spiral into depravity and murder.

Is luck real? Or is it just an illusion? Some people have to find out the hard way.

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Illusion of Luck

by Robert Burton Robinson

Chapter 1

Greg Tenorly was the luckiest man in the world. The woman of his wildest dreams was standing beside him—at their *wedding rehearsal*. He knew he didn't deserve her. Anybody could see that. He saw himself as a balding, average-looking 35-year-old. Cynthia was a strikingly beautiful 30-year-old redhead. He wouldn't have been surprised if Cupid himself had flown in to break up the crazy mismatch.

But Cynthia saw something in Greg she couldn't resist. Something she should have looked for in the eyes of her *first* groom. Troy was a rugged, handsome man. Nothing wrong with that. But he was also an abuser. And all the love he'd ever given her meant nothing after that first brutal slap across the face. Then came the booing and hitting and steady barrage of obscenities.

So, this time around Cynthia was looking for something different. Greg was kind and thoughtful and funny. And regardless of what Greg thought, she *did* find him attractive—even on their first meeting. And the more she got to know him, the more attractive he became. She wasn't marrying him just because he was a nice guy. She truly had the hots for him.

It was Thursday night, 6:20 PM. Greg and Cynthia were finishing up a run-through of the ceremony at First Baptist Church, Coreyville, where Greg was part-time music director. They were well on their way to happily ever after. Everything was perfect.

Until the phone call.

Cynthia's mother, Beverly, was serving as her Maid of Honor. She had girlfriends her age at First State Bank where she was a vice president. But her mom was her closest friend. It might have seemed a little odd to some people—no mother sitting on the second pew, crying. No father to walk her down the aisle and give her away. She wished so much he was still alive to share in the joy.

“And then, Greg, I will invite you to kiss your bride,” said Dr. Huff, pastor of the church.

“What if she doesn’t *want* to be kissed?” said Sandy Vockelman, Greg’s Best Man. Sandy had a habit of cracking jokes at inappropriate times.

Dr. Huff shot him a stern, over the top of the glasses, stare that said, *Sir, this is a holy place of worship—not a comedy club.*

Cynthia turned to Greg and smiled. “Oh, I’ll *definitely* want to be kissed.”

Dr. Huff went on. “And then I will present you to the congregation as Mr. and Mrs. Greg Tenorly and the organist will play the Wedding March as you make your grand departure.”

“Great job, Greg,” said Sandy as he slapped him on the back.

“Now we’ll take a ten minute break and then do a second run-through,” said Dr. Huff.

Sandy leaned in to Greg and whispered, “He’s kidding, right? I’m starving.”

Dr. Huff checked his watch. “So, let’s all be back in our places at 6:34.”

Sandy decided to make a point of being back in his place at exactly 6:35. Even as a college music professor he was still somewhat rebellious. He put his arm around Greg as they walked down from the platform. “I hope this Italian restaurant you’ve been bragging about is worth the wait.”

“It’s fantastic. Believe me—you’ve got nothing in Dallas that can beat it.”

“Well, that’s a little hard to believe.”

“I’m telling you, Man. Their bread is better than Lugio’s.”

“Whoa. Now you’re getting sacrilegious. Nobody’s bread is better than Lugio’s.”

“We ate a ton of that stuff.”

“We *had* to. I couldn’t make it through my music theory homework without that bread.”

“Yeah, me either. And my music history, music literature...even math,” said Greg.

“It was a wonder I didn’t gain all my weight back, eating like that.”

“*You* were pumping iron every day. *I’m* the one who gained weight.”

“That’s true. But it looks like you’ve managed to trim down since the last time I saw you.”

“Thanks. I’ve been jogging with Cynthia.”

“That woman’s good for you, Buddy. Seriously—she’s amazing. Congratulations.”

Cynthia and her mom had gone to the ladies room, and were checking their hair and makeup.

“Sweetie, I’ve got to say that I’ve never seen you more happy,” said Beverly.

“He’s wonderful, Mom. He’s everything I need and want in a life-long partner. And I know he feels the same way.”

“Greg’s a very lucky man.”

“Yes. I’d agree with that.” She smiled at herself in the mirror. “And I am a very lucky woman.”

“Y’all are like a couple of teenagers when you’re together. So you should have a ball at Disney World.”

“You really *could* have come with us, Mom.”

“Nope. Three’s definitely a crowd when it comes to honeymoons. And besides, I’m gonna have a great time on the cruise with my church group.”

“But it’s going to be hard to stay in touch with you while we’re in Orlando and you’re out at sea.”

“You don’t *need* to stay in touch with me. It’s your honeymoon. I don’t want to hear from you until you get back. And that’s an order, Young Lady.”

“Okay, okay. So, I guess I shouldn’t worry about you.”

“Of course not. Just enjoy yourself. We can share our stories when we all get back home.”

Beverly had moved into her daughter’s house a few months earlier. There was some concern, especially on Greg’s part, that she would interfere with their lives. But Cynthia had reassured him that her mother would respect their privacy. And so far, she had. Except for a couple of times when she accidentally caught them making out on the couch.

When Sandy went into the men’s room, Greg walked down to his office to get the gift for his Best Man. It was a music engraving pen, stamped with the letters ‘SUV.’ Sandy was a composer who still preferred writing manuscripts the old fashioned way rather than using music software and a printer. He said he felt more connected to Bach, Beethoven and Verdi when he wrote out the music notation by hand.

Greg had used one of those pens a few times. And he wondered how many shirts his buddy had ruined over the years. If you got a single drop of that black Indian ink on your clothes, you could forget about the washing machine or the dry cleaners. That pair of pants or shirt was going straight to the trash can.

‘SUV’ was a nickname Sandy had picked it up as a ninth grader, at 6’2”, 285 pounds. It was just too hard to resist when some kid realized Sandy’s middle name was Uriah. Sandy Uriah Vockelman—‘SUV.’

Sandy quickly corrected the boy. His first name was Alexander—Sandy was just a nickname. So, his initials were really ‘AUV.’ And you can’t create a nickname from another nickname. But it was too late. ‘SUV’ stuck. And he hated it. Maybe he would have liked it if he had been a offensive lineman. But he was no football player. His thing was choir and piano and music theory.

So, he began to work out with weights and trim down. By his senior year, he didn’t mind being called ‘SUV’ anymore because he was a slim, buffed-up guy. All of the choir girls wanted to go out with him—even some of those with boyfriends.

Greg sat down at his desk and pulled open a drawer and took out Sandy’s gift. His cell phone rang. He checked the caller id. It was anonymous.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Greg. How’s it going?”

Greg didn’t recognize the man’s voice. “Uh...fine.”

“Cynthia’s going to look stunning in her wedding dress.”

“That’s for sure.” Greg still didn’t know who the caller was, but it seemed like he was *supposed* to know.

“There’s something I need to tell you about, though.”

“What’s that?” Greg waited for the punch line.

“Are you sure you can trust her?”

“What do mean? Who is this?”

“I’m afraid there are some things she hasn’t told you.”

“This is a joke, right? Who is this?”

“She’ll rip your heart out, Man.”

“This is not funny. Now, stop it. Who is this? Sandy?”

Greg heard a click. “Hello?”

The caller was gone.

If that was Sandy, Greg thought, I’m gonna kill him. He put the gift box in his jacket pocket and walked down the hallway. Sandy was standing outside the restroom, drinking from the water fountain.

“That wasn’t funny, Sandy.”

“Huh? Oh, you mean that wisecrack about Cynthia not wanting to kiss you?” He chuckled. “Yeah, sorry about that. Couldn’t resist.”

“No. I’m talking about you calling me and pretending to be somebody else.”

“What? When?”

“Just now, while I was in my office.”

“Well, that wasn’t me, Man. Must have been some *other* weird friend of yours.”

“Are you serious? You didn’t just call me?”

“No. I really didn’t. Why? What did the guy say to you? Whatever it was, it sure got you upset.”

“No, it was nothing. Just somebody clowning around, I guess.”

“Then I’m sure he’ll take credit for it later. Probably at the rehearsal dinner. Hey—maybe it was the pastor. He seems like a real jokester.”

“Yeah, right.”

Sandy laughed.

Greg looked around to make sure Dr. Huff wasn’t within earshot. Then he laughed along with his old buddy.

But as he and Sandy walked back toward the auditorium for the second run-through, Greg couldn’t shake off the uneasiness. The man on the phone didn’t sound like he was joking. But who would call him two days before the wedding and malign Cynthia’s character? Even though they had been together for less than a year, he felt he knew her well. And he wasn’t about to let some stranger or prankster rattle his faith in her.

Chapter 2

It took Erin an hour and forty-five minutes to drive from their half-million dollar home in Plano to the small rented cabin at Lake Texoma, near the Oklahoma state line. It was Thursday night, and she could have been in their backyard, sitting by the pool in an ultra-skimpy bikini, drinking and laughing with her friends. Like every other night.

She walked in and slammed the door. “Okay, I’m here. Now, will you please tell me why it was so important for me to drive all the way up here tonight? You know I hate this place. And I had to cancel my party.”

Larry glanced over at his super-hot 25-year-old girlfriend. Her body could still blow away most of the competition at a Miss America Pageant. “I’ll explain. Just sit down and chill.”

He looked back at his laptop. Larry wasn’t a bad-looking 30-year old, if you could see past the scruffy beard and the long stringy hair.

She walked up behind him. “Who’s that?”

“It’s a girl I went to high school with.”

“What about the guy?”

Larry didn’t answer. He just puffed on his pipe.

Erin backed away. She hated his smoking, but he didn’t care. “Why am I here, Larry? This place stinks like dead fish.”

Larry kept his eyes on his laptop screen. “Well, this *is* a fish camp. But I do my best writing up here.”

“Fine. But *I* don’t need to be here. And let’s face it, Honey—your *best writing* is just not good enough. When are you going to give it up? You’ve written six books—and you still don’t have a publishing contract. You’ve got hundreds of rejection letters, and—”

“—thousands, actually. And each rejection brings me closer to a contract. You

know that's what I always say. Each failure brings me closer to success."

"Yeah. I know that's what you say. But what's the lucky number? One million? Do you have to get a million rejections before you get a contract?"

"Hey, there's a reason they call me 'Lucky Larry.'"

"Yeah, yeah, I know the story. You got the big inheritance right when you dropped out of college. Then you won \$3 million in the Texas Lottery. And then you got *me*. It's true—you *are* a lucky guy. You're lucky at everything—except writing."

"*Publishing*. I don't *need* luck with my writing. I'm an gifted novelist." He held his pipe with dignity as he puffed. "I just need a lucky break with a publisher." He began typing at full speed.

Erin sat down at the small table and poured herself a glass of Merlot. At least he brought along my favorite, she thought. She just hoped he had more than one bottle.

"For book seven, I'm taking a totally different approach. I signed up for a free account on this new website, DirectFromTheAuthor.com, using the name 'Barry Undermine.'"

"Okay...that's a strange name. But it's about time you started using a pseudonym. It's no wonder you get rejected, with a name like Larry Luzor."

He had always been proud of the Luzor family name. His grandfather was a successful industrialist, Joseph Alfred Luzor, who named his son Philip Karl Luzor, who named *his* son Lawrence Igby Luzor.

But he had finally decided Erin was right. Besides, after six books, agents were probably rejecting his work before they even read it. They probably saw the name of the author and immediately stamp the manuscript REJECTED.

"I'm publishing each chapter on that site, as I write it. And I'm already getting some great comments from my readers. So, maybe an agent or a publisher will take notice and offer me a contract."

"What's the name of this one?"

“Illusion of Luck. It’s about this guy who’s been very lucky in life. But when his luck finally runs out, he decides to impose his will and *make* his own luck, so to speak. And everybody thinks he’s still lucky. But in truth, he’s doing whatever it takes to get his way. So, it’s not luck anymore—it’s the *illusion* of luck.”

“Gee, that character sounds a lot like you, Larry—except the part about him having the balls to make his own luck. The only luck *you* have is whatever drops in your lap.” She poured herself another glass of wine. She thought it tasted a little funny, but she continued to drink it anyway. “Now, I would appreciate it if you’d stop typing for a minute and tell me why I’m here!”

Larry completed the paragraph, and then turned his chair around to face her. He knew Erin wouldn’t be able to resist the wine. She was a border-line alcoholic. “It’s about money, Erin.”

“Look, I really needed the new BMW. Surely you didn’t expect me to keep driving the old one. I’d had it for nearly two years.”

“We’re broke.”

“Funny.” She sneered at him.

“I’m serious. In the five years we’ve been together, you’ve been spending money like there’s no tomorrow. Well, guess what, Baby? You’re right—there really is no tomorrow. Cause there’s no more money.”

“Oh—I see what you’re trying to do. Now that you’ve used up my best years you want to trade me in for a younger model. Well, you’re not gonna get away with it, Larry. I’ll take you for all you’re worth. You’re gonna be sorry you tried to dump *me*.”

Larry wondered why he had put up with her. He had long suspected she was doing the pool boy. Or one of the neighbors. Or *all* the neighbors. Because he knew she was *not* going without. Yet he was paying for everything. The spoiled brat had never worked a day in her life.

Meanwhile, Larry had cranked out six top-notch mystery novels. Sure—they hadn’t been published. But he had worked hard to make them great pieces of literature. “You’re not hearing me. There’s nothing left. The bank is about to foreclose on the house.”

“Liar! When my lawyer gets finished with you...”

“Yes? Go on.”

“I’m feeling kinda weird.”

“Really? Are you dizzy and nauseated?”

“Yeah. And my heart’s beating like crazy.”

“And your throat feels sore?”

“My mouth too. Larry, what have you done to me? Did you put something in the wine? I thought it smelled funny.”

“Ever heard of potassium cyanide?”

“You poisoned me?” Erin threw her glass at him.

He deflected it to the wooden floor. “Yeah. I pretty much knew how you would react when I told you I was broke. I figured you’d threaten to sue me and take me for all I’m worth.”

“But I was already drinking the wine before you told me about the money. What if I had been kind and understanding?”

“Then I would have used this.” He picked up the box that was sitting beside his laptop and held it up.

“What’s that? The antidote? Give it to me!”

She stood and tried to walk toward him, but fell to the floor. “Please, Larry...”

He opened the box, studied the contents and read the labels in no particular hurry. “Let’s see...we have two bags: one is a 3% solution of sodium nitrate... and the other is a 25% solution of sodium thiosulfate.”

“Please, Honey, save me. I promise I won’t sue you. I’ll just walk away if that’s what you want. I won’t even take the car.” She started choking. “Just send me away on a bus.”

“I don’t believe you.” He walked over to the kitchenette and dropped the two bags into the sink and reached into a drawer for a steak knife.

“No!”

He stabbed the bags repeatedly.

She gasped for air as the antidote, and her life, gurgled down the drain.

He walked back to his laptop, sat down, and began to type, ignoring Erin’s convulsing body just behind his chair.

Her family had long ago disowned her when she slipped away during the night at the age of 18. She had caused her parents considerable heartache over the years. And if the little tramp thought she could make it on her own, then more power to her.

Her Miss Bikini title was just the beginning of her fame and fortune according to the smooth-talking photographer from Dallas. She gave him all the sex he could handle before realizing she would get nothing in return.

But then she met a writer at a party. He seemed sort of odd. But when she found out he was loaded, she decided to latch onto him and never let go.

Now all his money was gone. And so was she.

Larry finished the paragraph and clicked the ‘Publish’ button. They’ll love this chapter, he thought.

Larry was more like his new character than Erin could have imagined. She just didn’t understand the true power of his luck, because she had never seen it in action. He himself had lost the faith. For ten years, he had been sitting safely on the edge of the freeway, watching the cars go by. Now it was time to jump in front of an 18-wheeler and force his God of Luck to save him.

He couldn’t just wait around for the things he wanted. He needed to be proactive—and just go for it. Because, where is the faith if he didn’t step out blindly, believing?

He checked for Erin’s pulse and felt nothing.

His cabin was at the end of the road. It was a fishing cabin. But he had come there to write a mystery novel—not to fish. He had *never* come there to fish. And he had never used the barbecue pit. Until tonight.

It would be dark soon.

He eyed her body. Good thing she was short.

Chapter 3

For Greg, the second run-through was much different from the first. He tried to forget about the anonymous call, but couldn't help wondering if he really knew the beautiful woman who was reciting vows to him.

"I, Cynthia, take you Greg to be my husband, my partner in life and my one true love. I will cherish our union..."

As he looked into her deep blue eyes, his fears began to melt away. The sincerity of her voice was mesmerizing. Nothing could harm him. Nothing else mattered.

Then he noticed the necklace. Why hadn't he seen it before? It looked expensive. *He* had not given it to her, and he wondered who *had*. Could it have been a gift from an ex-boyfriend—some guy she had hypnotized like Greg.

Some women like to treat a man like a piece of bubble gum. The poor sap thinks everything's fine. And it is—until the taste runs out. Then she'll just spit him out the car window of her life and never look back.

So, what was the worst-case scenario? He would marry her, and then go off to Orlando and enjoy the rides and shows at Disney World. Every night they would make love. Maybe some days they would take a midday nap after some midday sex. Wow! His body ached for her. Whoa. Not a good time to get aroused though.

The wedding would be in two days, on Saturday. They would drive to Dallas, spend their first night together in the Marriott near DFW Airport, and then catch their flight to Orlando the next morning.

Greg decided to forget about the stupid caller.

*

It was about 7:00 PM, and pitch black. As far as Larry could tell, there was no moonlight at all. The gas pole lamp provided just enough illumination for nighttime barbecuing. But now that his eyes had adjusted to it, he could barely see anything else. His only real point of reference was the light coming from the

cabin windows. Without it, he could imagine himself getting lost and walking right into Lake Texoma.

He figured the temperature to be around 50 degrees. Probably about average for late February, he thought. He wasn't wearing a jacket, but felt plenty of warmth from the hot barbecue pit.

"Catch any big ones?" A deep voice boomed from somewhere out in the darkness.

Larry jumped.

The man's voice was approaching. "Me and my boys pulled in quite a haul today. I caught me an 8 lb. largemouth bass."

Larry strained to see the man, but couldn't. For all he could tell, it could have been a ghost, floating around in the darkness.

"Something smells good."

A big plaid shirt materialized at his side, and Larry jumped. Then he saw the jeans and the boots, and looked up to see the face. The guy was huge.

"Hi. My name is Jim." He grabbed Larry's hand and gave it a bone-crushing shake. "Me and Barb brought my three boys up for a long weekend of fishing. Yeah, I know what you're thinking: shouldn't them boys be in school? Nope. Cause I sent a note to their principal explaining how this is a part of the boys' education. Know what I mean, Guy?"

"Yeah...sure."

"Well, the principal didn't like it. He didn't like it one bit, and he got all huffy with me. But I told him I didn't give a durn what he thought. Sure, they gotta learn their three R's: reading, writing and 'rithmetic. Everybody knows that. But you gotta have some balance in life. Know what I mean? Gotta have your three F's, too. You know what the three F's are?"

Larry could only imagine. "No, I don't."

"Fun, fishin' and fryin'." He laughed. "Yeah, I made that up. Pretty good, ain't

it? The fun and the fishing go without saying. But you gotta have the frying, 'cause that's what we do, Guy. It's a family tradition. We don't broil 'em like *you* do." He glanced at the barbecue pit. "But there nothing wrong with broiling, I guess—if that's what you like."

Larry had nodded along with everything, hoping the big redneck would soon run out of things to say and leave him alone.

"But that ain't fish, is it, Guy? I'm sorry—I don't believe I got your name. That's just rude of me to keep calling you 'Guy'."

"Larry. And no, it's not fish. It's...uh..."

"That's okay. No need to be embarrassed. You must be one of them fellas that likes to fish, but doesn't like to eat 'em. You'd rather have a big juicy steak, right?"

"Uh...yeah, that's right."

"Probably one of them expensive cuts. Mind if I have a look-see?"

"Uh, no. I mean, yes, I *do* mind. The uh, particular way I cook my steak...you have to keep the lid closed until right when it's done. Yeah, because if you don't, it'll get tough."

"I see. Never heard of that. But you might oughta take a look at that thing soon, Larry. Smells like it's starting to burn."

"Yeah. Well, I was just about to check it. Thanks for dropping by. See you around, Jim."

"Yep. We'll probably see you out on the lake tomorrow." Jim started walking away, then stopped and looked back and said, "But if you catch some you don't want, no need to throw 'em back. I'll take 'em." He chuckled.

"Okay, Jim. Thanks."

Jim started whistling as he walked back toward his cabin. Larry recognized it as the theme to the *Andy Griffith Show*. He wondered how Jim could see his way back to his cabin. He half expected to hear him yell when he tripped over some

stump or armadillo.

Larry watched in satisfaction as the smoke drifted upward, beyond the soft glow of the lamp, into the night. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, he thought. This was one steak that would never cheat on him again.

He had never felt so alive. Putting that sleazy tramp in her place and taking control of his life had cranked up the engine of his dark soul. And now, thanks to the close call with Jim, he was drenched in sweaty fear, pedal to the metal, fuel-injectors kicking in hard. What a rush!

*

Greg, Cynthia and Beverly had decided to catch a ride with Sandy from the church to the rehearsal dinner at Coreyville Pasta House.

As Greg was getting into the front seat with Sandy, he said, “By the way, Baby, that’s a beautiful necklace you’re wearing tonight. I don’t think I’ve ever seen it before.”

“Thanks, Honey. Mom gave me this necklace.”

“I did?” said Beverly.

“Yeah. Remember, it was Aunt Judy’s.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You gave it to me three or four years ago.”

“Oh. That’s right. Now I remember.”

Greg wondered if Cynthia had winked at her mom to get her to go along with the story.

“I could eat a cow,” said Sandy.

“Would you settle for spaghetti?” said Beverly.

“Sure, that’ll work. As long as they have plenty of that good bread.”

Cynthia was sitting behind Sandy. “So, Greg told you all about the bread, huh? I’m not surprised. The man loves a great loaf of bread.” She put her hand on Greg’s left shoulder. “That reminds me, Sweetie. You told them you’d call when we were on our way.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Greg took out his phone, flipped it open and noticed that he had missed a call. He keyed in the number for the restaurant. “Hi. This is Greg Tenorly and I have reservations...that’s right—the wedding party...we’ll be there in five minutes...okay. Thanks.”

Just before Greg closed his phone, he saw that he had a message, so he hit the voicemail button.

You’re not gonna take my advice, are you? You’re gonna marry her anyway. But you’ll be sorry, Man. So sorry.

“Who was the message from?” said Cynthia.

“Nobody. I mean, it was a wrong number.”

“I hate that,” said Sandy. “A couple of weeks ago I had this message from some guy saying his flight had not been delayed after all, and could I please be at the airport by midnight.”

“So, you had to call him back and tell he had the wrong number?” said Beverly.

“I couldn’t—it was an anonymous call.”

“Serves him right for blocking his number,” said Cynthia.

“Yeah,” said Greg. “I want to *know* who’s calling *me*.”

“When they do that, I just want to ignore the call,” said Sandy.

I wish I had, thought Greg.

“But then sometimes it’s important,” said Sandy. “So, what can you do? You really can’t take the chance.”

“Just let it go to voicemail every time,” said Cynthia. “That’s what *I* do.”

“But then you still end up listening to what they have to say,” said Greg. “You’re not likely to just delete the message without *listening* to the doggone thing.”

“Are you okay, Sweetie?” said Cynthia. “You seem kind of upset.”

Greg changed his tone. “No, uh, I just hope they have the tables set up right.”

“You worry too much, Man,” said Sandy. “Chill.”

Greg wished he could chill. He wished he could enjoy what should have been one of the best nights of his life.

He wished he could rewind the evening and start over.

Without his cell phone.

Chapter 4

Larry sat down at his laptop and logged in as Barry Undermine to complete another chapter of his serial novel, *Illusion of Luck*. He jittered with excitement at the realization of what he had just done. His clothing reeked of smoke from Erin's incineration. Hopefully by morning her remains would fit in an urn. But she didn't deserve one. So instead, he would dump her ashes into the rusty 55-gallon garbage drum on the other side of the dirt road.

His brain articulated the scene at hyper-speed, overloading his sixty-words-per-minute hands. It was so easy—just like the murder.

Wait. Not *that* easy, he thought. It wasn't as though he was simply taking dictation. No, not at all. He was a craftsman, an artist. He had six novels worth of experience under his belt. This time his writing was much better—but only because he had a better story idea. It was still fiction.

He was taking a different approach to his writing—making it up as he went along instead of preparing a detailed story outline and following it to the letter. For this book, lucky number seven, he only had a rough sketch of the plot.

His original plot had called for his main character to confront his girlfriend about her affairs, and get into a nasty court battle over money. Then he would murder her and somehow get away with it and live happily ever after in Tahiti. Until the girlfriend's father, an ex-Navy Seal, tracked him down and killed him in the final scene.

But now the original plot would never make it into the book. Real life had given him better ideas.

He typed the last word of the chapter and clicked 'Publish.' Let's see how they like this one, he thought. Some of his readers had already signed up for instant email notification. So, it wouldn't be long before they'd be reading about the girlfriend's terrible demise.

He minimized the web page and went back to the Marshall News Messenger site. He stared at the picture, ignoring the man standing next to her. The beautiful redhead had been the unknowing object of his nightly pleasures throughout his

junior and senior high school years.

He'd been much too shy to approach her—even after being crowned the big football hero of the game against their archrival, Longview. His incredible last-second catch in the end zone had won the game. And his Marshall Mavericks had gone on to be Bi-District Champions that year.

But Larry was no longer shy. He was a man of considerable wisdom, charm, and wealth. Actually, not so much wealth currently. He had \$35,000 in an account his girlfriend was never aware of. She had spent all the rest.

But he was not overly concerned about his dwindling fortune. The inheritance and his lottery winnings had kept him afloat so far. Maybe he would start playing the lottery again, he thought. Larry had been kind enough to refrain from buying tickets so other people could win. But he didn't care about being rich anyway. A million or two was all he needed.

Erin was gone, but the \$65,000 convertible was not. And it could *not* be sitting in front of his cabin the next morning for Jim to gawk at.

Cool car. Belong to the Mrs.? When can we meet her? Why don't y'all come join us for dinner tonight?

Larry clicked back over to see if any readers had commented on his latest chapter posting. Yes—there were already three comments praising his work. The one from the guy in Sidney, Australia was his favorite.

Your characters practically leap off the page. I'm an avid mystery reader, but have never before read anything sounding so real, so genuine. The killer is creepy, brutal and sick. I love it! Hurry up and post the next chapter—please!

He read it aloud, over and over. Yes! Soon agents would be *begging* to represent him.

*

Sandy slid his chair back and stood up. “Could I have your attention, everyone?” After polishing off several baskets of bread and a couple of huge plates of spaghetti, Sandy was ready to make his speech.

Greg and Cynthia were sitting directly across from him.

Beverly, the pastor and his wife, the organist, the flower girl and her mother stopped talking and looked at Sandy.

“In my capacity as Best Man, I feel I need to say a few words about the groom.”

Uh-oh, thought Greg.

Cynthia was interested in learning more about her future husband. And she knew Sandy probably had some funny stories from their college days.

“As most of you know, Greg and I were roommates in college. We were both music majors. And I remember the day we met as freshman. I was thrilled to meet him because I thinking, ‘this guy is even nerdier than me.’”

Everyone laughed.

“Gee, thanks, Sandy,” said Greg, grinning.

“And one of the most memorable conversations we had that first year was about sex.”

The mother of the flower girl suddenly jumped up and took her young daughter to the restroom.

“But I don’t need to go, Mommy.”

“Yes, you do.”

Sandy went on. “So, Greg was telling me about when he was 13 and started having feelings for girls...”

Cynthia smiled at Greg—imagining how cute he must have looked as a 13 year-old.

Greg blushed. Not because of what Sandy had just said, but because of what might be coming.

“He had very special feelings for one particular classmate named Cindy. And back then he didn’t know *squat* about sex. But he spent a lot of time *thinking*

about her—especially at night. He’d think about touching her and holding her and kissing her and then—he’d sneeze. He explained how the excitement would build, poco a poco, to a grand fortissimo. Oops, sorry. There I go—talking in music notation. Let me translate. In English it means—well, in English it means he had a big ole—”

“—Sandy!” Greg couldn’t even bring himself to look down at the end of the table where Dr. Huff was sitting.

“And when Greg told me that, it made me think. A really good sneeze is a lot like...” he saw the look on Greg’s face, “...you know. It starts off with a little tickle in your nose. Then it gets stronger and stronger, and everything inside your head starts to buzz and finally, when you can’t stand it any longer—Bam! And then you go ‘Aah.’”

“That’s *more* than enough, Sandy,” said Greg.

But Sandy was not quite finished. “So, you see, Cynthia. The teenage Greg was a pure young man. He wasn’t having any sex.”

“Okay,” said Cynthia, hoping Sandy would stop.

“No, he wasn’t having any sex. He was just *sneezing his brains out*.”

“Thank you so much, Sandy,” said Greg. “Now, be a good best man and know when to shut up.”

“But I’ve got another great story. Remember when you lost your balance on the risers and fell on top of two of the altos? One of them wanted to date you after that. Remember?”

Sandy could see Greg was getting seriously annoyed.

“Okay. I’m done. Anyway—he’s a great guy. Congrats, Cynthia.”

*

Larry decided to drive Erin’s BMW down to Sherman, leave it in a parking lot, and take a taxi back to Denison. From there it would take a couple of hours to walk to the cabin.

He would tell the police she came to visit him, they argued, and she decided to go home.

He grabbed a flashlight, a pair of cheap garden gloves, and Erin's purse, and walked out the door and locked it. As soon as he got into her shiny new convertible, he raised the top and began to manipulate the buttons to adjust the electric seat. He was tall, but Erin was a mere 5'1". Or, that's what she *used* to be, he thought. Now she's 0'0". Ashes aren't very tall. He laughed to himself. How witty he was.

After the driver's seat had moved as far as it would go, he used his foot to lift his butt and move himself further back against the seat. But the heel of his shoe slipped on something. Yuck, he thought—a slimy frog must have hopped into the car while the top was down.

He shined the flashlight on the floorboard. Disgusting. It was a used condom. He wondered how much bribe money it would take to discover the owner of the gooey DNA.

Why had he let Erin use him for so long? She thought she could get away with anything—just because she had a hot body. How appropriate that it had finally gone up in flames. He chuckled softly.

Erin had been alive and well earlier in the evening, thinking she could treat him like dirt, as she always did. But this time it was different. Because Larry had learned a valuable lesson: that he could accomplish anything he had the *will* to do.

So, he willed that she *no longer exist*.

And his will was done.

Chapter 5

Cynthia stripped to her underwear and turned on the shower. She liked to let it run a couple of minutes and get nice and steamy before getting in.

She walked back into her bedroom. Soon to be *their* bedroom, she thought, smiling. She sat down at the small table and bumped the mouse, bringing her laptop back to life.

“Come on now, weatherman...give me a bright, sunny wedding day.” The weather had been looking iffy for Saturday.

There was still no change—partly cloudy with a chance of showers.

It had rained on her first wedding day. Looking back, it seemed like an omen predicting a bad marriage. So, she felt a great weather day would mean a great marriage. Silly, she knew—but she really wanted a sunny day.

She thought the shower should be about right, and started to get up when she noticed she had an unread email. She didn’t recognize the ‘from address,’ but opened it anyway.

Your beautiful smile, your silky red hair,

At the edge of the field, you were always there.

Rooting me on to unimaginable glory,

Inspiring my heart in a hero’s story.

But now I’m alone and longing for you,

So, flip up your skirt like you used to do.

Jump into the air and I’ll catch my hottie;

I’ll rip off your clothes and have sex with your body.

“Yuk!”

She deleted the email. Who would send her something like that? This one was even worse than the others. It sounded like the poem was referring to her being on the sidelines of a football game. She had been a cheerleader in both high school and college.

And apparently the writer considered himself some kind of a hero. Whoever it was, they were no hero to her—at least, not any more.

Cynthia slipped off her bra and panties and stepped into the steamy shower. She would forget about the weird poem. He might even have the wrong email address. Maybe his messages were intended for some other woman—or even for a teenage girl. Yes, that was probably it. Now, it made sense to her. It was just some horny teenage boy sending his sex poems to the wrong email address.

As she rubbed the slippery bar of soap across her body, she thought about the honeymoon and how much she loved Greg. Making love to him would be so amazing.

*

“You come here every night, don’t you?” Sandy grinned at his old buddy.

“Yep.”

Greg’s red 1965 Pontiac Bonneville was the only car in the back of Dairy Queen’s parking lot.

“Why don’t you put the top down so we can look at the stars? Isn’t that what you usually do when you bring Cynthia here?”

“Only when it’s warm out. But either way, it’s nice.”

“I’ll bet. But what does she think about your obsession with dipped cones?”

“I wouldn’t call it an *obsession*.”

“So, you don’t eat them as often as you did back in college?”

“No. I eat them *more often*.”

Sandy laughed.

“But it’s not an *obsession*. More of an *addiction*.”

“Well, I’ve never said anything, but I’ve always thought the whole concept was crazy. You put some ice cream in a cone, which you need to eat before it melts —‘cause otherwise it’s a shake, not a cone. You turn it upside down and hope the ice cream doesn’t fall out. Then you submerge the thing in hot fudge. The ice cream causes the fudge to get cold and hard, while the fudge starts melting the ice cream.”

“That’s the *beauty* of it.” Greg took another nibble from the top of the hard shell.

“And as soon as you take a couple of bites, the chocolate shell cracks and falls in your lap.”

“Not if you’re *good*.”

“And you know it must have been a *man* who invented them. Or a woman with no kids. Because no *mother* would create something that she *knew* would lead to little Johnny coming home with black chocolate smeared all over his new shirt and pants.”

“Well, just because little Johnny isn’t *man enough* to handle one doesn’t mean *I* shouldn’t—”

The chocolate shell broke apart and slid off Greg’s cone.

“The only difference between you and Johnny is those napkins spread across your lap. Because you *know* it’s coming.”

Greg began to pick up each chunk and eat it.

Sandy took a bite of his banana split. “I’ve got to congratulate you again, Man. Cynthia is *hot*.”

“Easy—that’s my bride you’re talking about.”

“I’ll bet y’all have been going at it like rabbits.”

“Well, not that it’s any of your business, but we’re waiting until we get married.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Nope. We made the commitment and we’ve stuck to it.”

“Why?”

“Well, for one thing, we know that *morally* it’s the right thing to do.”

“Sure. But that’s never stopped *me*.”

“And we’ve both lived through rough marriages and we just want to make sure neither of us gets hurt. You know—in case things didn’t work out.”

“Big deal. My marriage went south too, remember. But I’d rather take a chance on getting hurt. I don’t know how you’ve managed to wait.”

“I’ll admit—it hasn’t been easy.”

“You mean, it’s been *hard*.”

“Yeah.” Then Greg noticed Sandy was grinning at him.

“Yeah, I’ll bet it’s been *real hard*—every night.”

“Well, sure. I *am* human. But, how about changing the subject?”

“Okay.” Sandy spooned up another bite of ice cream, banana, and toppings.

“You’re off from work tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“We need to sleep in tomorrow morning so we can be rested up for your bachelor party.”

“What bachelor party?”

“I’m your best man, and I’m throwing you a bachelor party. So, get plenty of sleep tonight.”

“Well, who’s coming to this party? You didn’t ask me for a guest list.”

“That’s because it’s just gonna be you and me, Pal.”

“Fine. We’ll come back here tomorrow night and have some more ice cream, and you can give me a gift, if you like. And one of those silly paper hats.”

“Hey—don’t be telling me how to plan the party. You’re the guest of honor, but *I’m* running the show. So, just wait and be surprised.”

*

Candy watched the bearded man drive his silver BMW into the convenience store parking lot and pull around to the side, near the back corner of the building. There were plenty of open slots in the front, so she figured the guy was there for something other than a bag of chips and a coke.

A chilly breeze blew up her mini-skirt and she shivered. She pressed her legs together tightly to generate some heat. The knee-high boots protected her feet and calves, but her butt was freezing off.

She wrote down the license number as she circled around to the side of the expensive vehicle. He’ll have a big wad of cash, she thought.

Larry Luzor had just stepped out of the car, when she said, “Nice car, Honey.”

“Uh, thanks.”

“I’m Candy. You got a sweet tooth tonight?”

He gave her the once over. Her black hair framed a pretty, young-looking face. The low-cut blouse left little to the imagination, barely hiding her nipples. She was average height, but the high heel boots elevated her to about 5’8”. The long legs were very nice.

Larry had never used a prostitute. He’d always thought of it as revolting. The idea of having sex with a woman who’d been with hundreds of men did not appeal to him.

But this didn’t seem like a typical hooker. She seemed too clean—almost pure.

But of course, she wasn't. He knew she had to be just as skanky as the rest of them. Still—if he hadn't been in the middle of something important he might have been more than willing to buy what she was selling.

“So, what do you say? Want to get it on?” She smiled seductively.

He was impressed that she had all her teeth, and that they looked white.

“How can I resist?” He grinned at her and winked.

Yes, he would go with her. But not for the reason she thought. He had seen her in his rear view mirror, writing down his license number. And he knew that by morning the store owner would realize the BMW had been abandoned. The police would be called in. And when they contacted Larry, he would tell them his wife left the cabin last night and he had not seen or heard from her since.

So, the police would think Erin had been abducted from the parking lot. They wouldn't think Larry had anything to do with her disappearance.

But if Candy talked to the police, his plan would begin to unravel. She would tell them she saw Larry getting out of the car. And had a conversation with him. They would gather DNA evidence from the car and the cabin. And the barbecue pit.

So, he would go to the motel with Candy. And he might even let her earn some money.

But she'd never get a chance to spend it.

Chapter 6

Candy opened her box-shaped purse, pulled out the key, and unlocked the door.

Larry had been concerned that they would have to walk through a lobby of prying eyes. How foolish of him to think such a thing. These professionals knew what they were doing. The room was accessible from the parking lot, at the rear of the motel. He wondered how many men she had already brought to this room tonight.

She should have a business card, he thought. Just off the top of his head he could think of some great slogans.

When you absolutely, positively have to get laid.

I deliver for you.

Push my easy button.

Dinging dongs since 2002.

She let him in, locked the door, and hooked the chain. Then she sat her plastic-looking purse on the dresser, flipped up the top, dropped the key in, pulled out a box of condoms and began to walk toward him.

Larry guessed she was between 25 and 30. Whatever her age, he wanted her.

Then he remembered he was still wearing his wedding ring. Well, it wasn't really a wedding ring, since he and Erin never got married. But after they had been together for a year or so, she had suggested they get matching rings. And because he had worn it ever since, he would continue to wear it until Erin's killer had been caught. Ha. He sounded like O. J.

Why was he worried about what Candy thought, anyway? Hookers have sex with married men all the time.

She moved in close, put her left arm around him as her right hand went down to his crotch.

He got rock-hard immediately.

“Feels like you’re ready to go.” Candy unbuckled his belt and unzipped his pants as he unhooked the single button holding her blouse together. There was no bra to remove.

Larry had never seen such perky breasts. But then, he hadn’t seen very many breasts of any kind. At least not up close and personal. Her luscious lips and her hot tongue were taking his breath away. Erin had never kissed him like *this*. At the same time, she was stroking him through his underwear with her talented fingers.

“Oops.” She looked down.

“It’s okay. I can come again. Believe me.”

“No problem.” She stepped back and sat on the bed.

As she raised each leg to take off a boot, he could see all the way up between her legs. She was not wearing underwear. And she was clearly showing herself to him on purpose.

He clumsily pulled off his shoes, pants, and sticky underwear. His jacket and shirt were off in a flash.

Candy removed her final article of clothing—the tight-fitting, leather mini-skirt.

The sight before him was breathtaking. And he wondered why he had never done this before.

“Come on, Baby. Let’s have some fun.” She grinned and motioned for him as she slowly spread her legs.

He quickly took a condom out of the package and rolled it on. But as soon as he slid between her legs he came again. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, no problem. Is this your first time, Honey?”

“Oh, no. Not at all. But I’ve never—”

“—been with a hooker?”

“Right.”

“So, is that all? Or can you go again?”

“With *you* I think I could go *all night*.”

“Now, that’s gonna be pretty expensive, I’m afraid.” She grinned.

“I don’t care.”

“Well, okay then.” She began to kiss him.

Within seconds, he was ready for action again.

*

Cynthia had been sleeping for about an hour when something woke her. It seemed the curtains were billowing slightly. But she knew she hadn’t opened the window. It was February. She tried to determine whether it was colder in the room. Was there a breeze? But her senses were dull.

“Hello, Baby.” The strange voice was behind her.

She twisted in the covers and saw a dark figure standing over her. She squinted to make out his face, but the dim nightlight at his back provided only a silhouette of his overcoat and head.

“You had to know I’d come eventually. I shouldn’t have let you marry that *first* husband. But I really didn’t think you’d go through with it. I thought you would come to your senses and dump him.”

Cynthia hated guns, but right now she wished she had a big one in her hands.

“And now you’re about to do it again—you’re gonna marry this loser, Greg Tenorly, who doesn’t deserve you.”

She tried to speak, but nothing came out.

“But don’t worry. I’ll take care of him. You won’t have to do a thing. And then

I'll have you all to myself."

She struggled with all her might to break out of her grogginess. The word began to rumble deep with her belly, causing her whole body to shake violently until it erupted from her mouth. "No!"

He was gone.

Her heart was racing. She turned on the table lamp and ran to the window. It was closed and locked.

After taking a couple of slow, deep breaths, she got back into bed.

It was the emails—they were giving her nightmares. But it was silly. She'd already determined they were coming from a horny teenage boy. They were meant for some high school girl—not for her.

She rolled over and went back to sleep.

*

"So, are we done?" said Candy.

Larry was lying beside her on the bed. "One more time. How about doggy-style?"

"It's *your* money." Candy sounded tired.

She turned around and got up on all fours.

Larry hopped off the bed.

She waited while he put on another condom. The cheap bed frame wobbled as he crawled toward her from the rear.

"Okay, big guy. Give me your best shot."

She felt something brush across the top of her head and down past her face. Then it tightened around her neck.

"What are you do—?" She couldn't breathe, much less talk.

He had looped his belt through the buckle and thrown the noose over her head. He jumped on her back and rode her like a bronco—pulling back on the reins as hard as he could. He wasn't too concerned that the people next door would hear the ruckus. It sounded like the couple in that room was too busy getting their rocks off to notice.

Finally, her limbs gave way and her body lurched forward, crashing her head into the headboard with a sickening thud. She lie still, and Larry loosened his grip, thinking she might be dead. He leaned down to see if she was still breathing.

She jerked her head back, directly into his nose, dazing him. Then she tried with all her might to push him off.

He rolled off the bed and landed hard—flat on his back. He feared the thinly-carpeted concrete floor had done major damage to his tailbone. But the end of the belt was still in his hand. And Candy's body was falling toward him. Before he could react, one of her fists hit him like a hockey puck—right in the balls.

The back of her head flew toward his nose. Just in time, he turned slightly—only to feel the crunch of her skull hitting his cheekbone.

For a moment, he lost the will to fight.

Candy sensed it and tried to jump up.

But he grabbed the belt with both hands and gave it a violent yank.

She collapsed to the floor next to him.

He checked her pulse.

Nothing.

Finally, he thought. Her neck was probably broken.

He surveyed the room. What a mess he had made. He gathered the four used condoms, and put them in one of his jacket pockets. Then he used soap and hot water and a hand towel to clean her up.

He put her on the bed and stared at her naked body. She had been a lot of fun. But she had to die. He couldn't afford to have her talking to the police.

He had concocted a perfect plan to murder Erin and get away with it. And he could not allow this woman to ruin his plans—no matter how sexy and likeable she was.

Yes, Lucky Larry was lucky indeed—as always. He got to have the best sex of his life. Then he got to do another murder. He wasn't sure which he enjoyed more—_committing_ murder or *writing about it* afterwards. His readers were going to love this chapter, he thought.

He knew he would be leaving traces of his DNA in the room. But he doubted that police would make much of an effort to find the killer. Just another dead hooker. So, what did it matter?

He started to leave.

“Wow, that was close. Almost forgot,” he whispered to himself.

He unlatched the top of her purse and flipped it open. Then he dumped the contents on the dresser and began to search.

“There you are.” He smiled. It was the card with his license plate number on it. He had seen her writing it down when he was parking the car at the convenience store.

He flipped the card over and read it.

Melanie Maylin Attorney at Law

Yeah, he wasn't surprised a hooker would have an attorney to bail her out of jail whenever necessary.

The card was all he needed. But he was curious. He opened her wallet and looked at her driver's license.

“No! It can't be.”

He felt ill. Candy looked different in her driver's license photo. Her hair was

brown instead of black. And, of course, she was wearing more clothes.

And her name was *not Candy*.

It was *Melanie Maylin Attorney at Law!*

Chapter 7

“That’ll be \$9.87.”

Rebecca Ranghorn flipped up the top of the box, pulled out a glazed donut, and took bite.

The young secretary behind her looked on in disbelief. She was so ready for the weekend. But first she had to get to the office and put in her lousy eight hours. Why couldn’t this woman just pay and get out of the way?

Rebecca tossed the box at the clerk. A couple of donuts flew out and fell on the floor behind the counter.

“Those are yesterday’s donuts. I told you to give me the fresh ones.”

“But, ma’am, these *are* the fresh—.” The look in her eyes stopped him cold. He dumped the box in the trash and picked out a fresher dozen.

“Now, that’ll be \$9.87, please.”

“Keep your drawers on, Jack.” She sampled the new batch. “That’s more like it.” She threw a ten dollar bill on the counter and walked out with her donuts and large bottle of orange juice.

Her enormous black 1979 Lincoln Continental Town Car was four feet longer and twice the weight of the young secretary’s Toyota Corolla parked next to it. It was costing her a fortune to drive her dad’s old car. But it made her feel close to him—even though he had been dead for eleven years. She rarely had an occasion to drive out of town—and it was not a big town. Sherman, Texas has about 36,000 residents.

She pulled into the old strip mall parking lot. Most of the stores and other businesses were barely hanging on. The place hadn’t seen decent shopping traffic since the 1980s. But it was the perfect location for Rebecca and her partner. They didn’t need shoppers. All they needed was cheap office space. Theirs was narrow, but deep, with a reception area, two offices and a bathroom.

Wendy saw her coming with the donuts and orange juice. So, she got up and unlocked the glass door and let her in. The 19 year-old worked her butt off for the ten bucks an hour they were paying her. She wished she made more, but right now she was just happy to have a steady job so she could support her baby, and help her mom with the bills.

“Have some breakfast.” Rebecca put the donuts and orange juice on Wendy’s desk, and headed for the coffee pot. “Any messages?”

“Not for *you*. But Mrs. Davis called for Melanie. She had an appointment this morning at 10:00, and wanted to know whether she could reschedule for 9:00. I checked Melanie’s calendar and told her that would be fine.”

“Good.” Rebecca picked up a donut, took a huge bite and gulped it down.

“But the problem is: I can’t get Melanie on the phone and it’s 8:40.”

“That’s weird.”

“Yeah—because she always answers unless she’s in court.”

Rebecca took a sip from her coffee cup. “Better call Mrs. Davis back and cancel.”

“What do you think happened to Melanie?”

“Uh...maybe her phone died.”

Rebecca went to Melanie’s office. She was afraid she knew *exactly* what had happened to her partner was. She hoped she was wrong.

She found an extra memory card in Melanie’s desk and put it in her pocket. Then she walked back into the reception area and refilled her cup. “Wendy, cancel my appointments for this morning.” She was out the door before Wendy could ask her where she was going and when to expect her back.

Rebecca drove to the motel Melanie had told her about. As she walked into the office, she smelled forty years’ worth of stink, oozing from a dozen layers of tobacco-stained wall paint.

“Can I help you?”

The leather-faced old man didn't look like he had spent even one day indoors his entire life. Maybe this was his first one, she thought. “Yes. I believe my friend is staying here and I wanted to surprise her. It's her birthday. So, I was hoping you could tell me which room she's in. Her name is Melanie, but she goes by a different name sometimes. She might have registered as ‘Candy.’”

“Oh, yeah. Candy.”

She was glad the man knew her partner, but also a little sickened. She didn't want to have *any* friends in common with this carnie-looking greaser. “Good. So, can you tell me if she stayed here last night?”

He flipped through the register and started coughing. Then he stepped back a couple feet, pressed a finger on the side of his nose, and blew a wad of snot into the trash can. “Yeah. Room 97. But I can't give you a key. Only got one per room.”

“That's okay. Thanks.” She bolted out the door.

She located the room on the back side and knocked.

No answer.

The old motel had not upgraded to a key card entry system, so she was about to reach into her purse for her lock picking tool. Then she remembered what her dad had taught her: *Always try the easy way first*. So, she tried the doorknob and was surprised to find it unlocked.

She opened the door and saw Melanie naked on the bed. She stepped in, closed the door and rushed to her friend's side.

“Oh, Sweetie, you told me you weren't going to do this anymore.” It was easy to see that Melanie had been dead for hours.

She reached into her purse for the latex gloves and put them on. Then she took out her little screwdriver, turned Melanie's purse on its back to remove the four screws, and detached the bottom section. She removed the memory card from the thin video camera that was mounted inside, and replaced it with the blank

card she had taken from Melanie's desk. She was careful not to exert too much strain on the small wire that ran from the camera to the lens, which was located in the center of the flower on the front of the purse.

Rebecca reassembled it, picked up the used memory card, and studied her friend's body. So beautiful. Such a sweet girl. She shouldn't have come here. But she didn't deserve to die for it.

"I know—I'm tampering with the crime scene," she said to her friend. "But I can't stand the thought of the police seeing this video. They'd be laughing and getting their jollies watching the creep abuse you and murder you. And I'm just not gonna allow that.

"But don't you worry about your case falling through the cracks, Honey. 'Cause I'm *all over it*. He's a dead man. I promise you—I don't care where I have to go, I'm gonna track down the slimy snake and chop his ugly head off.

"Wait. Correction: I'm gonna chop off *both* of his heads. The little one first."

She tried to imagine a smile on Melanie's face.

*

Larry awoke to birds chirping outside his cabin windows. He had slept like a baby after pulling off the perfect murder, followed up by a *near-perfect* murder.

After leaving the motel he had walked to a pay phone and called a taxi. He had told the driver to drop him off at a certain apartment complex in Denison to make it look like he lived there. Then he had walked nearly two miles to his cabin.

It had taken longer than he thought it would, because he had to hide every time a car drove by. The last thing he wanted was to hitch a ride or to later be remembered as the guy out walking the roads in a trench coat at 12:30 AM.

Surely he would have some reader feedback by now, he thought. It was 11:30 AM. He had stayed up until 2:30 writing the next chapter.

He went to his laptop and logged into his author account. Wow! He already had thirteen comments.

Very exciting—can't wait for the next chapter.

Cool, he thought.

I stayed up late reading this chapter and IT WAS WORTH EVERY MINUTE!

Yes, it was.

Your murder scenes are so real and detailed that I nearly vomited.

Excellent, he thought. After all these years with no recognition of his considerable talent, finally the public had come to its senses. Soon he would be laughing at those idiot agents who had rejected him.

With his first six books, he couldn't even *give* them away.

Now, he was writing a masterpiece—a best-seller!

You're my new favorite author.

That's right—I'm the best.

Your characters and your scenes sound so real, it made me wonder... Is this fiction, or did some lunatic really kill these women?

What if somebody in Denison or Sherman were to discover his online book? His story was being inspired by his real crimes. And even though he was using the pseudonym, Barry Undermine, for this book, he knew it could be traced back to him.

He was living a very dangerous life, especially after killing that lady lawyer. But he could not stop—he had quickly become a fame junkie. The reader raves were his heroin.

And *nothing* would stand between him and his next fix.

Chapter 8

“Hey, Man, we’d better get going soon. Our reservation is for 7:00,” said Sandy.

He and Greg had slept late, ordered pizza, and spent the afternoon talking shop and reminiscing about their college days.

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“I don’t know if trust *your* kind of surprise.”

Sandy laughed. “What? You’re afraid of having too much fun? It’s your last night of freedom.”

“But that’s just the point—I don’t *want* to be free anymore.”

“Look—after tomorrow night you’re gonna be wearing the old husband handcuffs. All I’m asking you to do is forget that for a while and just have some fun with the old Sandman.”

“Okay, I’ll try. As long as you don’t get *too* crazy.”

“Me, get crazy?”

“Shut up. Just let me check my email real quick.” Greg got up from the couch and walked to his bedroom.

Sandy yelled from Greg’s comfy recliner. “Why? You think you might have something from your wife-to-be? That’s cheating. You two said you wouldn’t talk or see each other until the wedding. And emails count as talking. And so do text messages and instant messages. You can’t do any of that, Man.”

Sandy got up and walked into Greg’s bedroom to see for himself.

“I knew you couldn’t hold out.”

“No. It’s from one of my students. He’s telling me he might have to miss his

piano lesson on Tuesday. Apparently, he didn't read the email I sent out to everybody announcing that I would be on my honeymoon next week. I even posted it on my web page."

"I couldn't do what you do, Greg."

"What?"

"Your students can cancel their lessons at the last minute. And then you don't get paid. You have no control over it. *I* get paid whether my students show up or not."

"That *would* be nice. But on the other hand, all your students are the same age—late teens to early twenties."

"So?"

"So, isn't that kinda boring? I mean, you don't get the joy of teaching piano to a six year-old girl, or the fun of guitar lessons with a 67 year-old man."

"Yeah, that must be a hoot. I can't believe I'm missing out on *that*."

"No, really—it's pretty cool, actually."

"If you say so. Now let's go eat. I'm starving."

*

"Thanks again, Sandy. It was delicious," said Greg.

They got into Sandy's car.

"Okay. Now for your bachelor party."

"What do you mean? I thought that *was* my bachelor party."

"Oh, no. A steak and a baked potato do not a bachelor party make."

"Well, thank you for your words of wisdom, Yoda."

Sandy tried talking in Yoda's voice. "Off to the party now we flee. Cake of your

bachelorhood you will see. Beer shall you drink until you pee.”

Greg laughed. “That’s funny.”

“Thank you.” Sandy smiled broadly and nodded.

“But not very *good*.”

Sandy pouted.

“And anyway—I don’t drink.”

“That’s okay. Believe me—you’ll still have fun.”

Greg didn’t like the looks of the place—not that he could see it all that well. It was dark outside, and even darker_ inside_.

Sandy gave his name and a young woman wearing a bikini led them to a room and showed them to their chairs. Then she walked out.

“Now what?” Greg had a bad feeling.

“Sit tight.”

Another young woman walked in to take their drink orders. Sandy ordered a Bud Light and Greg asked for a Dr. Pepper.

“I wonder what Cynthia is doing right now?”

“Hey, you’re not supposed to be thinking about her. Remember?”

“Okay. I’ll *try* not to.”

After a few minutes, the woman brought their drinks. They had taken a few sips when a huge cardboard cake rolled into the room. Two scantily-clad ladies pushed it into place, right in front of Greg.

“There’s your cake,” said Sandy. “Make a wish.”

“I wish we could just get out of here.”

“Oops, wrong wish.”

A young woman jumped up from inside the cake and it fell apart. Even in the dim light, Greg could see that her breasts were enormous.

Before he could react, she sat down in his lap, facing him.

He couldn't get up, and didn't know what to do.

She reached to the center of her chest and unhooked her spring-loaded bikini top and it flew off and hit Sandy in the face.

Sandy caught it and held it there for a moment to take a deep whiff. “Yee-ha!”

Greg's zipper felt like it was about to rip open.

The woman felt his excitement and rubbed her crotch against it. Then she grabbed his head in both hands and pulled it in between her huge breasts and held it there.

For the first time in his life, Greg feared he had high blood pressure. He would surely die right here in this woman's arms, he thought. No, no, no!

He grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her away as he stood up.

She fell on the floor. “Hey—no rough stuff, Dude.”

“I'm sorry.” Greg helped her to her feet.

She moved in close and tried to rub up against him again, apparently thinking everything Greg had said and done was just an act.

“No, thanks.” He held out his hand to stop her and accidentally made contact with a breast. “I'm sorry. I didn't realize what my *friend* was getting me into. It's nothing against you. You're beautiful and sexy, but—I'm sorry.”

Sandy was laughing his head off.

*

Cynthia had taken her mother out for dinner and a movie.

“So, what did you think of the movie, Mom?”

“Things would have gone a lot better for that woman if she had married the right man in the *first* place.”

“Yeah.”

“She knew that workaholic businessman didn’t want kids. He told her so. But I guess she figured he’d change his mind.”

“Yeah. But he didn’t.”

“What about you and Greg? Are you both sure you really want to have children?”

“Yes, Mom. We’ve talked about it a lot. And we’re glad that neither of us had any kids already so we can have them together. We’re very excited about it.”

“Even at *your age*?”

“I’m only 30. And Greg’s just 35. That’s not too old. It’s not like when *you* were young, Mom. A lot of couples wait longer now.”

“Okay. Good. Because I really *do* want grandkids.”

“Then why are you trying to talk me *out of it*, you silly woman?”

They laughed.

“I just wanted to know if I could *count* on it.”

“You can count on it. Okay?”

“Great. When?”

Cynthia shot her an evil eye. “I’ll get back to you on that.”

When they pulled into the driveway, Cynthia noticed a package sitting at the front door. After she had parked the car and they had gone inside, she went to the front porch, picked up the package, and carried it into the living room.

“What is it?” said Beverly.

“I don’t know.”

“Who’s it from?”

“Oh—it’s from my Honey.”

Cynthia tore open the box and found a fancy jewelry box inside. She opened it and was amazed at what she saw. It was a beautiful heart-shaped diamond necklace. “Oh, Greg.”

“Let me see,” said Beverly.

Beverly took the box and studied the necklace. “If these are real diamonds, this thing must have cost him a fortune.”

“Oh, here’s a note.”

My dearest Cindy,

“Cindy? That’s weird—he never calls me Cindy. In fact, *nobody* does.”

When I saw this dazzling necklace I thought of you and the love we share and I just had to buy it for you. It doesn’t compare to your beauty, but it’s the most I could afford.

“How sweet,” said Beverly.

“Yeah. What can I say? The man’s crazy about me.” Cynthia grinned.

When I think about all the fun we’ve had together and all the great times in the—

“Go on,” said Beverly. “In the what?”

Cynthia quit reading aloud and began reading silently.

When I think about all the fun we’ve had together and all the great times in the sack, it just blows my mind. Remember that time we went at it all night long?

So, if this thing with Cynthia doesn’t work out, I’ll be back, Baby. And I hope you

understand that I do love you very much. But Cynthia gives me the respectability I need for my job at the church.

So, wish me luck!

Greg.

A single tear rolled down Cynthia's face.

"What's wrong, Sweetie?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you crying?"

"Because...it's just so sweet."

The necklace was obviously intended for someone else, she thought. Some tramp named Cindy that Greg had been sleeping with on the side.

But, no. Greg would never do that. He couldn't stand to hurt Cynthia. And the note was not even in Greg's handwriting—it was typed. It could be from *anybody*. Anybody who was trying to break them up.

But who in the world would be so cruel?

Chapter 9

When he yanked her blouse open, the buttons flew into the air and landed on the floor and the bed, and behind the dresser. But she was too busy unzipping his pants to notice. Then he kicked each foot to shed his business Florsheims and removed her bra faster than a backstage assistant at a fashion show.

He pulled down her skirt and then her panties. She kicked them off her feet and jumped backward onto the bed. He leaped between her legs with his boxers around his socks.

The couple was pumping like wild animals, oblivious to the woman standing in the back yard with a video camera. The sheers across the window offered no privacy whatsoever.

Rebecca was disgusted, but happy. He's dead meat now, she thought. "Men are such dogs," she whispered to herself.

Then she remembered she had company. She looked down at the mutt sitting beside her. "Sorry. You're nothing like that slime ball."

The dog looked at the window and barked.

Rebecca panicked. The couple was still going at it. But she didn't want to push her luck. She hit the stop button and began to walk around to the side of the house. The dog was at her heels. She prayed it wouldn't bark again or bite her on the ankle.

Then she heard the back door open.

"Who's out there?" he yelled.

She hurried to the sidewalk and headed toward her car, which she had parked down the block.

That was close, she thought. He heard the bark, but didn't want to investigate until he was done. Mr. Big Shot really knew how to satisfy a woman. The sweaty gymnastics had lasted a mere two minutes.

She opened her cell phone as she drove away.

“Hello?”

“Hi. This is Rebecca Ranghorn. Sorry to call you so late.”

“That’s okay.”

“We’ve got him. Got him cold on video.”

“What’s her name?” she demanded. “Where does she live?”

“Now, settle down. I’m not going to give you her name right now. Don’t want you going over there and blowing her head off.”

“I wouldn’t do that. I don’t even have a gun.”

“Yeah. One time a client told me that, but then after I gave her the woman’s name, she went out and *bought* a gun.”

“And she killed the woman?”

“No. She accidentally shot herself in the leg. But she *would have* tried to kill her if she hadn’t shot herself first. So, I don’t take chances anymore. But, believe me—your cheating husband is going to agree to a very nice divorce settlement after we threaten to give this video to his self-righteous boss.”

“Yeah. He’d get fired for sure if Mr. Morris ever saw it. So, what are they doing on the video—kissing and making out?”

“A lot more than that. And he didn’t even use a condom.”

“So, they actually had sex?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Oh! That makes me so mad. He said he was getting the vasectomy so I wouldn’t have to go through the ordeal of having my tubes tied. But his *real* reason was so he could go out and—” She began to sob.

“I’m sorry. I know this is tough. But the *good* news is that we’re gonna be able

to squeeze every penny out of the pig.”

She asked the woman to come to her office on Monday and said goodbye.

Rebecca never hired a private investigator for any of her cases, preferring to do the work herself. The experience she had gained during her college years while working with her dad had made her a better investigator than most of the local hacks would ever be.

Randy Ranghorn was an easy-going, but tough guy, who looked like the John Wayne character in the movie *El Dorado*. He had never been a *young* version of The Duke. To Rebecca, her dad had *always* been middle-aged. And that’s the way she would remember him and love him.

She should have been with him that night. But he had insisted that she stay home and study for her final exam.

And the house was supposed to be vacant. He picked the back lock and slipped into the dark house. All he needed was copies of a few documents. There was no way he could have known that a drug dealer had taken up residence in that house. Maybe she wouldn’t have been able to save him anyway. And she might have gotten herself killed too.

But Melanie was a different story. She *could* have saved *her*. The petite 28-year-old had become Rebecca’s partner and best friend after a rocky start.

Rebecca had pulled into a motel parking lot to stake out a certain husband, when another woman parked in front of her car. She watched the woman sip coffee and fiddle with her camera. Finally, she had seen enough.

She got out, walked to the woman’s car, and knocked on the window. “What are you doing?”

The woman choked on her coffee and rolled down the window. “What?”

“I said: what are you doing? I saw you sitting here watching Room 103.”

“Yeah well, it’s none of your business.”

“Oh, I think it *is* my business. I think you’re stealing my work.”

“What are you talking about? I’m just waiting for someone and drinking my coffee.”

“No. You’re working for my client, which means she might try to weasel out of paying me.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but I didn’t know anything about you. I’m just doing my job.”

“Okay, then. Let me ask you this: did you get shots of him feeling up the secretary?”

“No. Did you?”

“Yep—through his office window. I was on top of the building across the street.”

“Nice. But do you have *audio* of him telling her what he wants to do to her?”

“You bugged his office?”

The other woman smiled.

“I like your style, Lady. Let me introduce myself. I’m Rebecca Ranghorn.” She held out her hand.

“Melanie Maylin. Glad to meet you.”

Melanie invited Rebecca into her car and they talked for two hours. It turned out they had a lot in common. Rebecca had worked as a private investigator for two years after her father died. Then she went to law school. After graduation, she joined a firm that specialized in Contract Law. She did her best to fit into the corporate world.

But then a friend confided in her about her marital problems and asked for help. The friend suspected her husband was having an affair. And if so, she didn’t want to waste any more of her life with someone she couldn’t trust.

Rebecca agreed to look into it, and immediately launched into private eye mode. And it felt so good—like slipping into a pair of her favorite shoes. It was so comfortable and natural. She caught the cheater on camera and handled the divorce. It all came so easily to her—until one of the partners found out about it.

Unfortunately, the partner was a friend of the cheating husband. Soon after that, she was fired for some bogus reason. She could have fought it, but decided she didn't care. So, she became a divorce lawyer. And did investigations whenever necessary.

Melanie told her how her husband had cheated while she was in law school. He was a trucker who drove 18-wheelers across the country. The money was pretty good, but he wasn't home much.

One time she found an odd business card in his pants pocket.

Fifty bucks will get you anything you want for a full hour. Call 501-555-5242. Ask for Cherry.

Melanie looked up the area code, and then one weekend, while her husband was in the Midwest, she drove to Little Rock and called the number on the card. Cherry agreed to meet her at a motel. Melanie figured Cherry was a prostitute, but wanted to be sure before she accused her husband.

"You got the fifty bucks?"

"Yeah." Melanie handed Cherry the bills.

Cherry slipped off her blouse nonchalantly, as though she was removing a jacket. There was nothing underneath but huge, bare breasts. "Okay, Honey, let's do it."

"But I..."

"That's okay. I can see you're a little shy. Probably your first time with a pro, huh, Sweetie."

Melanie was dumbstruck.

Cherry took her in her arms and planted a big, wet kiss on her lips. Her erect nipples were poking Melanie in the chest.

Melanie jumped back. "No. You don't understand. I just wanted to see what this was all about."

"Who are you? A reporter—doing an expose? Well, you can forget it. I've got

nothing to say to you.” She snatched her blouse from the bed.

“No, I’m not a reporter. Really. I think my husband has used your service.”

“Oh, great. Now, take it easy. You don’t have a gun in your purse, do you? I don’t do any married men—at least not knowingly.”

“I’m not here to hurt you. I’d just like to ask you some questions. For my own curiosity.”

So, Cherry told Melanie all about the business. And Melanie went back home and confronted her husband. He admitted to using hookers—and not just Cherry’s service. He was a regular customer in five states.

Melanie divorced him, finished law school, and became a divorce lawyer. And she made it her mission in life to save women from their cheating husbands. Her attitude was that husbands were guilty until proven innocent.

By the time the couple emerged from Room 103, Rebecca and Melanie had decided to become law partners. And the wife who had hired them was going to pay *both* of them or get *none* of their evidence.

Rebecca was deeply saddened by the death of her dear friend and partner. But she would have her revenge.

The killer must have thought he was so smart—wiping his fingerprints off everything and taking the card with his license number on it.

But when he had turned the card over to read the other side, he had unwittingly exposed his license number to Melanie’s purse camera. And Rebecca’s friend at the DMV had easily matched the number to the owner of the car: Lawrence Igby Luzor, of Plano, Texas.

Chapter 10

At 9:15 on Saturday morning Larry Luzor, soon to be a best-selling author, walked into his Plano, Texas home. The message machine was flashing the number '12.' Probably just calls from Erin's sleazy friends, he thought. Or, maybe an agent?"

The phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Is this Lawrence Igby Luzor?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Luzor, this is Lt. Gotcha of the Sherman Police Department."

Gotcha? Larry felt a chill begin to run up his spine. Surely that's not his name, he thought. "I'm sorry—what did you say your name was?"

"Gretcha. Lt. Bill Gretcha. Sir, the reason I'm calling is that we have a silver BMW convertible that was reported abandoned in a parking lot. And the car is registered in your name."

The detective told Larry the license number and where the car had been found. He had been trying to reach Larry since the store owner had called it in late Friday afternoon.

"Yes, that's my wife's car."

"Well, when was the last time you saw or talked to your wife?"

"Uh...I guess that would have been Thursday night—at a cabin on Lake Texoma."

"I see. Well, Mr. Luzor, would mind coming in to the station so we can talk about this?"

"Can't we just do it over the phone?"

The detective waited four seconds before he responded. “Sir, you don’t seem to be all that concerned about what happened to your wife.”

“*Should* I be concerned? You think something happened to her?”

“I’ve said all I can say over the phone.”

“Look, Detective, my wife probably parked the car and went off with some guy. And I couldn’t care less. Our marriage is over. I planned to file for divorce next week.”

“So, when can I expect to see you here at the station?”

“I’m feeling ill right now. Some kind of virus, I guess. I’ll take some medicine and rest a while and then hopefully I can make the trip up there—probably late afternoon.”

“Okay. I’ll be expecting you this afternoon. Thank you. Goodbye.”

Larry hung up the phone.

He had no intention of going back to Sherman. And by the time the police became suspicious, he would be long gone.

*

“I appreciate you coming in on a Saturday morning. I know it’s an inconvenience,” said the detective.

“No problem at all,” said Rebecca. “I want to help in any way I can.”

“When I took your statement yesterday at the motel, you said Melanie was not a hooker.”

“Of course not. She was a divorce lawyer—and a good one.”

“So, what made you think to look for her in that fleabag motel?”

“There was a scrap of paper on her desk with the name of the motel on it. She was late coming in to the office and we couldn’t reach her by phone, so I checked her desk for clues.”

“I’m going to need that scrap of paper.”

“Sure. I’ll see if I can find it.”

The detective glared at her. “You think she went there in her capacity as a divorce lawyer?”

“Sure. We go wherever we need to for our clients.”

“The manager said you came into the office asking about her.”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“And you mentioned to him that Melanie sometimes goes by the name ‘Candy.’”

“Uh, yes.”

“Why would a lawyer have a nickname like *Candy*?”

“I don’t know exactly. It was from elementary school. She never told me why the kids started calling her that. But it’s a cute nickname for an 8 year-old.”

“Yeah, but at 28, it sounds an awful lot like a hooker—especially when you dress like one.”

“My partner was no hooker, lieutenant. She was a hard-working lawyer who really cared about her clients.”

“And when you found her, did you touch or move anything in the room?”

“No, of course not. I’m a lawyer—I know better.” Rebecca knew she had gone way over the line this time. There was no scrap of paper with the motel name on it. And she had gone through Melanie’s purse, taken the bottom off and swapped out the video camera’s memory card.

She might end up in prison, or at the very least, be disbarred. But she knew who the killer was, and *she* would dispose of him. No need to waste a prison cell on the stinking degenerate.

*

The jerk in the dark green Jaguar nearly sideswiped Rebecca as she was entering the subdivision. She looked to see if the driver was smirking at her, but the windows were too dark. Just because they're rich, they think they own the road, she thought.

It had taken until 1:30 PM to drive to Plano after being interrogated in Sherman.

She stuffed a handful of greasy fries into her mouth and sucked down the rest of her warm strawberry shake.

The yard sloped dramatically upward to the house, making her feel like a peasant looking up at a castle. She drove up into the semi-circle driveway, set her parking brake, and killed the engine.

She hoped he would pull a gun on her. She could whip hers out as fast as any gunslinger in an old Western. As a kid, she had worked at perfecting her skills with a toy pistol and holster. And when she was a little older, she and her dad spent a lot of time at the shooting range. At fifty feet, she could shoot a man's dangler off before he could even go for his gun.

She rang the doorbell and got no answer.

She knocked and waited, and knocked again.

Then it struck her. What about the guy in the dark green Jaguar that nearly hit her car? What if that was Larry Luzor? Too late to chase him.

She opened the wooden gate at the side of the house and went through. The bedroom door near the hot tub was locked. So was the utility room door and the sliding glass door to the den.

Rebecca peeked in the small door window of the detached garage and saw no cars. She would break a window if necessary to get into the house and look for evidence.

But first, she would search for *open* windows. She found one. It was a high and small, in the utility room, opened just a crack.

She put on her latex gloves, reached up to the screen, and pulled it off. Then she raised the window, grabbed onto the brick ledge, and pulled herself up. Her arms

scraped across the sharp edges of the bricks as she stuck her head through the window. She hoped a neighbor wasn't seeing her bottom half flailing around in the air.

Her head was nearly touching the washing machine when her legs and feet cleared the window. She fell hard on the washer and dryer and rolled off to the tile floor. Her head was spinning as she looked up at the dryer. She felt as if she had just spent a few minutes tumbling in it.

One lonely tennis shoe lay upside down on the grass outside.

She got up and began to search the house. There was a portrait of the formerly happy couple on the mantle. Yeah, it was the creep from the video, she thought. "You are so dead," she said to the picture. Then she removed it from its frame and slipped it into her pocket.

In the study, she saw his six murder mystery books displayed prominently on the bookshelf behind his high-backed leather chair. In one corner were several boxes of those same books.

There wasn't much on the desk, other than the computer and a 7 oz. bag of Black Night pipe tobacco.

She turned on the computer. The keyboard and mouse had been pushed to the side. She put them in place and began to search his files. But after a few minutes she realized something. None of the files had been recently created or updated. The computer had apparently not been used for weeks. But how could that be? The guy was an author. Surely he used his computer to write his books.

You dummy, she thought. He had moved the keyboard and mouse out of the way to make room for his *laptop*.

She checked each of the desk drawers, but found nothing helpful. So, she pulled the trash can out from under his desk and began to search it. There were various scribbles and what appeared to be notes about possible characters for a book.

Or, maybe some of the names are real people, she thought.

She typed one of the names into the Google search box. Then she tried another. After several failures, she got an interesting hit on 'Barry Undermine.' It was the

name of an author on a website called DirectFromTheAuthor.com. Mr. Undermine was posting each chapter of his mystery novel as he wrote it. She decided to read a few excerpts.

But when the hooker tried to escape, he yanked the belt as hard as he could. She collapsed to the floor, dead. Her neck was broken.

As he lay alongside her lifeless naked body, a warm rush of satisfaction washed over him. He would tell the world exactly what he had done.

And he would, once again, get away with it.

Rebecca screamed at the monitor. “No, he won’t!”

Chapter 11

“I’ll have the French toast with bacon—extra crispy. And coffee. *Lots of coffee.*”

Larry loved having a mid-afternoon breakfast at IHop. And he particularly liked this location because of its free wireless internet access. This time of the day there were plenty of empty tables. No need to rush.

He had to make some major decisions about his plot. What would his readers enjoy the most? One thing he knew for sure: the honeymoon night would end in disaster. He began to type.

The newlyweds would feel safe in their hotel room—their passions raging exponentially higher with each touch, each kiss. So lost in their own world, they would never notice the intruder.

Unlike many couples who had already spent many nights groaning and sweating in each other’s arms, this pure man and this unblemished woman had called upon every ounce of human willpower to save themselves for the wedding night. And they knew in their hearts it would be well worth it.

But just as they were about to enter the promised land, a single bullet to the temple of the husband would spoil their holy journey. And the wife would have just enough time to understand the horror of the situation before dying beneath her husband’s body. The killer’s face, not her husband’s, would be the final image in her terrified eyes.

Not bad, he thought. Only one problem—the story would end too soon. He needed a lot more chapters. It was a novel—not a short story. Besides, so far his storyline had followed his real-life adventures. And he certainly had no intention of killing the bride. The husband could be knocked off—but not the wife. Larry wanted the wife alive, for himself. She shouldn’t be marrying that man anyway, he thought. She belongs to *me*.

Always has.

*

Greg walked into the living room and sat down with Sandy, who was watching NBA highlights.

“How do you think the Mavs will do tonight?” said Greg.

“Well, Utah beat the Nuggets last night. So, I’m sure we can do the same tonight.”

“Sorry you have to miss the game.”

“No problem—I’m recording it.” Sandy checked his watch. “Only three hours until the wedding. But it’s still not too late to back out.” He whipped out his cell phone. “Want me to call Cynthia? I’ll let her down easy, Man—don’t worry.”

“You want me to grab that phone out of your hand and flush it down the toilet? I’m ready. So ready. Even if I *am* a little nervous.”

“About the honeymoon? Why? It’s not like y’all have never *done it* before.”

Greg watched the TV in silence.

“You’re kidding? Come on, Dude, you’re a *musician*. You mean to tell me you’ve never fingered Cynthia’s sousaphone?”

“Sandy!”

“Never stroked her viola with your bow? Never—”

“Stop! We’re virgins.”

“What? You’ve both been *married* before.”

“Well, we’re virgins to each other. At least that’s the way *we* look at it.”

“How sweet.”

“I knew you wouldn’t understand.”

“No, I don’t. But I respect you for it. Good for you.”

“Thanks.” Greg smiled.

“I just hope you can hold it until you get to the hotel.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’d hate to see you have a spontaneous *combustion* right in the middle of the ceremony.”

The scene flashed into Greg’s mind. “Oh, Man—I wish you hadn’t said that.”

Sandy grinned. “Your picturing it, aren’t you?” He started laughing. “I wish you could see the look on your face.”

“Great. You’ve just given me another thing to worry about. Thanks a lot, Sandy.”

“Well, I still don’t get why you’re worried about the honeymoon. Are you afraid you won’t live up to her expectations?”

“No...”

“Yeah—that’s it. You’re thinking: what if I’m not as good as the ex-husband?”

Greg didn’t speak.

“He was a big lineman-type guy, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you’ve got it all wrong. There’s no way she’s gonna be disappointed.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Wasn’t her ex an abuser?”

“Well, not at first, but yeah.”

“Then I guarantee you that’s what she remembers when she thinks about him. Any good lovemaking memories have been tainted by his abuse. But she knows you’ll never hit her or be mean to her. And after what she went through with him, there’s nothing sexier than knowing she’s with a man who’s gentle, kind and committed. When a woman truly feels safe with you, and she’s truly in love with you— that’s the ultimate turn-on, Buddy. I’m telling you.”

“Yeah, I guess. But since when are you an authority on this stuff?”

“What can I say? I watch a lot of Oprah.”

They both laughed.

“Okay,” said Greg. “Thanks.”

“So, just concentrate tonight. I’m sure you can keep *little Greg* in check while you kiss that gorgeous, sexy redhead in front of God and man.”

Greg punched him in the arm. “Stop.”

“Fine. How about a snack?”

*

Rebecca always thought of her dad when she drank coffee. The two had downed gallons of the black stuff while she did P.I. work with him. She liked Starbucks because it was a handy place for her to use her laptop. But it was *not* the kind of coffee shop her dad frequented that had only regular or decaf. With no frilly options or foreign-sounding sizes.

She could just imagine what would have happened if he’d ever walked into a Starbucks.

“Give me a large coffee.”

“Grande or Venti?”

“What?”

“Which size did you want, Sir? Grande or Venti?”

“I want a *large*.”

“Medium or dark roast?”

“Son, I just want you to pour some coffee into a large cup. What’s so hard about that?”

No, her dad wouldn't have liked this at all. But she sure wished he was here. She missed him every day. And right now she could use his help catching Melanie's killer.

She wondered if *Larry the Loser* had killed his wife the way his alter ego did in the book. Probably, she thought. The scene in which the hooker was killed sounded exactly like what had really happened to her partner. If he had known Melanie was an attorney instead of a hooker, he might not have killed her. But even after he knew, he still bragged about the murder in his book.

She wanted to nail his balls to the wall. If he pulled a gun, she'd blow him away. But if she got the chance she would prolong her enjoyment by torturing him first. She could lasso his neck and let him see what it feels like. She imagined sitting on his back, tightening the leather choker until he passed out. Then she would let him regain consciousness and do it again. He would plead for mercy as she took him to the brink of death over and over again. She would show mercy—to the same degree he had shown it to Melanie.

But she also wondered about the redhead. Larry seemed obsessed with her. And now his attempts, or his character's attempts, to get her to call off the wedding had failed. What would be his next move?

His book said the wedding was on Saturday and Rebecca assumed it was in Texas. So, she googled the phrase, 'wedding announcements February 24 texas.' If she could find a wedding scheduled for that day *and* there was a picture *and* the bride-to-be was a redhead...

She looked through several pages of wedding announcements, mostly listed in the online versions of local newspapers. Some of the pictures were in black and white. She began to wonder if it was just waste of time.

Finally she came across the wedding announcement page of the *Coreyville Courier* and spotted a beautiful redhead posing with her fiancé. Rebecca remembered that the woman in Larry's novel had been a cheerleader in high school. Yeah, she thought, this woman definitely looks like the cheerleader type.

The ceremony was set for 7:00 PM. She checked her watch. Could she get there before it was too late?

She closed her laptop and rushed out to her car.

*

Dr. J. Marshall Huff was finishing up his notes for Sunday's sermon when the phone rang.

"First Baptist Church. Dr. Huff speaking."

"Uh, yes, Dr. Huff. This is Johnny Jones. I'm an old college friend of Greg's. And I want to surprise him tonight. He has no idea I'm coming."

"Great. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I was already on the road when I realized I wasn't sure about the time of the wedding."

"Seven o'clock."

"Thanks. I couldn't remember whether it was 6:30 or 7:00. Oh, and I know he and Cynthia are going to Disney World for their honeymoon. But are they going directly there tonight after the ceremony? I wanted to send a big bouquet of flowers to their hotel room."

"No. They're not flying out to Orlando until tomorrow morning. Tonight they're staying in a hotel near the airport."

"D/FW Airport?"

"Yes. And I think they're staying at the Marriott."

"Okay. Thanks a lot for your help."

"So, I guess I'll see you tonight."

The line was already dead.

Chapter 12

Cynthia and her mom were at the church getting dressed and putting on their makeup for the wedding when Beverly heard a beep. “What was that?”

“My cell phone. I got a text message. Could you hand it to me?”

“Sure.”

It was a message from Greg.

“r u sure u want 2 go thru with this?”

Cynthia typed in, “of course - hope ur not getting cold feet”

“not me - im worried about u. that ul be sorry”

“no way - ur the best thing that ever happened 2 me”

“but what about sex?”

“can’t wait”

“but i may not be as good as u think”

“don’t b silly - gotta get ready c u soon”

“ok”

“What was that about?” said Beverly.

“Greg’s worried he’ll disappoint me in bed. But he won’t.”

“Of course not. Y’all are the perfect for each other.”

*

The ceremony was going by so fast. Soon she would be his wife.

“I, Greg, take you, Cynthia...” From the moment she walked in his door he wanted nothing more than to hold her, to care for her, to make love to her, to never let her go. In the blink of an eye she had gone from stranger to the most important person in his life. At first, he wasn’t even sure it was love. He only knew that suddenly she was all he could think about.

He had loved other women, and had even been married before. But this was different. Looking at her, touching her, just being near this amazing woman did magical things to his body chemistry. Why couldn’t they have met sooner—before either of them got married the first time?

He looked deep into her glistening blue eyes, and thought, oh, Cynthia, do you realize you’re making my whole body buzz? He hoped he had said his vows correctly...and that he hadn’t said the word ‘buzz.’

“I, Cynthia, take you, Greg...” Oh, Greg, I love you so much, she thought. You still don’t even know how much I love you. You are so kind and caring. And I’ve never felt so loved. You think I’m too beautiful for you. But all I know is that I’ve never enjoyed being with any other man the way I love being with you. I’ve never respected and cared as much for any other man. And I’ve never felt my body *heat up like this* for any other man. Baby, you just turn me on like crazy!

She wondered if he was reading her mind.

*

The uninvited guest went quietly up the stairs, two at a time. The .38 was hidden under the right pant leg in the ankle holster, ready when needed.

The balcony was empty. The perfect spot for a sniper. The groom could be taken out with one shot to the temple. The suppressor would muffle the shot enough to confuse the congregation for a few seconds while Larry escaped. Then, after a few months, Cynthia would be open to a new lover — the man she *should* have been marrying.

But Larry was not in the balcony.

Rebecca took a seat to watch the rest of the ceremony. Where was that slimy would-be novelist? She had driven like a maniac to get there in time. She desperately wanted to save Cynthia Blockerman from Larry the Loser. But what

if Cynthia was the wrong redhead? She couldn't be sure. The *right* redhead or her groom might already be on the floor of some church, bleeding all over the carpet.

No. Her gut told her this was *the* redhead. Perhaps Larry was waiting until the reception. Or the honeymoon. And did he plan to kill Cynthia or abduct her? It was difficult to tell from his latest chapter. But she would do everything in her power to stop the filthy creep.

And terminate him—with extreme prejudice.

*

When Rebecca entered the Fellowship Hall of First Baptist Church, she tried to fit in. She hoped she wasn't the only woman wearing pants. She would try to avoid talking to anyone.

There was a nice spread of finger sandwiches, nuts and mints, and the two wedding cakes. A young teenage girl was ladling out the fruit punch for the attendees who were already forming a line at the end of the first table.

A young boy, probably the brother, Rebecca thought, picked up one of the fancy glass cups. The sister tried to stop him, but he pulled away and guzzled the yellow liquid in two seconds. Then he put the cup back on the table and stuck his tongue out at her. She threatened him with the ladle, and then looked around to see if anyone had just witnessed her unladylike behavior.

The boy started coughing and grabbed his throat. Then he fell on the floor. The sister started to panic.

Not poison, Rebecca thought. Larry would have no way of predicting who would be the first to drink it.

Then the little boy started laughing. The sister grabbed a tuna sandwich and threw it at him. The sandwich opened in flight and landed in two parts on his chest. He snatched it up, smearing it across the pocket of his white sports jacket, and shoved it all into his mouth at once and mumbled, "Thanks, Sis." Then he started laughing again. Bits of bread and tuna spewed from his mouth.

A woman appeared out of nowhere and pulled the boy up by one ear. "What did

I tell you?"

"Ow, ow, ow—that hurts, Mama."

"I don't believe we've met."

Rebecca had been so caught up in the drama at the punch bowl that she hadn't seen the Best Man walking up to her side. "Uh, no, I guess not."

"Well, I'm Sandy. What's your name?"

"Rebecca." If he asked for her last name she would use one of her old standbys. She often had to lie when doing private investigations. It was just part of the job.

"I'm surprised nobody told me about *you*. I know most of Greg's old friends. You must be a friend of Cynthia's."

"Actually I'm working security for the wedding. Keeping an eye on things. You never know—somebody might be out to get Greg and Cynthia."

"To walk right into their wedding reception and shoot them."

"Or poison the wedding cake."

"Or go after them with a slingshot."

They laughed.

Sandy slapped her across the shoulder. "I like you, Honey."

"Good." Rebecca punched him in the stomach. "But I'm not your honey. Look—I went to high school with Cynthia, but she won't remember me. I saw in the paper that she was getting married, and I didn't have anything better to do tonight, so—"

"—so you thought you'd crash the wedding—get some free food and booze."

"Sure, why not. It seems like fun when they do it in the movies."

"Well, if you were looking for alcohol I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place. These people don't drink." Sandy noticed she wasn't wearing a wedding

ring. “I’d be happy to be your date for tonight—so you won’t feel funny standing around all by yourself.”

“Okay. Sure. As long as you don’t touch me. ‘Cause if you do, then be prepared to *lose* whatever you touch me with.”

“No problem. I’ll get us some punch.” As Sandy walked away, he imagined the stocky, but sexy woman ripping off his lips...or his hands...or his... He couldn’t understand why he was so attracted to her. Not that she wasn’t pretty. But she was definitely rough around the edges. She might even be dangerous.

Maybe that was the attraction.

*

Larry walked out of the convenience store, lit his pipe and stood there puffing on it as he watched the cars go by. He had not played the Texas Lottery in a long time. He knew he could win any time he wanted. But that wouldn’t fair to everyone else. So, he used his powers of luck sparingly.

But now that his funds were dwindling, he figured it was his turn to win again. By correctly selecting all six numbers, he could walk away with as much as \$45 million. Then he wouldn’t need to play again for a few years. But he didn’t plan to sit nervously in front of the TV at 10:12 PM to witness the drawing. He *knew* he would win.

Money had never been an issue for Lucky Larry. Let everyone else work at a crummy job for low pay. All he needed was his luck.

And now his luck in publishing was finally turning around. He knew it would happen. Two agents and a small publisher had already contacted him about his new book, *Illusion of Luck*. It would be a New York Times Best Seller—he could just feel it.

They would need a good portrait for the back cover. He would go to an expensive hairdresser for a precise trim of his beard and shaggy hair. In his picture he would, no doubt, appear to be in deep thought, holding his beloved pipe to his lips.

He got into his Jaguar and drove away. He laughed when he pictured the pastor

of First Baptist Church, Coreyville looking for Johnny Jones at the wedding reception. What a doofus, he thought.

Larry had not attended the wedding. He had never planned to. But he *would* attend the *honeymoon*.

Chapter 13

Sandy jumped into fourth position of the reception line. And when it came his turn, he took Cynthia in his arms and kissed her on the lips for a long second. Then he gave Greg a huge bear hug. Leave it to Sandy to act inappropriately, thought Greg. But they wouldn't hold it against him. It was just Sandy being Sandy. Besides, nothing was going to spoil Greg and Cynthia's perfect day.

Sandy made a quick pass through the food line and then joined Rebecca at her table with a full plate of sandwiches.

"You've got some red lipstick on your face," said Rebecca.

"Where?"

Rebecca picked up a napkin and wiped it off. She was surprised when she noticed Sandy blushing. He likes me, she thought.

He wasn't really embarrassed by the lipstick was on his face. But when Rebecca *touched* him—it was like turning on a red light bulb. Sandy hated it when he spontaneously broadcasted his feelings. He wasn't ready for her to know he was attracted to her. But it was too late now. He could see it in her eyes—she knew. He wanted to grab her. But then he remembered what she had said earlier and held back. He wasn't quite ready to take a chance on losing appendages. "So, what do you do for living?"

"I'm a lawyer."

"That's interesting. Most lawyers refer to themselves as *attorneys*."

"Same thing."

"But don't attorneys think of themselves more highly than lawyers do?"

"Probably. But, to me, it's like 'the lady's room.' I'd just as soon call it 'the bathroom' or 'the can.'"

"So, instead of regurgitate, for example, you'd say vomit."

“Or hurl...or barf.”

“What kind of law do you practice?”

“Divorce.”

“Hope you’re not like my ex-wife’s lawyer. She’ll drag a poor guy into court, strip him naked, cut off his balls and hand them to the wife.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes the *poor guy* has it coming.”

“Really? What kind of man deserves *that*?”

“The kind who’s drilling his hot young secretary until he gets caught. And when the wife files for divorce, he tries to leave her penniless.”

“And that’s where you step in and save the day?”

“I do my best.”

“How do you prove the husband cheated?”

“You do a little private eye work.”

“You do it yourself or you hire somebody?”

“I don’t trust anybody else to do it. Besides, most of the women I represent can’t pay much, so I really can’t afford any extra expenses.”

“Wow. A real-life private eye—and a divorce lawyer. So, you live here in Coreyville?”

“Oh, no. I live in Sherman.”

“Hey, that’s just up the road from where I live—in Dallas. And just for the record: I never cheated on *my* wife. I was just a big pain in the butt, according to her and her lawyer. But she knew *that* when she married me. Actually, I think *she* might have been cheating. But none of that matters now. It’s history.”

“What kind of work do *you* do?”

“I’m a music professor at a junior college in Dallas—technically, an *associate* music professor.”

“Your students must love you.”

“Yeah, they do. But what made you say that?”

“You’re sort of outrageous, bigger than life—a little crazy. I would think college students like that.”

“But that’s just who I am. I’m not gonna try to be what anybody think a college professor *should* be.”

“Good for you.”

“On the other hand, I’ve nearly been fired a few times.”

“For what?”

“Well, for example, one time I was talking to my class about various musical instruments, and I said that almost anything could be made into an instrument. When one of my students challenged me, I decided to do a little experiment. I told the class to go out to any room in the building, and for each one of them to bring back an item. Then I would prove it could be used as a musical instrument. So, they did.”

“Doesn’t seem so crazy. How did that get you into trouble?”

“The music dean was showing off our brand new building to a couple of board members. Then he took them into his office and invited them to sit for a while and chat. But his brand new plush executive chair was missing.”

“No.”

“Yes. One of my students had slipped into his office while his secretary was in the bathroom.”

Rebecca snickered. “Were you able to make music with the dean’s chair?”

“I didn’t even try. I ran through the hall, rolling the chair in front of me, praying

I would get there before the dean discovered it was gone.”

“Obviously, you didn’t make it.”

“Nope. So, the student won the argument. I could have played it as a percussion instrument, using drumsticks on the metal chair legs. But he knew I wouldn’t dare beat on the dean’s new chair.”

“Smart kid.”

“Yeah. Too bad I had to flunk him.”

“You didn’t.”

“No. But I wanted to.”

Rebecca started laughing. Then Sandy joined her.

Sandy couldn’t believe he’d meet an eligible woman he liked at Greg’s wedding.

Rebecca had given up all hope of finding a man she could stand to be in the room with. She was enjoying herself so much she could have almost forgotten why she was there.

*

As Greg and Cynthia hurried through the crowd toward the car, the well-wishers released bright colored balloons into the sky. Greg had requested the balloons, fearful of driving away with tiny rice or birdseed scratches all over his beautiful 1965 Pontiac Bonneville convertible.

Sandy’s string of Just Married cans clanged loudly as they drove away. As soon as they had cleared the Coreyville city limits, Greg pulled over at a gas station, put the top up, and cut off the string of cans and threw them in the trunk. He would have tossed them in the trash. But Cynthia wanted them as a keepsake, thinking it was a sweet, if goofy, gesture by Greg’s knuckleheaded friend.

“You look nervous, Honey,” said Cynthia.

“I do?”

“Yeah. You’re shaking.”

“I don’t think I’m *nervous*. Maybe *overwhelmed*.”

“You’re still worried about making love to me? Don’t be. I mean, you’ve had sex plenty of times. You know where everything goes and how it works.”

“Yeah, but I’ve never done it with *you*. You’re different. Your body is pure, —”

“—I hope you weren’t going to say *sacred*.”

“Well...”

“I’m not a *virgin*.”

“Yes, you are. To *me*, you are.”

“Okay. But you don’t have to get all stressed out about it. We’ll just be a husband and a wife having sex—like God intended.”

He agreed in principle with everything she was saying. But Cynthia was *the* perfect woman. In every way. And she didn’t even know it.

“I can’t wait to get naked with you,” she said.

“But we can turn the lights down real low.”

“Sure. If that’s what you want.”

“Or turn off the lights altogether.”

“Hey, I’ve seen you without your shirt.”

“And yet you still married me.”

“But you’ve never seen *me* naked. What if my body repulses you?”

Greg giggled at the thought of it. Then he chuckled. Finally, he roared with laughter.

Cynthia laughed along. “Well, at least I’ve loosened you up.”

“Oh, Baby, I love you. We’re gonna have so much fun together.”

“Yes, we are.”

*

Larry was enjoying a comfortable chair in the lobby of the DFW Airport Marriott Hotel. The free wireless internet access allowed him to work on his book while waiting for the arrival of the newlyweds. Right now he was just making notes. He wouldn’t actually write and post the chapter until he had executed the plan.

After Greg and Cynthia had gone into the room, he would stand near their door, listening. If anyone walked by, he would whisper that he was playing a joke on his buddy inside.

He figured that soon after entering their room, Cynthia would go into the bathroom to change and maybe take a shower. While Greg was waiting for her, Larry would call the room phone, disguise his voice, and tell him he had accidentally backed into Greg’s car and damaged it. He would ask Greg to come to the lobby so they could exchange insurance information and go out to the parking lot and look at the car.

Greg would tell Cynthia through the bathroom door that he’d be right back. While Greg was in the lobby waiting for the caller to show up, Cynthia would come out of the bathroom. Then Larry would knock on the door. Cynthia would think her silly husband had gone off without his room key and open the door without even asking who was there.

She would be surprised to see Larry instead of her husband. He would tell her who he was, and that they went to high school together. Then he would offer her a watch as a wedding present. She would think it looked bulky and ugly, but would be kind and accept it anyway. Larry would insist that she try it on, which she would do, just to get rid of him.

But as soon as Cynthia had the watch on her wrist, Larry would inform her that it contained a small amount of explosive material capable of blowing her hand off. He would show her the wireless detonator, invite himself into the room, and close the door. Then he would make her throw on some clothes, grab her bag, and leave the hotel with him.

Greg would wait in the lobby for a few minutes, give up on the caller, and walk out to his car and find no damage. Relieved, but confused, he would go back to his room only to find his wife and her bag missing. There would be no note—no indication as to why his wife had deserted him.

It was an ingenious plan. Larry just wished he could be there to see Greg's reaction. But that was okay—he didn't need to *see* it. He was a writer, after all. The world of imagination was his playground.

He could picture the pitiful look on Greg's face.

Chapter 14

Rebecca had been following Greg and Cynthia on Interstate 20 since they left Coreyville, maintaining enough separation so she wouldn't be noticed. It was easy to keep track of Greg's 1965 Bonneville. You don't see many of those on the road these days, thought Rebecca. She was a little envious, although she loved her 1979 Lincoln Continental.

Fifty miles out of Dallas, the rattle she had been ignoring got much louder. Not now, she thought. She wanted to stay close to Greg and Cynthia, in hopes that she could intervene if Larry Luzor showed up.

From what little she knew of the couple, she liked them, and would hate to see them harmed. But her primary motivation was the burning desire to take revenge on her partner's killer. Saving the newlyweds in the process would just be a nice fringe benefit.

The racket got even louder.

Rebecca knew a little something about cars. She had spent many hours out under the old oak tree, handing tools to her dad.

"Sweetie, could you give me the 9/16 inch socket?"

"Is it this one, Daddy?"

"No, Honey, that's a 9/16 inch box-end wrench. It's the right size. But what I need is a socket—you know, it's round and—"

"—like this?"

"Yeah, that's it. Thanks."

He would always explain in great detail what he was doing and why. That time he rebuilt the carburetor on the old Buick and ended up with parts left over, she thought he'd go nuts trying to figure it out. But he finally got it all back together and working.

She was 95% certain she was hearing the rear universal joint break down. And

she knew if it completely fell apart, the back end of the drive shaft could hit the road and that might pull it out of the transmission. Then the drive shaft might roll across the highway and cause other cars to wreck.

She pulled over to the side of the highway and watched the taillights of the red convertible get smaller and fade away. Now she would have to call for a tow truck. She was disgusted with herself. The noise had started weeks ago. Why hadn't she taken the time to get it fixed then?

No sooner than she had called for a tow, she saw headlights coming up behind her. Maybe it was state trooper. But she couldn't see any lights on top. A man got out of the car and walked to her door.

"Hey, Lady, got trouble?"

He leaned down to look in the driver's window and saw a pistol pointed at his face.

"Whoa, take it easy, Rebecca. It's me—Sandy."

She lowered the gun. "What are you doing here?"

"I was driving home—like you. And I saw what I thought was your car on the side of the road and figured you were in trouble. I just wanted to help. But I nearly got my head blown off. You're dangerous, Woman."

"I'm sorry, Sandy. Have you been following me all the way from Coreyville?"

"No, like I said, I wasn't even sure this was your car. I drove through McDonalds on the way out of town, so you had some lead time."

"You were hungry again? After all those sandwiches you ate at the reception?"

"Yep. So, what's wrong with your car?"

"Rear U-joint."

"Huh?"

"You're not a car guy, are you?"

“I just drive ‘em. Can I give you a lift?”

“No, thanks. I can ride in on the tow truck. I just called them.”

“Well, then I’ll just hang around until they get here.”

“Oh, I hate for you to have to wait. I’m sure you’d like to get on home.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Well, okay. Thanks.”

*

Chaucey checked the site for the fourth time in five minutes. What was taking him so long? She needed to read the next chapter.

She searched for another online book to read. Most were not as good as his, but she needed something to occupy her time while she waited. She was a voracious reader. And she had plenty of time to read. At 27, she lived alone in her apartment in Katy, Texas, just west of Houston.

Chaucey Reed was the product of an English literature professor and a psychiatrist. They had agreed to have but one child, which would be a boy. But, she had disappointed them by being a girl. It had been her mother’s plan to name her son Geoffrey Chaucer, after her idol, the English author, poet, philosopher, and diplomat.

After a brief disagreement, the Drs. Reed decided to use the name anyway. Geoffrey Chaucer Reed. They would call her Chaucey. Yes, that was perfectly acceptable. To *them*. She hated her name. But she did, begrudgingly, admire Chaucer. And she had read his works numerous times.

She was a strikingly beautiful woman with long, dark brown hair. Upon entering a room, men would flock to her. But one by one they would walk away disappointed—not because they were rejected, but because of her snobbishness. She was always the smartest person in the room—and she’d let you know it. Not that she’d been in many rooms with other people recently.

She made a good living as a free-lance graphic artist. And her work rarely

required her to leave her apartment. She had become a hermit—only venturing out when absolutely necessary. She didn't even go out to shop. She had groceries and other items delivered to her door. Anything she needed could be ordered online.

There was not one television in her home. She didn't care for the medium. Why let actors attempt to tell her a story that would play out much more vividly in her own imagination. The only way to get the full impact of a story was to read it. She didn't understand why everybody didn't feel that way. Ignorant peasants were they.

Few of the walls in her apartment could still be seen. She had neatly stacked her thousands of books from floor to ceiling along nearly every wall.

She couldn't bear to part with any of her precious tomes, yet there was no room to add more. Her solution was to begin reading electronic books. She scoured the internet for books she could read online or download. Some were free, others were not. It didn't matter. Money was not an issue. She just needed a constant supply of new reading material.

She found a huge volume of older literature, which she did enjoy. But she preferred modern mysteries and thrillers. And, at a rate of two books per day, it soon became clear she would eventually run out.

Some unpublished authors were posting their novels online. She liked perusing their books, but found most lacking in quality.

Then she came across a new mystery being written by Barry Undermine. She had never heard of him, but thought his style sounded familiar. She found herself strangely fascinated by his writing. Unlike the work of many would-be novelists, his characters and story rang true. And she had become hooked.

But the problem was that she couldn't zip through this book in her usual manner. He was posting each chapter as he wrote it. It was driving her crazy having to wait.

And the more she read, the more enthralled she became with the writer. To her, the man was powerful and dangerous and sexy. She wished she could meet him. And it took a lot to make her want to venture out of her apartment.

And in his tyme swich a conqueror,

That gretter was ther noon under the sonne.

She would throw off her cloak of fearfulness and plunge headlong through the dreaded maze of ignorant masses—if her journey would lead her into the presence of this intriguing, mysterious man. But she wondered...was she drawn to the writer...or to his murderous main character? Or were they one and the same?

She was frightened, yet invigorated by her wild, impetuous thoughts.

Barry's story was taking place in East and North Texas. And he seemed to know that part of the country so well that she suspected he lived there. Perhaps she would write to him and propose a meeting.

She had a picture she could send him. It was four years old, but her looks had changed very little in that time. It was one of those glamour shots taken in a studio. She was lying across a white furry blanket in a bikini. The photographer begged her to go out with him. She refused.

The picture was for a doctor ex-boyfriend she was trying to win back. Her plan failed.

What if she sent Barry Undermine that picture, along with an offer to satisfy the darkest desires of his heart?

Could he resist such an offer?

She trembled at the thought.

Chapter 15

As Larry made notes on his laptop, he kept one eye on the front desk. Hours earlier he had stopped at a flower shop a few miles from the hotel and paid \$50 for a lovely bouquet of red roses in a red vase. Hopefully they had already been delivered to Greg and Cynthia's room.

He had slipped the clerk an extra \$50 and made it very clear that it must be delivered that evening. The clerk had assured him it would be done as he requested.

A couple walked through the entrance toward the front desk.

She hasn't changed at all, thought Larry. She is so beautiful. And she's finally going to be mine.

He closed his laptop, put it in the leather bag, and picked up the newspaper he had purchased earlier. Then he got up and walked toward the elevators. When Greg and Cynthia passed, he was standing there with his laptop bag hanging at his side, reading the Dallas Morning News. As soon as they entered the elevator, he followed them in, never lowering the newspaper from his face.

Greg pushed the fourth floor button and turned to Larry. "What floor would you like?"

Larry peeked around the side of the paper and saw the fourth floor button glowing. "The same—fourth. Thanks."

Cynthia was totally oblivious of Larry. All she could think about was Greg and what she was about to do with him. They had waited until they were married to have sex. All those months of pent-up desire were about to be released in a single night. She looked into his eyes and thought, how could he possibly want me as bad as I want him?

Larry was glad he had the laptop bag to hold in front of himself. He thought of a nice simile: just being in her presence had shot him up, *like an elevator*, to the top floor. He knew he would go through the roof the first time he touched her.

When the doors opened, Larry nodded for Greg and Cynthia to go first. He followed them at a distance to their room, and then casually glanced at the room number as he passed by.

Greg slid in the key card and opened the door. Cynthia was about to walk in.

“Wait. Let’s get it right,” said Greg.

“You want to carry me over the threshold?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” He grinned.

She spoke more softly. “You sure it won’t hurt your back? ‘Cause you’re going to need a *strong* back.” She smiled seductively.

“Oh, really? So, you’re gonna work me hard, huh?”

“You bet I am, Mister.”

“Don’t worry. Nothing can slow me down tonight.”

He scooped her up and carried her into the room. “I love you, Mrs. Tenorly.”

“Not as much as I love you, Mr. Tenorly.”

He kissed her set her down and went back out to the hallway to get their two overnight bags. Their Disney World luggage was in the trunk of the car. They wouldn’t need it until tomorrow. He dropped the bags and rushed back to her arms.

“Nice room,” she said.

He rubbed up against her. “*What* room?”

“Oh, my.” She reached down felt it. “That’s quite a handful, Mr. Tenorly.”

“Let’s get out of these clothes.” He began to unbutton her blouse.

“Hang on there, Buddy.”

“No, please don’t make me wait any longer.”

“I want to take a shower first.”

“Okay. And then I’ll take mine. But please hurry.”

She snatched up her bag and hurried into the bathroom. Then she stuck her head out the door and said in a singsong voice, “Don’t start without me.”

I’ll *try* not to, he thought. Maybe he would jump in the shower with her. But she might not like that. At least not before their first time. And he sure didn’t want to do anything to spoil it.

He imagined for the thousandth time being in bed with her...against her naked body...her arms wrapped around him...her legs. But tonight he didn’t *need* imagination. This was the real thing. Settle down, Greg! You’ve got to hold on just a little longer...

The phone on the nightstand rang and startled him. He felt embarrassed—as though the caller could see the big lump in his pants.

But who would be calling at this hour? It was after midnight. What was the caller thinking? It’s probably Sandy, he thought. That turkey. He decided not to answer it.

But what if it was Beverly? She might be checking to make sure her daughter and new son-in-law arrived safely.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is this Mr. Tenorly?” The man had a very strong Texas accent. He sounded like an older gentleman.

“Yes, it is.”

“Mr. Tenorly, I am so sorry to bother tonight, but I’m afraid I have bumped into your car in the parking lot.”

“Are you sure it’s mine?”

“Yes, sir, I’m pretty sure. I gave the license number to the front desk clerk and she looked it up on her computer. It’s a big red Pontiac convertible.”

“Yeah, that’s mine.”

“So, like I said, I’m really sorry. But I thought you would want to come down and take a look at the damage. And let me give you my insurance information.”

Greg looked at the bathroom door, and pictured Cynthia in the shower. Why did this have to happen tonight?

“So, do you want to come down and meet me in the lobby?”

“Sure. I’ll be down in a second. What’s your name?”

“Merle Steeler.”

Greg hung up and went to the bathroom door.

“Sweetie?”

“I’m hurrying—I promise.”

“That’s okay, Honey. Take your time. I’ve got to go down to the lobby.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Some old guy ran into my car.”

“Oh, no. I’m sorry.”

“I’ll be back as fast as I can.”

“Okay, Baby.”

*

After Larry had hung up the phone, he walked across the lobby and took the door to the stairs. In his earpiece, he had heard Greg talking to Cynthia through the bathroom door. And he had heard the door close when Greg walked out of the room.

The money he had spent on the flowers and the bribe had been well worth it. And the little bug he had attached just inside the vase was working as advertised.

If he strained, he could even hear the shower. What a brilliant man he was.

The only weakness in his plan was the possibility he might not have enough time to get away with Cynthia before Greg returned.

He walked out of the stairwell into the fourth floor hallway. He could still hear the shower.

A young couple came out their door.

Larry walked to the nearby vending machines and pretended to be checking out the beverages options.

The couple stepped into the elevator.

Come on, thought Larry. Hurry up, Cynthia.

Then he heard the TV come on. He rushed to the door and knocked. He heard Cynthia hook the privacy latch.

She opened the door just a crack.

“Yes?”

“Cynthia? Cynthia Blockerman?”

“Yes?”

“I *knew* it was you when I saw you walk through the lobby. I heard you were getting married.”

“And who are you?”

“Larry. Larry Luzor from high school. Remember me?”

“Uh...”

“You know—‘Lucky Larry.’”

“Oh, yeah. Well, Larry it’s great to see you, but it’s very late, and I *am* on my honeymoon, so—”

“I understand. And I hated to bother you, but I have a wedding present for you.”

“A wedding present?”

“Yeah. It’s just something I bought downstairs in the gift shop.”

Cynthia closed the door, unhooked the latch, and opened the door.

Larry handed her a small gift box.

“You shouldn’t have. But thank you so much.” She started to close the door.

“Would you mind opening it? I want to make sure you like it.”

“Uh, okay.” She removed the lid. “Oh, it’s a watch.” A very ugly, bulky watch, she thought.

“It’s kinda big—but it’s got tons of cool features.”

“I see. Yes, it’s very nice. Thank you.”

“Would you mind trying it on?”

“Well, I—”

“—let me hold the box for you.”

Cynthia was losing her patience. “Okay, but then—”

“—then I’ll go. I’m sorry for being a pest. I just want to make sure it fits.”

She fastened the metal band and held out her wrist. “It fits just fine.”

Larry reached into his pocket and took out a small black plastic object. He pushed the button on the side of it.

A tiny red LED on the face of the watch lit up.

“What’s that? What did you just do?”

Larry whispered, “Don’t take off the watch.”

“What?” Cynthia was frightened and confused.

Larry pushed her back, stepped inside, and closed the door.

“The watch is now armed. There’s a small amount of plastic explosive in it.” He flipped open the lid of the remote, exposing a red button, “And if I push this button—”

“—don’t!”

He flipped the cover back to closed position. “It’s not enough to *kill* you, but it would probably blow your hand off.”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“No time for talk right now. We’re leaving. Throw on some clothes, grab your things and let’s go. If we can get out of here before Greg comes back I won’t have to kill him. And, by the way, if you try to take the watch off, it will automatically detonate.”

Cynthia put on shorts, a shirt, and running shoes.

“Take all of your stuff.”

She put everything in her bag, and he rushed her out the door and down the hallway to the stairs. Just as they were entering the stairwell, they heard the elevator ding.

“Hurry,” said Larry.

Chapter 16

Greg stepped out of the elevator. He had waited in the lobby until his patience ran out. Then he had gone out to the parking lot to look at the Bonneville. It didn't have a scratch on it.

He was relieved that his car was okay, but irritated that somebody would pick this night, *of all nights*, to pull such a prank. He took out his key card.

His cell rang. It was Sandy.

"That was not cool, Man."

"What?"

"Didn't you call our room 10 or 15 minutes ago, disguising your voice?"

"No. That wasn't me."

"Well, that's weird. Some guy told me he bumped into my car, and asked me to meet him in the lobby. But he never showed. So, I figured it was you, playing a trick on me. I couldn't think of anybody else who would do it."

"I'm serious, Man—it was not me. Are y'all okay?"

"Yeah, we *will* be. If people will just leave us alone."

"So, Cynthia's okay?"

Greg opened the door. "Sure. Why wouldn't she be?"

"Okay. I just wanted to make sure."

"What made you think something was wrong?" He walked to the open bathroom door looking for Cynthia. She was not there.

"It's a long story. I'll tell you about it after the honeymoon. Y'all have a great time. I promise not to bother any more, Buddy."

“Wait. Cynthia’s not here.”

“Well, maybe she went down the hall to get a candy bar or something.”

“I don’t see any of her clothes. And her overnight is bag is gone.”

“Uh-oh.”

“What do you know about this, Sandy? Tell me what’s going on.”

“It’s just a hunch, really. And it’s complicated. Just hang tough, Buddy. We’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“We? Who’s with you?”

“Uh, her name is Rebecca. I met her tonight at the wedding.”

Greg didn’t know any Rebeccas. “Okay...”

“Another long story. See you soon.”

“Okay. Bye.”

Greg knew it had been too good to be true. He didn’t deserve Cynthia. She must have finally come to her senses.

Then he remembered the anonymous call on the night of the wedding rehearsal.

She’ll rip your heart out, Man.

He sat on the edge of the bed, dizzy and heartbroken.

*

Larry knew he couldn’t go back to his house in Plano or to the cabin on Lake Texoma. By now, the police might suspect his ex-wife had been murdered. If so, they would come around asking all kinds of questions. And he certainly didn’t want to be bothered—now that he was finally reunited with the true love of his life.

He looked away from the road to see her pretty face in the moonlight. “You

don't know how long I've dreamed of this, Cynthia."

"What do you plan to do with me?"

"What do you think?"

She was afraid to answer.

"Live happily ever after," he said.

"With a woman you abducted on her wedding night?"

"I got there just in the nick of time. I *saved* you."

This guy is seriously deranged, thought Cynthia.

"You made sweet love to me every night in high school."

"I never even went out with you."

"Every night you slipped into my bed and had sex with me. We did it over and over again—until we both passed out from exhaustion."

"Larry, you've got quite an imagination."

"Yes, I do. But I knew it would all come true one day. I knew you wanted me as much as I wanted you. I just needed to get up the nerve to ask you out."

"But you never did."

"No. And it's my greatest regret. You were so cute in your little cheerleader outfit."

Then she realized. "You're the one who sent me those weird emails."

He seemed hurt. "You thought they were weird? What about my poem? I wrote you a nice poem."

A *creepy* poem, she thought.

Your beautiful smile, your silky red hair,

At the edge of the field, you were always there.

Rooting me on to unimaginable glory,

Inspiring my heart in a hero's story.

But now I'm alone and longing for you,

So, flip up your skirt like you used to do.

Jump into the air and I'll catch my hottie;

I'll rip off your clothes and have sex with your body.

"If you wanted to date me, why didn't you just call me up? *This* is certainly not the way to a woman's heart."

"I was afraid you would reject me."

You were so right, she thought.

"But I knew *this* would work. I knew my luck would come through for me."

"You call this *luck*?"

"Sure. I've always been lucky. That's why they call me 'Lucky Larry.'"

"Wait. Now I remember. Everybody started calling you that after you made the big play in that game against the Lobos."

"That's right! I won the game."

"And you were lucky to even be *in* the game, if I remember correctly. Coach hardly ever gave you any playing time."

"That's right. If Coach hadn't put me in for that last play we would have lost."

"But didn't he *have* to put you in the game? A bunch of the players suddenly came down with diarrhea, didn't they?"

"I don't remember..."

“Yeah, that’s right. They said you brought brownies to the locker room. And all the players who ate them got sick. That wasn’t luck.”

“I didn’t make them sick. That’s not true.”

“Yeah. And you were wide open in the end zone because everybody knew you were a lousy player. But nobody else was open, and the clock had run out. So, Tony threw the ball to you, and it bounced off your helmet, and you fumbled around with it for while before you finally fell to the ground. *That* part was luck. The Longview coach claimed you didn’t have possession. But the ref said you did. There again—pretty lucky, I guess. Or did you poison the ref too?”

“No, My Dear. You’re only half right. I *was* lucky to be put in the game. And coach *was* lucky he had the good sense to *put* me in the game. And, I’ll admit, I made a lucky catch. And that’s how I became ‘Lucky Larry.’ I wasn’t *my* fault seven players got sick that night.”

Cynthia realized she was being foolish. It was not a good idea to argue with this wacko. He could blow off her hand with the push of a button.

And clearly, he was crazy enough to do it.

*

Greg had been sitting on the bed, staring at the wall ever since he hung up with Sandy.

There was a knock at the door.

He opened it and saw Sandy and some woman holding a briefcase.

“Hey, Man. You okay?”

Greg looked pitiful. “No.”

Sandy gave him a big hug. “I’m sorry, Buddy.”

“Come on in.”

“This is Rebecca Ranghorn. I met her tonight at the reception and we just kinda

hit it off.” He smiled at her.

Rebecca shook Greg’s hand. “Glad to meet you.”

She must be an old friend of Cynthia’s, thought Greg. “So, what’s going on, Sandy? What do you know about this?”

“Well, Rebecca was on her way home when her car broke down. So, I gave her a ride. And she was telling me that she thought you and Cynthia might be in danger. It all sounded crazy, but it was bugging the heck out of me, so I called you.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t say something sooner,” said Rebecca. “But it was just a hunch. And you would have thought I was nuts.”

Greg knew she was right.

“My best friend was murdered Thursday night,” she said.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” said Greg.

“Thanks. We were law partners. And I believe that the man who killed her is writing a book about it on the internet. And in the book, he talked about a redheaded woman he was obsessed with, and that she was getting married on Saturday.”

Greg listened in disbelief.

Rebecca went on. “So, I searched the web looking for all women who were getting married today in Texas who also happened to have red hair. The only one I found was Cynthia.”

“Oh, no.”

Sandy jumped in. “But the good news is that this guy will probably write about whatever he’s doing. So, we’re hoping the book will lead us right to him.”

“Well, have you checked? Has he written anything else?”

“We don’t know. But Rebecca has her laptop.”

“Does this room have wireless?” she said.

“I think so,” said Greg. He hadn’t cared. He had planned to spend all night making love to his wife—not browsing the web.

Rebecca opened her case, took out the laptop, and turned it on.

She went to the site and found Barry Undermine’s page.

“No new chapters. Sorry.”

“I’ll call the police,” said Greg. “And report her missing.” He took out his cell phone.

“It’s too soon to file a missing persons report,” said Rebecca. “She could have just changed her mind. You know—the old runaway bride scenario.”

“But we know better,” said Greg. “We know this guy took her. You have proof in his book.”

“Think about it, Greg,” said Sandy. “Think about how it’s going to sound to the police.”

“We’ve got to find her ourselves,” said Rebecca. “Because the longer she’s gone, the less likely she’ll ever be found. And the more likely he’ll...”

“You think he’ll *kill* her?” said Greg.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But we know he’s already killed at least one person.” She saw the bouquet of red roses on the shelf and nodded at them. “Did you buy those?”

Greg and Sandy turned around to see what Rebecca was looking at.

“No,” said Greg. “I hadn’t even noticed them.” He hadn’t noticed *anything* about the room but the *bed*.

Sandy walked to the bouquet and picked it up. “The card says, ‘to Greg and Cynthia,’ but it doesn’t say who it’s from.”

Rebecca walked to where Sandy was standing and studied the flowers and the

vase. She ran her fingers along the inside of the vase and found something.
“Look at this.” She held up a tiny object.

“What is it?” said Greg.

“It’s a bug. That’s how he knew what you were doing.”

“But how did he get Cynthia to go with him?” said Greg. “And why didn’t she scream?”

“He probably had a gun pointed at her,” said Sandy.

Greg couldn’t bear the thought of his precious baby in such danger.

Rebecca walked back to her laptop. “All we can do is wait.”

Chapter 17

It was just after 1:30 AM on Sunday morning when Larry exited I-45 and pulled over at Bill's 24-Hour Coffee Shop.

Cynthia noticed the 'Free Wireless' neon sign in the window.

"Hungry?" Larry sounded almost human, cordial.

"No."

"Well, we're going to be here for a while, so you might want to reconsider."

When they walked in, Cynthia thought the coffee smelled good. But the cigarette smoke didn't. She read the limited menu, which was posted on the wall behind the counter. A single cup of coffee was one dollar. A never-ending cup was \$1.99. Looking around at the patrons, Cynthia doubted any of them opted for the single cup.

There was a 300-pound bearded man in an undersized plaid shirt and jeans sitting at a table with a skinny guy in a white T-shirt and a faded Chicago Bulls cap. Truckers, she thought.

On the other side of the room was a very old couple, smoking and sipping coffee. They sat in silence, staring at nothing in particular. Their sad, worn faces seemed to know their shriveled bodies would be laid to rest soon.

Larry selected a booth in the rear and they sat down. He took out his laptop and opened it. Then he lit his pipe and began to puff on it.

"I need to go to the ladies room," said Cynthia.

"Okay."

She picked up her purse and started to go.

"Wait." He pointed to her purse. "Dump everything out on the table."

She frowned, but obeyed him.

He fingered through the pile and picked up her cell phone and said, “Okay. And by the way, the watch has a little mike in it.” He grabbed the small earpiece that had been dangling on a wire running out the top of his shirt. He smiled at her as he put it in his ear.

Cynthia tried to act as if she couldn’t care less. She put the stuff back into her purse and walked to the bathroom.

Larry logged in, and began reading comments from his fans. He didn’t even look up when the waitress arrived for his order. “The never-ending coffee,” he said in a rude voice. “That’s all, for now.”

Cathy didn’t appreciate his attitude. Just because she was a few years past her prime didn’t give him the right to treat her that way. Ten years ago, she thought, or maybe twenty, he would have been drooling all over her tight body. Every day she heard her mother’s voice:

Mark my words, Cathy. You’re gonna to live to regret dropping out of college. The tips are great right now, but one day they’ll start to dry up. And then what are you going to do?

Shut up, Mama, she thought. The loss of income didn’t bother her nearly as much as the loss of respect. Or, maybe she never really had gotten any *respect*. But at least the bozos used to _lust_ for her. These days she got no validation whatsoever.

Larry was elated by all the positive comments. Wait until they read the *next* chapter, he thought.

Cathy delivered the coffee pot and poured his first cup. He watched her walk away, but was unimpressed by the view.

The next comment was different from the others.

I am a serious student of literature, so please do not think it trivial when I proclaim my adoration for you. Your writing invigorates my inner being. With every syllable of every word, I find my soul increasingly engorged by the powerful stroke of your pen. You may find the intensity of my passion inexplicable. But I assure you it is quite real.

Thence, it is incumbent that I seek a rendezvous, so that I may bask in the radiance of your fertile mind, while you explore the wonders of my virginal body.

Your fervent admirer, Chaucey.

Larry didn't know whether the woman was crazy or just really turned on. But he wasn't too surprised his writing could have such an affect on a woman.

She had included her picture. Chaucey was a breathtakingly beautiful, sexy young woman.

But *his* love was only for Cynthia.

What was taking her so long? He rushed to the ladies room and discretely slipped in.

Cynthia was standing at the mirror staring at herself. "This is the *ladies* room. Do you mind?"

Larry looked around. He checked each stall. Then he checked again—but this time he went inside each one to look at the back of the door. "What's this?"

Cynthia didn't answer.

"Did you really think you could get away with this? Wet some paper towels and get in here and clean it off."

Cynthia had used an eyebrow pencil to write:

Please call the police. I have been abducted by Larry Luzor. Cynthia Blockerman Tenorly.

She had added her Social Security number at the bottom.

He waited while she wiped off her message. Then he checked it. "Now, scribble all over the door."

She followed his orders, erasing every discernible trace of her cry for help.

"Now, you will go back out there and behave. Right?"

She frowned at him. “Right.”

She’ll come around, he thought. She just needs time.

When they walked out of the ladies room everyone was still in their places. They apparently hadn’t seen or heard anything.

Larry sat down on his side of the table and began typing on his laptop.

Cynthia took her place across from him. After a few seconds she decided a little rest might make her feel better. For now, she would give up on getting away. She would think more clearly after a nap.

*

Greg sat on the edge of the bed with his head bowed, and prayed silently.

Oh, God, please don’t let anything happen to Cynthia. You gave her to me, Lord. You wanted us to be together, didn’t you? I beg you to protect her. Please don’t let him hurt her.

“We’ll find her, Buddy,” said Sandy.

“If anything happens to her I’ll never forgive myself.”

“I know. But it wasn’t *your* fault.”

Greg stood up. “Maybe it was.”

Rebecca looked up from her laptop.

“What are you talking about,” said Sandy.

“Remember when I got that call on the night of the rehearsal?”

“Oh, yeah—the prank call.” said Sandy.

“Maybe it wasn’t a prank. And I got another call after that. I missed the second one, but he left a message.”

“You didn’t tell me about *that* one,” said Sandy.

“What did the guy say?” said Rebecca.

“He said there were things I didn’t know about Cynthia and that she would rip my heart out.”

“Okay, that’s good to know,” said Rebecca.

“Why?” said Greg.

“Because it sounds very much like what’s in the book. And if that’s the guy who took her—and I think it is—then he has a *romantic* interest in Cynthia.”

Greg looked puzzled.

“Why do you say that?” said Sandy.

“When Greg got those calls, he thought they were a prank. But they were *really* an attempt by the caller to get Greg to postpone or cancel the wedding,” she said.

Greg and Sandy looked at each other, both waiting for the other to talk first.

Rebecca got up and walked to where they were standing. “Don’t you see, Greg? He wanted you out of her life so *he* could have her.”

“You really think that’s it?” said Sandy.

“Sure. And when his calls didn’t work and Greg married her anyway, he had to go to Plan B: steal her away before the marriage was consummated.”

Sandy grimaced. “How do you know it wasn’t already consum—”

“—it wasn’t,” said Greg.

“But, look on the bright side, Greg,” she said. “If he’s in love with her, he won’t want to *hurt* her.”

Greg tried to perk up. “Yeah...I guess not...”

“Until she rejects him,” said Sandy.

Rebecca slapped Sandy across the shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Greg,” said Sandy.

Rebecca walked back to her laptop. “Hey. He posted a new chapter.”

“What does it say?” said Greg.

“Let’s see...yes, he talks about putting the bug in the vase...and about making the phony call...and the abduction of his beloved redhead. They’re headed south on I-45 toward Houston.”

“But how do we know he’s not feeding us bad information?” said Greg.

Rebecca grinned. “Because he doesn’t know that *we* know his pseudonym—Barry Undermine.”

“How *do* we know that?” said Greg.

Sandy jumped in. “She found it in a trashcan when she broke into his house.”

“What?” Greg didn’t know what to think of Sandy’s new friend.

“It’s okay,” said Sandy. “Rebecca is a lawyer *and* a private eye.”

Rebecca closed her laptop and jumped up. “Let’s head for Houston, Guys.”

“But we don’t know exactly where he’s going,” said Sandy. “And if he goes to Houston—that’s a big city.”

“Well, at least we know his *general direction*,” said Greg as he rushed toward the door.

“Yeah,” said Rebecca. “He’s going *down*.”

Chapter 18

Cathy, the nightshift waitress at Bill's 24-Hour Coffee Shop, walked to the booth in the back and started cleaning up Larry's mess. She was not at all surprised by his lousy tip.

He had sat there on his computer for nearly three hours, sucking down three pots of coffee and devouring four apple crumb muffins. The stench of his smoldering pipe tobacco would take hours to dissipate.

She could tell that the redhead didn't want to be there. Cathy didn't blame her. And the woman never even had anything to eat or drink. The jerk probably wouldn't allow it.

There was a napkin on the woman's side of the table that had been used and neatly refolded. Odd, she thought. She picked it up, opened it, and saw smeared mascara. She had thought the woman might have been crying. Probably being abused. Cathy knew something about that. Leave him, Honey—he'll never change.

*

It was 6:02 AM when Greg pulled into the IHop parking lot in The Woodlands. Funny name for a city, he thought: *The* Woodlands. Why not just *Woodlands*? But he didn't really care what the name of the city was. He just wanted to get Cynthia back—safe and sound.

Sandy had called his cell and suggested they get some breakfast. Greg didn't want to stop, but he *was* feeling a little weak.

"I'm starving, Man," said Sandy as he got out of his car. He and Rebecca had kept each other wide awake by exchanging stories about themselves.

"You were driving awfully fast, Greg," said Rebecca.

"Sorry," said Greg, even though he really wasn't.

"No," she said. "I *like* to go fast."

Sandy caught the double meaning, and smiled at Rebecca. She smiled back at him, but he wondered whether she was smiling for the same sexy reason.

Greg saw different smiles than he had seen between them earlier at the hotel. Like two people with a secret. Like two lovers. Lovers? How could they be lovers? They'd been driving down the interstate at 85 mph. Although...he wouldn't put it past Sandy to attempt it. I must be getting delirious, he thought.

As soon as they had been seated, Greg got up to walk to the bathroom. On the way, he passed a table that had not yet been cleaned, and stopped in his tracks. There was a paper napkin that had obviously been used and then neatly refolded. And the silverware had even been placed back on top of it.

"Did you see who was sitting here last?"

The waitress seemed uneasy with his question.

Why? What did she know that she was not saying? Then he realized the wild look in his eyes was probably scaring her.

He spoke confidentially. "I'm sorry. My girlfriend is missing, and I thought she might have been here."

"Well, this isn't my table, but I did notice the *woman*. She had beautiful red hair."

"Yeah—that was her. How long ago did they leave?"

"Five or ten minutes."

Greg rushed to Sandy and Rebecca, who were looking over the menu.

"We've gotta go. Now!"

"We were just about to order," said Sandy.

"They were here. He brought her here."

"How do you know?" said Rebecca.

"I just do. Come on!"

Greg hustled out of the restaurant, with Sandy and Rebecca close behind.

As they hurrying to their cars, Greg said. “I saw a napkin. It had been used and then refolded—just like Cynthia does it.”

“A napkin?” said Sandy.

“Yes. She always does that. It’s a habit. And the waitress said she had beautiful red hair. I’m telling you—it was Cynthia!”

“But, Greg,” said Rebecca, “we don’t know which way they went.”

Greg looked at the cars and trucks flying by in both directions on I-45. “I know, but we can’t just sit around while he gets away. We were so close. They must have just pulled out when we drove in.” An idea flashed through Greg’s mind. “We can split up and go to every gas station and any other place that’s open and ask if they saw them.”

“Well, it’s only a little after 6:00. Not much is open this early,” said Sandy.

“That’s good,” said Greg. “That should make it easier. I’ll go south and y’all can go north.”

“He might not have even got back on the freeway,” said Rebecca.

Greg waved his arms in the air wildly. “I don’t care. Let’s just go, and hope we get lucky.” He jumped in the Bonneville, cranked up the big V-8 and drove off.

Sandy shook his head. He wanted to help his buddy, but his stomach wanted to go back inside for tall stack of pancakes. “Let’s go.”

He and Rebecca got into Sandy’s silver Impala and took the feeder road to the next street, made a U-turn and headed north.

*

“May I help you?”

The diminutive elderly woman was startled by the huge man standing over her. It was only 8:00 AM, and the grocery store had just opened. If she cried out for

help, would anyone even hear her? But then she realized it was only Crow.

Kroger Bagley, Jr. was the 6' 2", 235-pound 29-year-old son of a grocer who was himself the son of a grocer. He had worked for his dad at Bagley's Food Mart in Sugar Land since he was 16.

"Oh, Crow, you scared me," she said as she slapped his arm.

To him, her slap felt like the brush of a feather. "I'm sorry, Mrs. uh...Jacobs. You need something off the top shelf?" He jumped into a karate stance, and looked like he was about to attack the shelves at any moment. Then he squinted as he surveyed the upper rows of cereal boxes.

Mrs. Jacobs watched him for a few seconds. It was as though he might be able to figure out what she wanted if he just studied them long enough. Such a nice boy, she thought. Not too bright though.

"The Nabisco Shredded Wheat," she said.

"Oh!" He snapped his fingers as though he almost had it.

"You'll get it next time, Dear."

"Here you go. Have a great day, Mrs. Jacobs." He grinned at her and waved broadly as she ambled down the aisle.

Then he heard something hit the floor and break on the next aisle.

"Zachary, I told you not to touch anything."

"I'm sorry, Mommy," said the young boy, with no hint of sincerity.

"Well, you're *gonna* be sorry when I get you home, Mister."

Crow ran around the end of the aisle and up toward the scene of the accident.

Zachary started crying when he saw the big man barreling toward him at full speed.

His mother said, "I'm sorry about this. Look, just at it to my bill."

“Oh, no, that’s not necessary, Ma’am,” he said as he tried to catch his breath. “I just don’t want anybody to slip and fall down.”

He took the walkie-talkie from his belt and held it to his mouth. “I need a cleanup on aisle seven, Johnny.”

“Thanks.” The young lady rolled her cart down the aisle, fussing at her son all the way.

The pretty lady reminded Crow of his girlfriend. Well, she wasn’t really his girlfriend *yet*. But he could tell she liked him a lot.

It had been about a year since he had told everybody at the dinner table that he was moving out. His dad was shocked and his mother started sobbing. He later realized she was crying because she didn’t think he could make it on his own. His 79-year old grandfather had said, “Well, it’s about time, boy.” They were all impressed that he had already located and signed paperwork for an apartment. It was only a few blocks away—but still.

At first his mom and dad took turns dropping by his place to check on him. But after a couple of months it sunk in: he could actually survive on his own. Although, his mom was still not convinced he was eating well enough. Did a grocery store mom spend more time worrying about her children eating vegetables than a typical mom? He didn’t know. She was the only mom he’d ever had.

On the very first day at his new place, he had bumped into his girlfriend. Of course, she was not his girlfriend *then*. They hadn’t even met yet.

She was standing at the mail boxes when he drove up. And just as he was approaching, she turned to walk away with her mail. He had accidentally caught her with his right shoulder and knocked her backward, sending her mail into the air. He grabbed her just before she could hit the ground.

He had apologized like crazy. But she had seemed more *amused* than upset.

Later that night he had heard a knock and thought someone was at his door. So he opened it and saw a pizza delivery guy standing across the hallway. When the door opened—it was *her* again.

He just stood there watching like a puppy as she paid the delivery guy and he walked off.

“You like pepperoni?” she said.

“Sure.”

And that was how it all started. Pizza and TV. Or Chinese takeout and a movie.

They were great friends. And to him, much more.

She laughed at him a lot—sometimes when he wasn’t even trying to be funny. But he didn’t care. He loved to make her laugh. But he did wonder why she never wanted to go *out* to eat or go *out* to a movie. Or out anywhere.

So, she wasn’t his girlfriend *yet*. But he was already *her* boyfriend—even if she didn’t know it.

Someday, the Food Mart would be all his...and so would she.

Mr. and Mrs. Kroger Bagley, Jr.

Crow and Chaucey.

Chapter 19

“Hello?”

“Hey, Sandy. Where are you guys?”

“I was just about to call you, Buddy. We just stopped at Starbucks. Why don’t you come join us? We’re on the corner of Grogan’s Mill and Sawdust.”

“Yeah, I think I passed it a while ago. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Sandy hung up and looked at Rebecca. “I can’t believe we drove around for three hours looking for them.”

Rebecca was working at her laptop. “I just hope Larry has posted another chapter.”

“He might have done it in a coffee shop.” Sandy looked around for a table with a refolded napkin.

“Well, I don’t know where he did it *from*, but—”

“—he posted a new chapter?”

“Yep.”

“What does it say?”

“Give me just a minute. You want to get us some coffee?”

“Sure.”

By the time Sandy came back with three coffees and three big blueberry muffins, Greg had walked in.

“Okay,” said Rebecca, “this is good news.”

Greg perked up. “What?”

“He leased an apartment.”

“Here in The Woodlands?” said Sandy.

“He’s kinda vague on that. But it’s got to be somewhere close. Leasing offices wouldn’t open before 8:00 or 9:00. And it’s just 9:15.”

“What does he say about Cynthia?” said Greg.

“I don’t know if you really want to hear this,” she said.

“What? Tell me?”

“He says he will make love to her every hour of the night—”

“—I’m gonna kill him,” said Greg.

“And that in the morning she will still be begging for more.”

“He really thinks he’s hot stuff, doesn’t he?” said Sandy.

“We’ve got to hurry and find them,” said Greg. “Surely he gives some hint about where they are.”

“Not in the chapter posting. Let me check the comments,” she said. “There’s another one from this woman named Chaucer who propositioned him earlier. She is so weird.”

“What does she say?” said Greg.

Rebecca tried to read it aloud.

And she obeyed hym in every thing

That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng.

Greg and Sandy responded in unison. “What?”

“I think it’s Old English or Middle English.” Rebecca turned the laptop around so they could read it for themselves.

“Well, look at his response,” said Greg. “They seem to be speaking the same language—whatever it is.”

Of vitaille and of oother purveiaunce,

They goon and pleye hem al the longe day.

“And he says his heart is near,” said Sandy, “—whatever *that* means.”

“Wonder if it means he’s *physically* near?” said Rebecca.

“What if he is?” said Sandy. “How does that help us? We don’t know where *she* is.”

Rebecca turned her laptop back around and started typing.

“And how can we possibly find her?” said Sandy. “We don’t even know her last name.”

“We don’t even know that her *first* name is *real*,” said Greg.

“I got a hit,” said Rebecca. “I googled ‘Chaucey Houston’ and got the website of a graphic designer named Chaucey Reed.”

“Where does she live?” said Greg.

“It doesn’t say. Just gives her email address,” she said.

“Well, we could email her and ask her where she lives,” said Sandy.

“And you think she’d tell you?” she said.

“Yeah—if she wants to do business with me,” said Sandy.

“Let’s just start searching apartment complexes,” said Greg. “Rebecca, you said he’s probably driving a dark green Jaguar.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I think he passed me as I was turning on to his street. But at the time I didn’t know what kind of car he drove. I should have thought to ask about *all* his cars when I called my friend at the DMV the first time. That was stupid. I could have had him.”

“No need to beat yourself up over it,” said Sandy.

“I should have known better,” she said.

“So, we can just go around to all the parking lots looking for that car,” said Greg.

“It’s a 2007 XK with black interior,” she said.

“Whoa,” said Sandy. “Those things go for like 90K.”

“Well then it should be easy to find,” said Greg.

“Actually,” said Rebecca, “The Woodlands has a pretty high per capita income from what I’ve read. So, you might see several of them around town.”

“We can write down all the apartment names and addresses and split up,” said Greg.

“Okay, fine,” said Sandy.

*

“Well, how do you like it?” said Larry.

“Very nice. Looks more like a house than an apartment.” Cynthia was still playing along, hoping for an opportunity to get away. She had not given him the least bit of trouble since trying to leave a message in the bathroom stall. She had sat patiently and pleasantly in a Starbucks for two hours while he worked at his laptop.

But she wondered if he was lying about the watch. Was it even possible to put enough explosive material in it to do any damage? Maybe it was fake. But she couldn’t afford to call his bluff. If she could just get the remote away from him somehow...

“It’s nearly 1,600 sq. feet—not including the garage,” he said. “Look at that widescreen flat-panel. It’ll be great for movies. You like movies, don’t you?”

“Oh, sure.”

“And the two spare bedrooms are in there. They share a bathroom. But the most

important room of the house is over there—the *master* bedroom. You and I need to make up for a lot of lost time, Honey.”

Cynthia felt a surge of vomit at the back of her throat.

“So, why don’t we get to it?” he said.

“No.”

He frowned.

She smiled. “I mean...let’s not rush it, Baby. I’m so tired, and I want the first time to be special.”

“Well, okay. Me too. Why don’t you go take a little nap? Just let me know when you’re ready for me.”

“Okay.”

He took her in his arms and kissed her hard on the lips. “That’s just a preview, Baby.”

She wanted to gouge his eyes out. “Can’t wait.” She walked to the master bedroom.

“Yeah, me either. Can’t wait to bone you.” He laughed.

How romantic, she thought, as she closed the door and stretched out on the bed. She’d like to *de-bone* him.

*

Cynthia pretended to still be asleep when she felt him unhooking the front of her bra. While sleeping, she had been stripped to her underwear.

He gently lifted each cup, laid them to the sides and admired her perky breasts.

She wanted to peek, but did not. She was under his control.

He slipped his fingers under the waist of her panties and carefully slid them down her toned legs, and off her feet.

She still dared not look. Would he eventually quit and go away if she kept pretending to sleep?

He took her left leg in his warm hands and moved it slightly to the left. Then he moved her right leg to the right.

She could feel his naked body sliding into place between her smooth legs. She couldn't stop him, could she?

She felt him begin to kiss her right breast and then circle the nipple with his warm, moist tongue.

She suddenly felt herself getting wet for him and realize she had no control over her own body.

He moved up higher on her and she knew entry was imminent. Then he slid a hand under each butt cheek.

"Oh, Greg..." She wanted him so badly.

"Uh, let's get the names straight."

She jerked herself free, and jumped up from the bed. Larry was standing on the other side. He was wearing clothes. So was she. Thank God.

"What were you doing?" she said.

"Just waking you up with a nice butt massage."

Gross, she thought. Her head was still spinning.

"I'm sorry. I thought you'd like it," he said.

Time to get back into character, she thought. "I was just having a weird dream. That's all."

"So, are you all rested now and ready to go?"

"Maybe." She smiled seductively.

"Come here, Baby."

She walked around to him.

He reached out and grabbed her, and she started kissing him.

Clearly, he was surprised that she had initiated the kiss.

Her left hand slid down to his butt and began to rub it.

He got more excited.

Then she worked her hand around to the front and began to explore. She could tell he was on the verge of losing his mind as she brought her right hand around, and unzipped his pants and put her hand inside. She also felt the remote in his pocket.

As she teased him with the super-slow progression of her right hand into his boxers, she slipped her left hand into his pocket and carefully extracted the remote with two fingers. He didn't even notice.

He was just about to throw her onto the bed and rip off her clothes when her knee slammed into his crotch like a sledgehammer. He fell to the floor, groaning in pain.

She ran out of the room to the front door. In five seconds, she would be too far away to catch. She would call the police. They would throw him in jail and the bomb squad would get this horrible thing off her wrist.

But then she realized the deadbolt was locked. Where was the key? She didn't have time to look.

Maybe she could get out through the garage. She turned to run.

"Stop or I'll shoot!"

Larry was crouched over in the bedroom doorway holding a pistol.

So close, she thought. Where did he get that gun?

Now she would pay for trying to escape. He would be judge and jury.

So, would she be sentenced to death...or worse?

Chapter 20

“Greg, did you ever eat lunch?” said Sandy.

“Yeah. I drove through McDonalds.”

“We did Burger King.”

Greg opened the door.

“This is nice room,” said Rebecca.

It was 3:45 PM. They had driven all over The Woodlands in their two cars, checking the parking lots of apartment complexes for the dark green Jaguar. Sandy and Rebecca had convinced Greg that they all needed to stop and get some rest. So, they got a room at LaQuinta Inn.

“I don’t know about this,” said Greg. “I feel like we need to keep working at it.”

“But we’re all so tired we can’t strink thaight any more. I mean, think straight,” said Rebecca.

Greg was too tired to laugh. “I guess you’re right.” He sat down on one of the beds. “Well, I’ll lay down for a few minutes, but I doubt I’ll sleep.”

“That’s okay,” said Sandy. “Just try to relax for a while. You can have that bed to yourself. Rebecca and I will take this one.”

“Oh, really?” she said. “Rebecca and I?”

Sandy stammered. “Well, I mean if it’s okay with you.”

“As long as you don’t touch me.”

“Oh, sure. No problem.” He *wanted* to touch her. He wanted to touch her all over—but he *didn’t* want a bloody nose.

After Sandy had turned off the lamp, the room was black, except for the faint rectangular glow outlining the heavy drapes.

*

“What’s this?”

“I wanted to do something special tonight,” said Crow.

“Why?” Chaucey had expected to plop down on the couch with a paper plate of Domino’s pizza and watch a movie. The usual.

“Don’t you remember? It’s our anniversary.”

Chaucey gave him a blank stare.

“We met one year ago tonight. And you invited me over to your apartment for pizza.”

“Oh, okay. Has it already been a year?”

“Sure has.” He pulled out the chair for her. “Please have a seat, Young Lady.”

Young lady? He’s only two years older than me, she thought. Intellectually, *she* was much older than *him*. But that was okay. She enjoyed his company. “So, what does the chef recommend for this evening?”

“Huh? Oh, the chef recommends homemade vegetable pizza, Caesar salad, and garlic bread.”

“Wow, you made all that for little ole me?”

“Yes, I did—because you’re so special. And because I happen to know that vegetable pizza is your favorite.”

“So, what kind of vegetables did you put on it?”

“All your favorites: mushrooms, green peppers, onions, black olives...”

“Sounds great.”

“...and carrots, cucumbers, bananas, apple sauce, mustard—”

“—you’re kidding, right?”

Crow suddenly looked worried. Then his lower lip began to quiver and he looked like he was about to cry.

“I’m sorry. It’s okay, Crow—it’ll be fine.”

His sad face morphed into a big grin. “I’m kidding. What do you think I am—an idiot?”

No, she didn’t think he was an idiot. Of course not. She laughed. “Very funny. I’m gonna get you for that.”

Crow brought the pizza to the table.

“Looks delicious.”

“Just like you.” He gazed into her eyes.

Even after a year, she wasn’t quite sure how to take those kind of remarks. But she knew he wasn’t trying to be crude—sometimes it just came out that way.

“How was work?”

“Fine. The store’s on track for a record profit this year.”

“Really? Is that what your dad told you?”

“No. That’s what *I* told *him*. I study the books every day, you know. And I’m getting pretty good at understanding them.”

They ate in silence for a few seconds.

Crow suddenly got excited. “Oh, and I caught a robber.”

“A robber? Somebody tried to rob the *grocery store*?”

“Yep. It was a young guy—about 20. He had stuffed four DVDs in his shirt. I saw him doing it. And I hoped he’d change his mind and put them back—but he didn’t.”

“So, you stopped him as he was going out the door?”

“No. I had been keeping an eye on him. But then a lady asked me where the flax

seed was, so I was telling her it was on aisle eight. And then she wanted to know ____”

“—so, what happened?”

“Well, I looked up and he was gone. He was already in the parking lot. So, I ran out, and I saw him at his pickup, fumbling with his keys, trying to get the door unlocked. I think he got nervous ‘cause he saw me running at him. I was running as fast as I could.”

“So, you got there before he could get the door open?”

“Not quite. He got it open, and got halfway in. And that’s when I slammed into his door at full speed.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. He told the police I nearly cut him in half.”

She started laughing.

“But that was a lie. He was definitely in one piece. He was just real sore.”

“You’re a hero, Crow.”

“Nah. Just doing my job. What about you? Anything exciting happen today?”

“No. Just the usual. Although, there was one guy who really got me ticked off. He made me so mad I just wanted to tear off his head and stuff it up his butt.”

Crow started laughing loudly. He couldn’t help it—he was a loud laughter. “I’m sure he deserved it.” He wondered which part would hurt worse—the tearing off or the stuffing up? He laughed even louder.

“The jerk wanted me to do his first job free so he could *evaluate* my skills.”

“Doesn’t he know you’re the best?”

“That didn’t matter. He just wanted to con me into working for free.”

“But that boat don’t fly. Right, Chauncey?”

“Yeah. That boat don’t *float*.”

Crow took a bite of pizza and thought about how beautiful Chaucey was—even when she was mad.

When they had finished eating, she helped him clear the table and wash the dishes.

“Thanks for your help, Chaucey.”

“No problem. Now let’s get the movie going.”

“Okay.”

As she turned to walk toward the couch, he was right behind her. He couldn’t resist. He sniffed her hair.

She spun around as though a jewel thief had robbed her of a priceless necklace.

“What are you doing? Did you just sniff my hair?”

He hesitated. “Yes. Chaucey, I need to tell you something.”

“No, no. Don’t.”

“I’m in love with you.” He wished he hadn’t blurted it out. He had wanted it to be romantic.

“No. I can’t do this, Crow.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve got to go.” She hurried out the door, and across to her apartment.

He wanted to run after her, but he knew it would only make things worse. Had he just ruined everything? He wanted her to be his girlfriend. But he didn’t want to destroy their friendship.

Crow had finally reached out for her love. But he had squeezed it too hard in his big, strong, clumsy hands. He hated himself for upsetting her.

*

Sandy was enjoying his nap so much he didn't want to wake up. He was on his side, and his back was cool. But his front was cozy warm, against Rebecca. What an amazing dream. Her firm butt felt wonderful nestled in his lap. And the feeling was growing stronger by the second. His right arm was wrapped around her, his hand gently cupping her right breast.

He began to massage her nipple with his thumb. She moaned ever so faintly and arched her back slightly, forcing her rear end tighter against him. He responded by pushing a little harder against her.

It was unquestionably his best dream ever. And it seemed so real.

There's something about taking a nap in the middle of the day when you're dead tired. He could remember a summer camping trip at the lake. That first day, after swimming all morning and most of the afternoon, he took a nap before dinner. He dreamed he was still in the water, floating around and playing games with bright-colored fish. Thank goodness his mom woke him up when she did. He was just about to pee in his pants.

How long would this dream last? And how far would it go? He couldn't wait to find out. Then he heard Greg snore. Poor guy, he thought. But why was he hearing Greg snoring? This was *his* sex dream—he didn't want Greg interrupting it.

But what if it *wasn't* a dream? What if he really was spooning Rebecca? What if he really was caressing her breast?

She twitched, and he realized—it was *not* a dream. He was a *dead man*. He released her breast and pulled his arm back.

Rebecca sat up.

Sandy was frozen in the dark. He couldn't see anything. At any moment her fist would be launched toward his head or crotch. And he'd never see it coming. But he deserved whatever he got. He had gone way over the line. But, in all fairness, he had thought he was dreaming. Would she buy that? Doubtful.

"It's nighttime—almost seven o'clock," she said. "We'd better get up."

Is that it? Sandy wondered. Or is she just waiting for the right moment? He pictured the three of them at a nice restaurant, talking and eating, when suddenly she would pick up her steak knife and stab him right through the heart, and then calmly and casually say, “I warned you.”

Or maybe she didn’t even know what he had done. Maybe she had slept through it. Or...maybe she *liked* it.

Chapter 21

“We should check for another chapter.” Greg was sitting on the side of the bed, still groggy from the three hour nap.

“I’m on it.” Rebecca already had her laptop open at the table.

Sandy had not bothered to sit up yet. “Anybody hungry?”

“I thought for sure we’d find his car if we checked all the apartments,” said Greg.

“Well, they’ve got some fancy ones,” said Sandy. “Must be nothing but rich people living around here. One place even had garages. At first we wondered where all the cars were.”

“Yeah, I ran across one of those, too,” said Greg. “Did you go into the office and ask if they had any new tenants?”

“Yeah. They had a woman who moved in this morning, so I figured it couldn’t be them.”

“But what if he made *Cynthia* do it? You should have gone to the apartment and checked it out.”

“Oh, we did.” He nodded at Rebecca. “Miss Private Eye insisted.”

She didn’t even look up from the computer. “I don’t take anything for granted.”

“So, we met the woman and her five cats,” said Sandy.

“Single, huh?” said Greg.

“Oh yeah,” said Sandy.

“No new chapter,” said Rebecca. “But we’ve got more comments. This Chauncey woman is still after him.”

“She’s gonna be plenty sorry if she ever *catches* him,” said Sandy.

“He’s got a couple of lines of that Old English junk we saw in his last comment. Then he’s got this weird poem.”

Such a rare treat, I dare not waste it:

From yonder tree a delicious cherry.

Come forth and meet in the woods to taste it;

If you believe, make it one for three.

“The guy is nuts,” said Sandy. “But he thinks he’s some great poet.”

“Most great poets *are* nuts,” said Rebecca. “Actually, most of them are *dead*.”

“But maybe it means something,” said Greg.

“So?” Sandy yawned.

“There might be some clues in there somewhere,” said Greg. “He does mention *woods* in the poem. Hopefully that means they *are* here in The Woodlands.”

“Where? We’ve already checked all the apartments,” said Sandy.

“We could try the hotels.”

“Yeah, but in the book he said he rented an *apartment*,” said Sandy.

“Oh, this is interesting,” said Rebecca.

“What?” said Greg.

“I googled a line from this Old English stuff. It’s not *Old* English—it’s *Middle* English.”

“Well, *that’s* good to know,” said Sandy sarcastically.

Rebecca ignored him. “It’s from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.”

“And her name is Chaucer,” said Greg.

Sandy sat up. “Okay, that’s pretty weird—but I don’t see how it helps us.”

“Let’s see...that particular passage is from *The Franklin’s Tale: a feast in the garden*.”

“Wait,” said Greg. “Now we’re getting somewhere—I think. In Larry’s poem, he talked about meeting in the woods. The woods...a feast in the garden...a garden feast woods...a feast in the garden woods...”

“Oh, wow,” said Sandy. “You’re right, Buddy. Now we know their *exact location*. They’re out in the garden woods having a feast. And, of course, we know from the poem that they’re feasting on a single cherry. Yum—delicious.”

“Yeah, that’s it, I think,” said Rebecca. “And Cynthia is the cherry.”

“What?” said Sandy. “I was joking.”

“And he wants Chaucey to join them, to share the cherry,” said Greg. “He wants to have a *threesome*. That stinking pervert!”

“Garden woods—weren’t there some apartments with that name?” said Rebecca.

Greg reached into his pocket and pulled out his crumpled list. “Yes. Gardenwoods Luxury Apartments. I remember that place. It was the one with the garages.”

“But you went into the office and checked, right?” said Rebecca.

“Yeah. And there *was* a guy who moved in this morning. But the lady said he was foreign. She could barely understand him. She thought he was from India or Pakistan.”

“What was his name? Did you write it down?” said Rebecca.

“No, but it was...Reebo...or Reelo...or—”

“Reevo?” said Rebecca.

“Yeah, that’s it—Reevo.”

“Do you remember the first name?” said Rebecca.

“Uh...”

“Was it Enim?” said Rebecca.

“Yes—I think it was,” said Greg.

“How in the world did you know that?” said Sandy.

“Think about it,” said Rebecca. “Enim Revo. Now turn it around backwards.”

Greg thought for a few seconds. “Mine...over.”

“Good. Now swap the two words so that *everything* is backwards,” she said.

“Over mine,” said Sandy.

“Get it?” said Rebecca. “Over mine..._Undermine_?”

“Barry Undermine,” said Greg.

“This guy really loves to mess with your head,” said Sandy. “He thinks he’s smarter than everybody else.”

“And so does Chaucey,” said Greg. “They think they’re so smart that they can say whatever they want because we dummies don’t have the intelligence to decipher it.”

“But we *did*. And now we know everything but the apartment number,” said Sandy.

“Hold on,” said Rebecca. “I think he might have even given us *that*. He *had* to tell Chaucey so she could join him, right? Listen to the last line of his poem.”

If you believe, make it one for three.

“We thought he was referring to a threesome, and maybe he is,” she said. “But it could have a double meaning.”

“Make it one for three...” said Greg. “Make it 1-4-3. He gave her the apartment number: 143!”

“Right,” said Rebecca.

Sandy jumped up. “Let’s go get him!”

*

They had decided to take one car—Greg’s red 1965 Pontiac Bonneville convertible. Sandy had suggested Rebecca ride in front with Greg. But he wished the Bonneville didn’t have bucket seats. He would have preferred sitting up front, with her in the middle. Although, if his arm or leg had touched hers, he might have gotten a hard elbow to the nose. Or maybe she would have grabbed his head in both hands and planted a huge kiss on him.

“Why didn’t he just get a hotel room instead of an apartment?” said Sandy. “I mean—what’s he using for furniture?”

“Gotta be a furnished apartment,” said Rebecca. “They’re great for business people that need to hang around for a month or two—doing consulting or whatever.”

“So, what is he thinking—that he’s going to set up housekeeping with Cynthia?” said Sandy. “Surely he didn’t think he could kidnap her and then make her want to be his live-in girlfriend or wife?”

“He’s a wacko,” said Greg. “How knows *what* he’s thinking.”

“Well, apparently he’s decided he needs more than just Cynthia,” said Rebecca.

Greg was quiet for a moment. “Unless...”

“What?” she said.

“Unless he doesn’t *have* Cynthia anymore,” said Greg.

“No, I’m sure she’s okay,” she said.

“But he killed your partner,” said Greg.

“Yeah, but Cynthia is different. He loves her,” she said.

“In his own sick way,” said Sandy.

“Here it is,” said Greg.

“Why don’t you drop me off at the office,” said Rebecca, “and I’ll go in and make sure apartment 143 belongs to Mr. Revo. Y’all go watch the apartment and make sure he doesn’t get away.”

“Okay,” said Greg.

Good thing this was an expensive place, Rebecca thought. At a typical complex, the office would be closed at night.

“Excuse me,” said Rebecca.

The woman behind the counter gave her a look that said, ‘You must have gotten lost, Lady, because you certainly don’t look like you belong here.’ “May I help you?”

Rebecca realized how awful she must look after spending all night and most of the day in a car and then sleeping in her clothes. “Yes. I came to see a friend of mine, but I’m not sure about the apartment number.”

“Well, why didn’t you just call her and ask her?”

Rebecca wanted nothing more than to jump over the counter and bludgeon the snooty woman. “It’s a guy. And my cell phone is—it’s a long story. His name is Enim Revo. I think he said he was in 143. I just wanted to be sure.”

“Ma’am, I’ve never heard that name before. And I’ve been working here for nine years.”

“Well, he just moved in this morning.”

The woman looked over the top of her glasses. “I see.”

“Could you just check it, please?”

The woman worked at her computer a few seconds. “Yes. Here he is. Apartment 143.”

Rebecca rushed out of the office, not bothering to thank the woman or to wait for

an apology. She spotted Greg's Bonneville in the parking lot, and walked over to it. "Okay. Greg, why don't you wait here while Sandy and I go in?"

"Oh, no way. I'm going in." Greg opened his door and got out of the car.

"Okay, then. Sandy, you get in the driver's seat and watch his garage door. If he tries to escape, block him in with Greg's car."

Under normal circumstances, Greg would have strongly objected to the idea of his car being used as a bulldozer.

When they reached the apartment, Rebecca said, "I'll knock. He doesn't know me. You stay back."

She rang the doorbell.

And again.

Then she knocked.

No response.

Greg whispered. "Now what?"

She led him around to the side and checked the windows. They were all locked. So, she took off a shoe and used it as a hammer to break a window. Then she unlocked and opened it.

Greg wanted Cynthia back more than anything, but he wasn't sure about breaking and entering. Were they absolutely sure this was the right apartment? The right tenant? What if they were wrong and they guy had a gun?

"Give me a boost," whispered Rebecca.

Greg helped her climb in and then waited for her to come back.

He saw a light come on inside—followed by a gunshot!

Greg hit the ground.

Was Rebecca dead? He couldn't budge. He was frozen in the stone cold silence.

Chapter 22

Greg's brain churned at hyper-speed, running through the possibilities. Oh please, God, don't let Rebecca be dead. He heard somebody walking toward the window. What if it was Larry—with a gun? He was about to jump up and run.

"What are you doing down there?"

He looked up and saw Rebecca. "Thank goodness. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sure. There's nobody here."

"What was that loud bang?"

"Oh. Is that why you're down there?" She looked at him and wondered why she had even asked. "Sorry I scared you. I saw a little piece of paper under the kitchen table. So I pushed a chair out of the way and it tipped over and it hit the tile floor."

Greg stood up. "So what was on the paper?"

"It was just a receipt for chips and cokes. Go around to the door and I'll let you in so you can help me search the place."

While Rebecca looked through the kitchen cabinets and drawers, Greg went into the master bedroom.

He prayed he would find the bed still made. But if the covers had been thrown on the floor it could only mean one thing. He flipped the light switch.

The bedspread was still in its place, but it had been ruffled. He studied it for signs of... He felt ill. If he found proof that Larry had forced himself on her, he would fall apart—or turn into a raging madman.

He leaned in close—afraid of what he would see. Then he smelled it—Cynthia's perfume. He quickly sniffed up and down the bedspread. It was all her.

He fell onto the bed and buried his face in her scent. With his eyes closed, he could see her. Oh Baby, I love you so much. You're the best thing that's ever

happened to me.

The tears began to well up in his eyes.

He stood up and told himself he must hold it together. They would find her. He would get his wife back. His *wife*. Cynthia was his wife. He wasn't even used to calling her that yet. They had only been married one day.

He checked the nightstand and found nothing. Then he got down on hands and knees to search the carpet. He flipped up the bedspread and looked under the bed. At first he didn't see anything. But as he was about to stand up, his eye caught a flicker of light. He tried to locate its source, but it was gone. So, he slowly traced his movements.

He saw it again, and reached under for it.

It was a ring. Cynthia's wedding ring.

As he studied the ring he had lovingly place on her finger just 24 hours ago, his hand began to tremble.

"What did you find?" Rebecca was standing in the doorway.

"It's her wedding ring. It was under the bed."

"Smart woman. She left it for you to find."

"But wouldn't he notice it was missing?"

"Probably not, since it's just a band. The *engagement* ring had the diamond, right? That's what people notice."

"Well, I'm surprised she was still wearing them," he said.

"Yeah. You would think he would have made her take them off. Maybe he's pretending to be married to her."

Greg didn't respond.

Rebecca knew what he was thinking. "But we'll find them soon. Don't worry."

“How? All we know is that they were here. We don’t know where they went or when they’ll be back.”

“You and Sandy can drop me off at a coffee shop with free internet, and then come back here to watch this place. I need to keep checking his web page for more clues.”

*

“Where are you taking me?”

“Oh, you’re gonna love it,” said Larry. “Ever done a threesome?”

Cynthia knew he would never give up on having sex with her. She was just hoping to stall him until Greg could rescue her. “That’s disgusting.”

“Yeah.” He laughed. “But in a *good* way.”

He pulled off the highway and stopped at a convenience store, parking on the far right side. “I need some tobacco,” he said.

Now she understood why he had stopped smoking his nasty pipe.

“You want something to drink? A bag of chips?”

“No, thanks.”

He reached into the glove box and pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

“I’d like to be able to trust you, Baby. But after that little trick you pulled at the apartment, I have to take precautions.”

He handcuffed her left wrist to the steering wheel, got out of the car, and walked into the store.

Another car pulled up on the left side of the Jaguar. The driver was an older woman—probably mid-seventies. She killed the engine and reached across the seat for her purse. When she glanced up, she noticed Cynthia sitting in the car beside hers, and smiled at her.

Cynthia instinctively returned the smile. Then she realized the woman might

have seen the handcuffs.

The old woman got out of her car and walked around to the driver's side of the Jaguar.

Cynthia slid across the seat and leaned against the steering wheel, trying to hide the cuffs.

"Are you okay, Honey?" said the woman through the closed window.

"Yes. I'm fine. Thank you."

The woman pointed to the handcuffs Cynthia was trying to hide.

Cynthia smiled. The woman had already seen the them, so there was no use in lying about it. "It's just a game my boyfriend and I like to play."

The old woman looked at Cynthia's engagement ring and then back at her face. Cynthia suddenly realized her mistake, and she was afraid the woman had caught it. She had just referred to her *boyfriend*—yet she was wearing an engagement ring. Why hadn't she called him her *fiancé*? But just as she was about to correct it, the woman turned and hurried away.

Cynthia watched her walk toward the store entrance. Then Larry came out. When he saw the old woman walking his direction, he started to walk in the opposite direction of his car. What's he doing? Cynthia wondered.

The old woman called to Larry. Cynthia couldn't hear what they were saying, but she could imagine. No—please don't ask him for help. Don't tell him about the handcuffs.

The woman led Larry back toward their cars. This is not good, thought Cynthia.

"See," said the woman as she stood between the two cars pointing at Cynthia.

Cynthia saw Larry bend down and look at her over the old woman's shoulder. There was a look in his eyes she had not seen before. An evil look.

He grabbed the woman by the shoulders and threw her down and backward into the side of her car, hitting her head on the door.

She collapsed to the ground.

Cynthia looked down at the woman. She was dazed, but still conscious.

Larry put his face up to the closed window. "See what you've done."

"No! Leave her alone!"

"It's *your* fault."

The woman looked up. She didn't seem to realize that Larry had purposely harmed her. When she saw him squat down, she thought he would help her get up.

"You seem like a nice lady. But that woman in the car is *not* nice. She wants you dead."

Cynthia had to stop him. In one quick motion, she opened the door and flung it at Larry.

She had caught him off guard. He fell sideways and hit his head on the old woman's car.

He jumped to his feet.

Cynthia closed the door and locked it.

"Open this door!"

She didn't move a muscle.

Larry reached into his pocket, pulled out the bomb remote, and flipped the lid open.

Cynthia unlocked the door.

He opened it and leaned inside. "I don't think you realize who you're dealing with."

He punched her in the jaw.

She grabbed her face and began to cry.

He got out and closed the door. Then he went back to the old woman, who was still on the ground.

He took her head in his hands.

She looked up at him with thankful eyes.

“You’re an old woman. It’s not safe for you to be out alone at night.”

“I know. But I ran out of cigarettes.”

Larry slammed her head into the side of her car.

“Haven’t you heard? Cigarettes will kill you,” he said.

He smashed her head against the unforgiving metal over and over, until her gray hair began to turn red. Then he raised her head and dropped it on the pavement like a bag of ice. That usually breaks the cubes free, he thought. And sometimes it tears the bag open.

Larry smiled to himself. What if the woman had gone into the store and told the clerk and all the customers about the pretty lady who was handcuffed to the steering wheel? That might have been a serious problem for him. Or what if a customer had come out while he was killing the old woman?

But, as usual, Larry’s luck had saved him. His luck was better than a guardian angel.

Chapter 23

“Why did you have to *kill* her?”

Larry puffed on his pipe and smiled.

Cynthia wished she could jump out of the car. But if she didn’t die from hitting the road at 75 mph, she’d surely die when Larry came back to hunt her down.

She had figured Larry for a whacko when he stole her away from her honeymoon. But she hadn’t been sure how dangerous he was. Now she knew he was a cold-blooded killer. He really would push that red button and blow her hand off. She had thought that if she tried to run away, losing her hand would be her worst fate. Now *that* seemed like the *best* case scenario.

“What about your luck, Larry? If you’re so lucky then why were you worried about her telling somebody I was handcuffed? Didn’t you trust your luck to keep you out of trouble?”

“Oh, my luck worked just fine. I was able to kill her right there in the parking lot without any witnesses. There were four or five customers in the store. Any one of them could have walked out while I was cracking her head open. Yet nobody did. That’s some powerful luck.”

“Then why do you need me? Why don’t you just go buy yourself a lottery ticket and win a fortune. And then I’m sure any number of women would love to be with you.”

“It’s not that I *need* you. It’s that I *want* you. And I always get what I want.”

He puffed on his pipe. “But I *did* buy a lottery ticket for last night’s drawing.”

“Did you win?”

“Of course—\$45 million.” He grinned broadly.

Cynthia was amazed. Why is all the good luck wasted on this creep?

“Unless somebody else picked the same numbers—which is possible, but

unlikely.”

“So, you don’t know how much you won?”

“Not yet. I haven’t even checked the news.”

“Then how do you know you won?”

“Are you kidding? I’m Lucky Larry. I always win. I haven’t played in a long time because I didn’t need the money. But I knew I could win again whenever I needed to.”

Larry exited Highway 59 and pulled in at a seedy looking motel and parked in front of the office.

He handcuffed Cynthia to the steering wheel.

“Don’t let anybody see the cuffs—unless you want them to die.”

“What are we doing here?”

“I met a very interesting woman online. She’s meeting us here. She’s very hot—you’ll like her. And she’s gonna *love* your body.” He got out of the car and walked into the office.

Cynthia felt ill. What kind of a sleazy tramp would come to this roach motel to have sex with two strangers? She wondered how much Larry was paying her. And what horrible things would Cynthia be forced to do tonight just to stay alive? Would she ever be the same? And *if* she survived it, would Greg still want her?

*

Chaucey opened the dusty package of fishnet thigh highs she had ordered online two years earlier. She couldn’t remember what had possessed her to buy them. Perhaps it was just to see how they made her feel.

She had always been beautiful. In high school she could have had any boy she wanted. But they were all so immature. Art school was not much better.

She had been working full-time for three years when she ran into a good-looking guy in a Blockbuster. Normally she would have walked right past him. But when she saw that he was renting *Sense and Sensibility* she introduced herself.

“Great movie,” she said.

“Yes, it is.”

“Got anybody to watch it with?”

“Uh...”

“My name is Chaucey.” She shook his hand.

“Hi. I’m Timothy.”

They went to his place to watch the movie. He was entranced by her beauty. She loved his quiet intellect.

Both families approved of their coupledness. Everybody thought the doctor and the graphic designer were made for each other.

Sexually, Chaucey gave Timothy everything he could have ever hoped for. But emotionally, she always held back a part of herself. He thought she would finally open up to him. But she never did. And it wasn’t that she didn’t *want* to. She just couldn’t.

Her parents had been so disappointed when they learned of the breakup. She tried to save the relationship. She even posed for a sexy photo and mailed it to him with a plea to give it one more try. He had never responded.

After that, she had gone back into her shell. It was only a year ago that she had allowed a friend into her life. Crow had been a great buddy to hang out with. But now he wanted more. He wanted love.

Her feelings for him were strong, but they were not romantic. How could she ever love a man of his...low intelligence? She hated herself for even thinking those thoughts. But it was the one thing Crow lacked. And it was the thing she desired most.

Barry Undermine was an intellectual—a talented novelist. She imagined being held in his arms, melting in the warmth of his eloquent prose.

When she had walked out on Crow after his declaration of love, and returned to her apartment, she had found a message waiting from Mr. Undermine. He had located her website and sent her an email. She had been shocked and excited.

You are cordially invited to join me for an evening of poetry reading, wine, and lovemaking.

Location: Room 109 at Lovelong Motel in Sugar Land

Time: 9 PM

Sincerely, Barry Undermine

She had responded immediately. Yes, it would be her honor to join him.

She would dazzle him with her sexuality, just in case he was not sufficiently impressed with her mind. Chauncey had never dated a man who was smarter than her. This might be a first, she thought.

*

Crow heard Chauncey come out of her apartment. He jumped up from the couch and ran to the door. Then he quietly opened it and peeked out just in time to see her walking into the elevator.

He wondered why she was dressed like that. He'd never seen her wear fishnet stockings, high heels, and a mini skirt. She did look very sexy. But she didn't look like his Chauncey.

*

"Where could they be?" said Greg.

"Who knows?" said Sandy.

"How long have we been sitting here?"

"You just asked me that. About twenty minutes."

“I wonder if Rebecca found anything on his web page.”

“She’ll call as soon as she does. Come on, Buddy—it’s only 8:45. And it’s gonna be a long night if you don’t settle down a little bit. Try to think about something else for a while.”

“I’ll try.”

“Good.”

Greg had parked the Bonneville in a poorly-lit back corner of the lot where it wouldn’t be noticed.

“So, what’s the deal with you and Rebecca?” said Greg.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you two seem pretty close.”

“I wouldn’t say that. I mean, yeah, I like her. And I guess she likes me. But we’re like oil and water, Man. And you can’t mix oil and water.”

“Sure, you can.”

“Huh?”

“You take water...add oil...throw in some vinegar and spices and—”

“—you’re turning us into a salad dressing?”

“I saw you hugging her on the bed, Sandy.”

“...You did?”

“Yeah. And I didn’t see her pushing you away.”

“She was asleep.”

“Oh.”

“I mean—I *think* she was.”

“What if you’re wrong? What if she was awake and she *wanted* you to snuggle with her...

Sandy looked straight ahead.

“...and play with her breast?” said Greg.

“You *saw* that?”

Greg laughed. “No. I couldn’t see *anything*. It was too dark in the room, you knucklehead. But knowing you, I just figured.”

“Okay, yeah, you caught me. That’s exactly what I was doing. I’m crazy about her.”

“That’s great. I’m happy for you.”

“No—I don’t know if it’s great. I can’t tell how *she* feels about *me*.”

“Well, I didn’t hear her yelling at you or slapping you.”

“Yeah. That surprised me. I still had my arm around her right before she got up.”

“See? She *does* like you.”

Sandy’s cell phone rang. He put it on speakerphone.

“You got something?”

“I found out where Chauncey lives,” said Rebecca.

“Where?”

“In Sugar Land. I think that might be where Larry went.”

“Why? Did he post another comment?” said Greg.

“No. But in his *last* comment it sure sounded like he wanted to meet her. And since he’s not at *his* place, maybe he went to *hers*.”

“Do you have her address?” said Sandy.

“Yeah. I looked up the domain name owner info for her website and got it that way. I think we should go down there right now. It’s about an hour drive.”

“But we might miss him,” said Greg. “What if he comes back here while we’re gone?”

“If he’s not down there we can come right back,” said Sandy.

“Yeah, okay,” said Greg. “We’ll come pick you up, Rebecca.”

Chapter 24

Larry opened the door to Room 110 and flipped the light switch. “Not too bad.”

Yeah, thought Cynthia, if you’re a *roach*.

Larry checked his watch. “It’s almost 9:00. Come over here.”

He led her to the king size bed and turned on the lamp.

“Lay down on the bed,” he said as he took the handcuffs out of his jacket pocket.

“Are those really necessary?”

“I’m afraid so, Honey. Until I think I can trust you.”

He had planned to cuff her to the bedrail, but saw a hole in the box springs and decided to hook onto a spring instead. He removed the Bible, telephone book, and complimentary notepad from the nightstand drawer and put them on the floor where she couldn’t reach them. Then he unplugged the phone and put it in a chair across the room.

He opened the door that led to the adjoining room—109, and said, “Just relax and keep quiet.” Then he turned off the overhead light and went outside. He unlocked the door to Room 109, went in.

Larry stuck his head in Cynthia’s room and said, “I hope you know it’s really *you* I want. But I have needs. I just hope this won’t make you *too* jealous.” He grinned.

He left both doors open just a crack to be sure his lovely redhead could hear him having sex in the next room. Soon, she’d want to join them.

There was a knock at Door 109.

Larry opened the door. “You must be Chaucey.”

“And you’re Barry?”

“Yes. Come on in.” Larry could already feel the blood gushing to his crotch. She was dressed like a hooker—the most beautiful hooker he’d ever seen.

“I just love your writing. You’re so talented.”

“Thank you. You’re pretty good at turning a phrase yourself.”

“I try. My mother is a literature professor, so I guess it comes sort of naturally. She even named me after Chaucer.”

“I wondered about that when you kept quoting Chaucer in your comments.”

“But how lame is *that*? For a mother to give her daughter a British man’s name?”

“Very lame, if you’re name was *Chaucer*. But *Chaucey* is a beautiful name.”

She decided to leave it at that. He didn’t need to know that her real name was Geoffrey Chaucer Reed. “Thank you.” She smiled. “In your email you said something about wine.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m sorry, but I didn’t have time to pick up any.”

“Well, that’s okay—as long as you read some poetry. I’m really looking forward to that.”

He took her hands in his. “And up he rist, and by the wenche he crepte.” (And he rose and sneaked up on the girl).

Chaucey immediately recognized it as a quote from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales: The Reeves Tale*.

He drew her closer. “This wenche lay uprighte, and faste slepte.” (This girl lay across the bed, fast asleep.)

His voice both soothed and excited her.

“Til he so ny was, er she myghte espie.” (Until he was so close before she saw him.) He put his left arm around her and began to unbutton her blouse.

She began to feel uneasy. What was she doing here? She had envisioned a

tasteful recitation of lovely poetry, sipping fine wine from a chalice, falling into her poet's arms in passionate love. But this was not love. This was dirty and tawdry.

"That it had been too late for to crie." (That it was too late for her to cry out for help.) He opened her blouse and began to run his fingers across the top of her lacy, low-cut bra.

"Wait. I don't know if I—"

"—and shortly for to seyn, they were aton." (And soon they were one.)

"I'm sorry, Barry. I shouldn't have come here."

"It's okay, Baby. I'll be gentle."

"No. I really don't want to do this." She tried to push him away.

"Barry," yelled Cynthia from the other room. "I want you, Baby."

Chaucey was startled. "You've got another woman here?"

"If you're trying to make me jealous, it's working," said Cynthia. "Come on, Honey. I got naked for you and I'm ready to go."

Larry released Chaucey. "Hang on. I'll be right back."

Larry opened the doors and went into the other room. He shut the second door behind him so Chaucey wouldn't hear the conversation. Then he realized Cynthia had turned off the lamp. He was standing in the dark. "I know you're lying. So, just shut up and let me have my fun."

"I'm not lying. I really am naked. Come feel for yourself."

Larry followed the wall to the night stand and felt for the lamp. When he turned it on, he barely had time to see that she was *not* naked before something flew at his face. It was Cynthia's shoe—and her foot was in it. There was no time to react.

The heel made direct contact with his nose and kicked his head sideways. His

body followed, but not quickly enough. It was like a failed hanging attempt—the sudden jerk to the neck, stretching it a bit longer than nature intended before the faulty rope gave way.

“You’re gonna be sorry you did that.”

She thought he was about to beat her to death.

But instead, he turned and walked back through the doors to the other room.

Maybe he’s going after his gun...or the watch bomb remote.

He was even angrier when he came back. “She’s gone!”

Good, thought Cynthia. She didn’t know what had attracted Chaucey to him, but it had quickly become clear that she regretted it. Cynthia had heard her tell him ‘No,’ but Larry would not have stopped. He would have raped her. And then killed her. Maybe Cynthia couldn’t save herself, but at least she had saved Chaucey.

Then Larry did something unexpected. He went out the door and locked it without saying another word. She heard him get into his car and drive away.

Would it be wrong for her to pray for his death? She pictured him driving down a two-lane road. He would be smoking his pipe, thinking about how lucky he was when he dropped the pipe and it fell to the floorboard. After reaching down to get it, he would look up to realize he had drifted into the other lane, putting his car directly in the path of a dump truck.

He would only driving 55 mph, but so would the trucker. He would pull the steering wheel hard to the right, causing the Jaguar to skid down the road sideways for a split second before the truck slammed into the driver’s side of the car. It would be like hitting a battleship at 110 mph—if the Jaguar had been seaworthy. But either way, he’d be sunk.

It didn’t seem likely Larry would get himself killed before returning. But thinking about the various ways he could die helped her ignore the squeaky springs in the room above her.

*

Greg, Sandy, and Rebecca were on their way to Sugar Land in the Bonnevilles.

“By the way,” said Sandy, “have you talked to Cynthia’s mother?”

“No,” said Greg. “She called my cell earlier while I was checking parking lots for Larry’s car, but I didn’t answer.”

“So, she doesn’t even know her daughter has been abducted?” said Sandy.

“No. But I’m sure she thinks we just left our phones in our hotel room, and that we’re having a ball at Disney World. Her cruise ship took off from Galveston this afternoon.”

“Well, don’t you think she has a right to know?” said Rebecca.

“Yeah, I do. And I feel bad about not telling her. But she would have skipped the cruise. And there’s not a thing she can do to help right now.”

*

Crow enjoyed reading the newspaper. His reading ability had improved dramatically since high school because of his paper reading habit. He always tried to read every word in every section—even stuff he wasn’t interested in, like the obituaries.

He picked up his paperback dictionary from the coffee table and looked up the word *substantive*. He was pretty sure he knew the meaning. Yeah, he thought. It’s almost the same as *substantial*. Why do lawyers always say *substantive* when they could say *substantial*, like everybody else?

The page fell out and glided to the floor. He picked it up and put it back in its place. He would buy a new dictionary soon. They had a nice one at the store.

His concentration was weaker than usual tonight because he was worried about Chaucy. He had upset her and she had gone somewhere. He couldn’t imagine where she went dressed that way. She rarely ever went out at all—especially at night.

Maybe he’d been wrong to tell her how he felt. But he was only telling the truth. Now it seemed like she didn’t *want* to know the truth. Before he had told her,

everything had been fine. They had spent time together almost every day.

He should have just left well enough alone. But he really wanted to hold her in his arms. He wanted to marry her and make love to her. Not that he knew *how*. He was a virgin. But he was sure he could figure it out. And she would help him. Chaucey always helped him with stuff. She was always patient with him. It was just one of the many things he loved about her.

The wall clock said 9:29. He hoped she would get back soon.

Then he heard her door opening. She was being so quiet that he almost missed it. She probably didn't want him to know she was back because she thought he would bother her. But he wouldn't. He would give her time to think. Time to realize that she loved him too.

Chapter 25

Chaucey heard a knock at the door.

She felt bad about the way she had walked out on Crow earlier in the evening. He had been so sweet to prepare a special meal for her. She shouldn't have reacted that way when he said he loved her. She already knew it, but didn't want to hear him say it out loud.

"I'm sorry." She opened the door.

"Good."

He stepped in. But it wasn't Crow—it was Larry. He had a knife in his hand and she didn't doubt he would use it.

She stepped back.

He closed the door, locked it, and hooked the safety latch. "Why did you leave? It was just about to get fun."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lead you on. I should never have agreed to meet you."

"But you did. And you got me all hot for you." He unbuckled his belt. "Take your clothes off."

"No, please..."

"I'd rather have sex with you than stab you. But it's your call, Honey."

"You don't have to do this. Just leave now. I promise I won't call the police."

"Apparently I'm not making myself clear. You will either strip naked and get down on the floor with me right now...or you will die. Your choice." He held out the knife, ready to use it.

She began to unbutton her blouse.

He took off his shirt and threw it on the back of the couch. “Hurry it up.”

She took off her blouse and began to cry.

“Shut up,” he whispered loudly and looked around as though he could see the neighbors through the walls.

She couldn’t stop crying, but managed to muffle the sound. She took off her high heels, then the mini skirt and the fishnet stockings. She had hooked up with a stranger she met on the internet because he seemed intelligent, well-spoken, and sexy. It had been so exciting. And so stupid. Here she was, standing in her underwear, about to be raped in her own apartment.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” he said. “Keep going.”

Suddenly the locked door exploded.

Before Larry could turn around, something big and heavy collided with his back, hurling him toward the kitchen bar. It was like a monster sack of an NFL quarterback. But the floor was harder than a football field.

Larry managed to roll Crow’s body off of him. The behemoth had apparently hit his head on something that knocked him out.

Adrenaline gushed through Larry’s bloodstream, producing an all-powerful rage. Just when he was about to enjoy doing anything and everything with Chaucey’s sexy body, this ogre had butted in. And now he would die. Larry would stab him in the gut so many times that his organs would be indistinguishable.

He would lift the knife far above his head and—. Then he realized the knife was not in his hand. Where was it? He frantically looked all around the room. Then he saw it—two yards to the right, on the floor.

He was about to dive for it when he saw Chaucey. She had run into the kitchen and grabbed an iron skillet. He turned to check the status of the giant, and saw that he was beginning to wake up. Larry jumped up, grabbed his shirt off the back of the couch, and ran out the door.

Chaucey heard him race down the hallway and out to the stairs. She set the skillet on the bar, rushed to Crow, and knelt down beside him. “Are you alright?”

“I think so. Got a headache though.” He looked up at her through blurry eyes. As his vision focused, he saw that she was wearing only a bra and panties. “Oh, I’m sorry.” He put his hand over his eyes.

“It’s okay.” She pulled his hand down. “I don’t mind.”

“You’re so beautiful, Chaucey.”

She was surprised how good the words made her feel—coming from him. Similar words, spoken that night by Barry Undermine, had made her feel like a prostitute. “Thanks for saving me. But how did you know I was in trouble?”

“Well, I heard you when you got home. And then I heard somebody knock. And you never have company—except me. So I snuck into the hallway and put my ear up to your door.”

She grinned. “Well, aren’t *you* the nosey one.”

He blushed. “Sorry about that.”

“No—I’m so glad you did.” She leaned down and kissed him on the forehead.

He was in heaven. She had never kissed him *anywhere* before. Her soft, smooth, warm, moist lips felt so...

“Excuse me?” They were both startled by the man’s voice.

They had forgotten her door was wide open. In fact, her door was completely destroyed.

Two men and a woman were standing in the doorway.

“Uh, sorry to bother you, but are you Chaucey Reed?”

“Yes.”

“Well, my name is Greg Tenorly, and I’m looking for Larry—I mean *Barry* Undermine.”

“Is he a friend of yours?” said Chaucey. She got up, grabbed an afghan from the couch and wrapped it around herself.

“No. He abducted my fiancé.”

“Oh, no,” she said.

“What?”

“I met Barry at a motel tonight and he tried to force me to have sex.”

Crow felt an overwhelming urge to hunt down Barry and smash his skull.

“But then a woman yelled to him from the adjoining room. So he went in there—to shut her up, I think. He was definitely upset with her.”

“*Then* what did he do? Did you hear anything?”

“No. When he went into the other room, I took off. He was going to rape me.”

Greg was heartbroken. Had the savage already raped his Cynthia? And maybe even killed her?

Chaucey went on. “And then he followed me here. He would have raped me or killed me if Crow hadn’t come to my rescue.” She smiled at Crow.

Rebecca jumped in. “How long has he been gone?”

“Five minutes or so. He took the stairs.”

“What motel? What’s the room number?” said Rebecca.

“The Lovelong Motel. Room 109.”

“I saw it on our way in,” said Sandy.

“Thanks,” said Greg to Chaucey. “And I’m glad you’re okay.”

Crow and Chaucey heard the trio run down the hall and out to the stairs.

*

Larry had been denied the luscious Chaucey. He had hungered for her body. He had longed to devour her. Had his hot streak of luck finally gone cold?

Impossible, he thought. He had been lucky his whole life.

And after all, he had escaped unharmed. He should have been dead—or at least have had some broken bones. Any mere mortal would have. But *he* had walked away unscathed. So, no—he hadn't lost his luck. He had just been barking up the wrong tree. Barking up the wrong *she*, he thought. Oh, how clever he was.

Larry parked the Jaguar, hopped out, and went into Room 110. "Hope you got a nice nap."

"I need to go to the bathroom," said Cynthia.

He took the cuffs off and she went into the bathroom.

"Hurry it up," he said through the door. "We're getting out of here—now." He knew there was a possibility that big Chaucey's friend would come after him. No need to *press* his luck.

Cynthia walked out. "Where are we going now?"

"Oh, you're gonna love it. It'll bring back old memories."

She had no idea what he was talking about, but she knew it couldn't be good.

They got into the Jaguar and drove away.

Cynthia wondered where Larry had gone and what he had done. She hoped Chaucey was okay.

*

"I don't see his car," said Rebecca.

"Maybe he parked it in back," said Sandy.

Greg jumped out of the Bonneville and ran to Door 109 and started banging.

Sandy was close behind, banging on the door right next to Greg's—110.

After they had made a lot of racket for thirty seconds or so, a woman wrapped in a sheet came out of 108 and started to scream at them. "Stop it, you idiots!"

They stopped and looked at her.

She walked over closer to them and spoke confidentially. "I've got a client in there." She nodded at her room.

"Sorry," said Greg. A client? Is that what they call them these days?

Greg and Sandy looked to each other for direction. But before either of them could say anything, Rebecca got out of the car and ran at Door 110. Sandy jumped out of the way. She burst the door open, and then turned on the light. Greg and Sandy followed her in.

They looked around for clues that Larry and Cynthia had been there. Nothing had been left behind.

Greg walked over the bed and bent down to smell the bedspread.

Sandy cringed. "What are you doing, Man?"

"Cynthia was here. I can smell her perfume." He felt the bed. "It's still warm."

"Well, at least we know she's still alive," said Rebecca.

"Yeah, but we don't know where they went," said Sandy.

"Let's go back to The Woodlands," said Rebecca. "Hopefully, he's taking her to the apartment."

Greg had tried not to think about how frightened Cynthia must be. Because when he did, it made him sick to his stomach. Cynthia was his wife. It was his job to protect her. He was a total failure as a husband.

Chapter 26

Rebecca got out of the car to check Larry's apartment. In two minutes she was back. "They're not here. He probably saw the broken window and took off. If he even came back here at all."

"Great," said Greg. "If he knows we're on to him, he'll be more careful. And we may never find him."

"Yeah. But I don't think he's been back. Why don't you and Sandy stay here and watch for him while I drive to the coffee shop and check his web page."

"Okay."

Greg and Sandy got out of the car and sat on the curb at the back of the parking lot.

Rebecca drove to the nearby coffee shop, bought a cup of coffee, and powered up her laptop. She was excited to see that Larry had posted a new chapter. Funny that he would take the time to write at 11:00 PM while on the run, she thought.

In previous chapters, Larry's alter ego, Barry Undermine, had accurately described what Larry had been doing or was planning to do. But this time he had fictionalized. He told about meeting a beautiful woman in a motel while having his redhead in the next room. That much was true.

But then he went on to detail the woman's insatiable appetite for sex. And he painted himself as one of those shirtless hunks you see on the cover of a romance novel. But, in spite of his considerable strength and endurance, he could barely keep up with her. She told him she didn't know what had come over her. Never before had her passion been so...voracious.

Rebecca had to admit it—Larry was a talented liar.

He talked about how he had succeeded in making his redhead jealous. And now he would take her home and she would be eager to help him reenact their first night together.

Rebecca wondered what *home* he was referring to. And what would they be reenacting? Sex in the back seat of his car? Probably just more fiction, she thought.

Time for further research on Larry. Was it possible that Larry and Cynthia grew up in the same town? She remembered Greg saying Cynthia's mom, Beverly, had recently moved in with her daughter. He hoped it would work with the three of them living in the same house. Beverly had moved from Marshall.

She called Greg's cell. "Hey, Greg. Did Cynthia grow up in Marshall?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"What's her maiden name?"

"Sonora."

"Thanks."

"Wait. Why are you asking this stuff?"

"Just a hunch. I'll tell you later. Bye."

She googled 'Cynthia Sonora Marshall Texas' and all she got was the wedding announcement in the Marshall News Messenger. So, she decided to search the paper's archives.

She got several hits having to do with Cynthia's work at the bank and one announcing the marriage to her first husband. Then she spotted a very old article featuring the high school cheerleading squad. Cute picture, she thought. Wonder if Greg's seen this?

Rebecca searched the archives for 'Larry Luzor,' and was shocked by what she found. Larry was the hero of a big football game. The clock had run out when he made the game-winning catch in the end zone.

Unbelievable, thought Rebecca. He didn't seem like the type. She read further.

This reporter has never witnessed a luckier catch. Larry Luzor, who had previously seen virtually no playing time this year, was wide open in the end

zone. Yet the quarterback hesitated to pass him the ball. But just as he was about to be sacked, he fired the ball to Larry, who inexplicably bowed his head at the last second, causing the ball to hit his helmet and ricochet into the air.

When the football came down, Larry fumbled around with it for a second before he tripped and fell down. Honestly, I don't think he ever had possession. But the ref called it good, and now the locals are calling Larry a hero.

I prefer to call him 'Lucky Larry.'

Rebecca grabbed her laptop, hurried to the car, and drove away. She called Greg's cell. "I'm coming to pick y'all up."

"Why? What did you find out?"

"They went to the same high school."

"Who?"

"Cynthia and Larry."

"You're kidding. He grew up in Marshall?"

"Yeah, and I'm pretty sure that's where they're headed right now."

"Why do you think that?"

"See the headlights coming toward you? That's me. I'll explain on the way."

*

"Very sexy. But it still doesn't look like a cheerleader's outfit," said Larry. "We need some kind of little skirt to go over it."

Larry looked around for assistance. "This Wal-Mart needs to hire more people."

"It's two o'clock in the morning," said Cynthia. She was glad nobody else was there to see her standing in the aisle, modeling the skimpy ensemble he had put together.

He rummaged through the racks. "Here's something." He held out a mini-skirt.

“Try it on.”

She started to walk toward the dressing room.

“No. Just put it on right here.”

Cynthia pulled the short skirt up under the longer one she was wearing.

He lifted the outer skirt to take a peek. “Perfect. Now go change so we can get out of here.”

Larry picked up the heavy duty work flashlights and batteries he had already selected. Finally, he would get to enjoy the special night he had always dreamed of.

*

Crow should have been sleepy. He was an ‘early to bed, early to rise’ kind of guy. In the grocery business, you *had* to be. But he couldn’t stop looking at her face. He was sitting on Chauncey’s couch. She was lying across it, wrapped in the afghan, with her head resting in his lap.

In the one year Crow had known her, she had become so important to him. Oxygen, water, food, and Chauncey—in that order. And the first three wouldn’t matter if he ever lost the fourth.

He wanted to bend down and kiss her, but he couldn’t. It would not be right to take advantage of her while she was sleeping, he thought. So, he would just go on admiring her pretty face. Occasionally he glanced at the rest of her body. But he would not ogle her.

He wished he could track down Barry Undermine and teach him a lesson he’d never forget.

His eyes made another quick pass from her head to her toes and back, but this time he lingered a little too long at the lovely twin bumps.

“Hey there,” said Chauncey in a soft, hoarse voice.

“Hi.” His face turned bright red.

She smiled. “What time is it?”

He checked his watch. “2:20.”

“Aren’t you sleepy?”

“No, not really.”

She sat up. “Well, you need to go to bed. Don’t you have to get up early for work?”

“No. I’m off tomorrow.”

“Well, you still need to get some sleep. So, go on home. I’m fine now.”

“Okay.” He got up and walked to the door. “Aren’t you worried about this?”

Her door had suffered major damage when he had knocked it down earlier. There was no way to reattach it to the door frame—much less lock it.

“Well...”

“Come over and sleep in my bed. I’ll sleep on the couch. I don’t want you staying here with no door.”

Chaucey thought about it for a second. “Thanks. I’ll do that.”

“And don’t worry—I won’t bother you.”

She looked up at him and smiled. “I know.” She put her arms around him and hugged him tightly.

It was the first time he’d ever felt that she fully understood how much he cared for her.

*

It was nearly 4:00 AM on Monday morning, and they were thirty miles from Marshall. Larry had taken Highway 59 all the way from Sugar Land.

Good, he thought. There was enough nighttime remaining for the reenactment.

The memories were so clear.

Cynthia was on the sideline in her cheerleader suit, jumping around with the other girls on the red gravel running track. Her little skirt flipped up every time she jumped. Her legs and arms glistened with sweet perspiration in the bright lights.

Longview's defense foolishly ignored Larry, allowing him to run right past them. He was wide open, in the center of the end zone. The home crowd held their breath as the quarterback released the ball just before being tackled. And, in a moment of glory that would be remembered by Marshallites forever, Lawrence Igby Luzor caught the pass and won the game!

The bleachers erupted in cheers, whistles, and screams. The mass of people flowed out onto the field like hot lava. Larry was surrounded by his new fans.

It was an amazing night. And it had been perfect—almost. Now he would replay that night with his own alternate ending.

As soon as he made the winning catch, everybody in the stands would cheer, but stay in their places. Cynthia would run out to him with a big smile on her face and jump into his arms. He would throw off his helmet and give her a long, wet kiss. Then she would lie down on the grass, flip up her skirt and wink at him.

The 9,000 people in attendance would continue to whistle and cheer as he and Cynthia rocked and rolled all over the field. Then Cynthia would jump up and proclaim him the greatest lover in the world.

He had now accepted the reality that he could never make Cynthia love him. But he could make her *pretend* to love him at least once. At least tonight.

Chapter 27

Cynthia changed clothes in the car while Larry stood a few yards away. She was surprised he hadn't insisted on watching.

He pointed one of the heavy duty flashlights toward her as she got out of the Jaguar.

"Very nice," he said.

"What are we doing here, Larry?"

"We're going to relive the night of the game."

Yes, *the* game, she thought. It was the *only* memorable football game for Larry.

He led her down the running track to the ten-yard line.

"Okay, you'll be right here doing your cheers." Larry dug the back end of the heavy duty flashlight into the ground until the beam was directed at her.

"It's been 12 years since high school. I don't remember any of the cheers."

"I don't believe you, but I figured you'd say that. So, I brought this."

He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and unfolded it. "Here you go."

She read over the two cheers.

Cheer No. 1:

Okay, let's go. (clap hands & stomp feet)

Okay, let's go. (clap hands & stomp feet)

We are the Mavericks

We're in control. (clap hands & stomp feet)

Okay, let's go. (clap hands & stomp feet)

Okay, let's go. (clap hands & stomp feet)

The mighty Marshall Mavericks

Will put on a show. (clap hands & stomp feet)

Gooooooooooooooooo Mavs! (stomp feet like crazy)

Cheer No. 2

We're gonna crank you,

We're gonna spank you.

Look out now, (clap, clap)

Look out now. (clap, clap)

We're gonna flip you,

We're gonna rip you.

Look out now, (clap, clap)

Look out now. (clap, clap)

(clap, clap, clap, clap, clap)

When your head is getting' starry

You'll be thinkin' that you're sorry

That you e- (clap) ven (clap) came. (clap, clap, clap)

You'll be runnin' home to mommie,

Go to bed in your pajamies to forget (clap) this (clap) game.

(clap, clap, clap)

“We never did this second one,” she said.

“I wrote that one myself. So, I’ll be on the field, and after you’ve done the two cheers I will reenact the famous catch that won the game.”

He’s completely lost it, thought Cynthia.

“Then my fans will go crazy in the stands. And you’ll run out on the field and jump into my arms and kiss me. Then you’ll get down on the ground and invite me to have sex with you.”

“What? No, I won’t.”

“And we’ll do it over and over again—until I’m worn out.”

“I’m not doing that.”

Larry reached into his pocket and pulled out the watch bomb remote. “When the time comes, I’m sure you’ll do the right thing.”

Cynthia started doing the first cheer. Greg, where are you? Please come save me. But nobody could possibly figure out that Larry would bring her to Marshall, to Mav Stadium at 4:30 in the morning. There would be no one to save her. She was on her own.

She could either keep her left hand intact by having sex with him or she could try to escape and probably lose her hand. Could she run fast enough to get away from him? She was a very good runner, so she doubted he could catch her. But if he pushed that little red button and blew off her hand she might bleed to death.

What would she do when the moment of truth would arrived? She decided she’d rather give up her body to the angel of death than to let Larry have it.

*

Greg and company had stopped by the LaQuinta in The Woodlands to pick up Sandy’s car. They had traveled to Marshall at high speed, making only one quick pit stop.

When Greg turned north onto Maverick Drive, he got the jitters. What if they

had been wrong, and Larry and Cynthia were still back in The Woodlands? But then he turned into the stadium parking lot and saw the Jaguar.

He killed his headlights and Sandy followed suit. Greg prayed Larry wouldn't hear their cars—they needed to make a surprise attack. There was almost no moonlight, but Greg figured the street lights would allow them to see well enough to slip up on Larry.

Greg walked to Sandy's door and whispered as he pointed, "Why don't y'all go around that way and I'll go this way."

They nodded in agreement.

When Greg turned the corner and saw Cynthia, his heart began to pound. She was near his end of the field, standing in the beam of a propped up flashlight. But why was she wearing that outfit? He saw Larry striding toward her, carrying a flashlight. Greg tiptoed toward them, confident he was hidden in the darkness.

"I told you what you were supposed to do," said Larry. "This is the part where you run out and kiss me!"

"And I told *you*—I'm not going to do it," she said.

Larry pulled out the remote and held it up. "I believe you *are*." He dropped his flashlight and grabbed her.

She pushed him away.

"You're ruining everything," said Larry.

He lunged at her.

She swiped at the remote, and it flew into the air.

"Oh, you're gonna regret that."

Larry turned around, picked up the flashlight and began to search the grass for the remote. Then he thought he heard an animal and raised his flashlight. But it was no animal—it was a man—running straight at him.

Before he could react, Greg tackled him.

“Greg.” Cynthia could not believe her prayers had been answered. “Be careful—he’s dangerous.”

Greg hopped on top of him. He knew nothing about fighting, but that didn’t stop him from delivering three quick punches. But then Larry popped him in the jaw, pushed him off, and jumped to his feet.

Greg hopped up and ran at Larry again.

Larry turned and ran away from him. But then he saw Sandy coming from the other direction. He considered running across the field, but then he saw Rebecca coming toward him. And she looked like she wanted to rip his head off. He was cornered.

So, he ran to the stands, jumped up on the ledge, and climbed over the railing. Greg and Sandy were close behind. He started to go for the exit, but Sandy had it blocked. So, he ran up the stands.

Rebecca stayed with Cynthia. They held the two flashlights, pointing them at Larry.

“You might as well give up,” said Sandy. “There’s nowhere to go.”

Larry ran to the very top and climbed up on the railing.

“That’s gotta be at least a thirty foot drop,” said Sandy.

“Yeah,” said Greg, “don’t be stupid.” Although, Greg kinda wished Larry *would* be stupid.

Larry climbed over to the back side of the railing. “See you around, Chumps.” He jumped off.

Greg and Sandy ran to the top and looked down.

“Can you see anything?” said Greg.

“Nope. But he’s got to be dead. Or at least have a lot of broken bones.”

Greg yelled down to him. “Hey, are you alive?”

No reply.

They hurried down the stands.

“Did he jump?” said Rebecca.

“Yeah,” said Sandy. “Throw me your flashlight.”

Greg and Sandy took the exit and went behind the stands to investigate the grisly scene.

“No,” said Greg. “Don’t tell me.”

There was a commercial garbage bin sitting directly under where Larry had jumped from. And the lid was open.

“He couldn’t have known it was here,” said Greg. “We *know* he couldn’t see it from up *there*.”

Cynthia and Rebecca ran around to meet them and found the two men standing in front of the garbage bin, shaking their heads.

“Is he dead?” said Rebecca.

“No,” said Sandy.

They heard an engine start.

“There he goes,” said Greg.

“You’re kidding me,” said Rebecca.

“He really *is* lucky,” said Cynthia.

“Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s go after him,” said Rebecca.

“You and Sandy can, if you want,” said Greg. He looked at Cynthia.

They ran to each others’ arms.

After a long kiss, Greg said, “Are you okay, Baby?”

“I am *now*.”

Sandy looked at Rebecca. “What do you think? You want to chase him?”

“I guess not. He’s got too much lead time anyway. But, Cynthia, you need to go file a police report.”

“We will,” said Greg. “And let’s go do it right now so we can get out of here —‘cause we’re late for our honeymoon. That is, if you’re still up for it.”

Cynthia had been through quite an ordeal. And if it had been any other kind of trip, she would have cancelled it. But this was their honeymoon, and doggone it, she was not going to let Larry destroy it. “Sure. All I need is a good meal and a shower.” Then she remembered she was still wearing the ridiculous cheer leader outfit. “And a change of clothes.” And a little sleep would be nice, she thought. “Oh—and I need help with this.” She held up her wrist.

Rebecca pointed the flashlight at it. “You need help with your watch?”

“It’s got a bomb in it. At least that’s what Larry said. That thing I knocked out of his hand was the detonator. He told me if he pushed the red button on that remote, or if I tried to take off the watch, my hand would get blown off.”

Rebecca looked more closely. “Probably a fake.”

“I know—but I didn’t want to chance it.”

*

As Larry drove out of town, he felt invigorated. Things had gone terribly wrong, yet his luck had saved him again. He had truly taken a leap of faith this time, and in doing so, through his belief in the God of Luck, he had become...invincible.

Now, *nothing* could stop him from getting what he wanted.

And what he still wanted more than anything...was Cynthia.

Chapter 28

It was 6:45 AM when Rebecca's cell phone rang. She and Sandy were on their way back to Dallas in his car. "Hello?"

"Hey, Rebecca, this is Cynthia."

"Hi. I'll put you on speaker so Sandy can hear too. How did it go at the police station?"

"Fine, I guess. The watch bomb was a fake."

"Yeah, but still, I know you were glad to get that thing off your wrist."

"Right. So, they took my statement. They didn't look like they were going to do much about it, but I guess at least now the police will be on the lookout for him."

"Yeah. And if he gets pulled over for speeding or whatever, they'll see that there's a warrant for his arrest."

"Well, we're just glad to be done with it. Right now we're driving to Shreveport to catch a flight to Orlando. We'll get there around 2:00. I doubt we'll go into any of the parks today since we're both dead tired, but it's only Monday, and we'll be there until Saturday. So we'll still have plenty of time left."

"I just hope you're not overdoing it—after all you've been through."

"Well, I guess the smart thing would for me to go home and collapse for a week. But I just don't *feel* like doing the smart thing."

"Yeah, I don't blame you. But at least once you get there you can spend the rest of the day in bed."

"Definitely."

"Oh, yeah, for *that* too."

"Yeah."

Rebecca could hear the tired smile in Cynthia's voice. They make a great couple, she thought. She had already spent enough time with Greg to see how much he loved her. And after witnessing the joyful reunion that morning, she knew Cynthia loved him just as much. They were so lucky.

"Well, y'all have a wonderful honeymoon," said Sandy.

"We will. And thanks again for everything y'all did to help rescue me."

"You're welcome. Bye-bye."

As soon as they hung up, Sandy said, "They've never had sex."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. They wanted to wait until they got married."

"Oh, man. So, they wait all that time, and then just when they're about to go crazy in bed, Larry shows up and steals her away."

"That's right."

"What if Greg had never got her back? I'll bet then he would have wished they had already done it—at least once."

"Well, I don't think so. Once Greg makes a commitment, he sticks with it."

"What about you? What would you have done?"

"Oh, *I* wouldn't have waited. But, if for some reason I *had* waited and then lost my bride on my wedding night, I'd be kicking my own butt from here to next Tuesday. To me, Greg has funny ideas about some things. But I respect him for it. He does what he thinks is right."

"So, you think they were foolish for waiting?"

"No, I'm not saying they were *foolish*."

"You're just saying that *you* wouldn't have waited."

"Right."

“Like you couldn’t wait to rub up against my butt and touch my boobs.”

Sandy grinned sheepishly. “What?”

“You thought I didn’t notice what you were doing when we were in bed together at the LaQuinta?”

“*On* the bed together—not *in* bed together. There’s a big difference.”

“Whatever.”

“And it was only *one* boob.”

“So, you admit to taking advantage of me while I was sleeping?”

“Well, apparently you *weren’t* sleeping. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have known *what* I did.”

“Really? Well, just what would you have done if I hadn’t woke up?”

“Well, I...”

“Where else would you have touched me?”

Sandy tried to think of a witty response.

Rebecca didn’t wait for one. “If I had been a sound sleeper, you might have taken off my clothes.”

Sandy smiled at the thought of feeling her naked body.

She punched him hard in the arm.

“Hey. Why’d you do that?”

“Because I’m serious, but you think it’s a big joke. Have a good laugh on Rebecca, huh?”

Sandy’s smile was gone. “I’m sorry.”

“You ought to be.” Rebecca looked straight ahead. “Next time...wake me up

first so I can enjoy the whole thing.”

Sandy turned his head so fast, he nearly gave himself a whiplash. “*Next time?*”

“Yeah—assuming you want to date me.”

“Uh...yeah, I want to...date you.”

“Hey—what did you almost say? You want to *what* me?”

“I’d love to go out with.”

“No, no. You’re not getting off that easy. What is it you want to do to me?”

Sandy spit it out all at once. “I want to do *everything* to you and *with* you. Okay? I really like you a lot. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

Rebecca tried to hide her smile. “No...not unless you *mean* it.”

“Well, of course I mean it.”

“Great. Then how about picking me up Friday night at 7:00?”

“Fine.”

“Well, alright then. I’m glad that’s settled.”

“Me too, ‘cause I’m sick of talking about it.”

“Not as sick as *I* am.”

They looked at each other with stern faces for one second, and then started laughing.

*

Even though Crow and Chaucey had been up until 1:00 AM talking, he woke up at 7:00. The couch had not been nearly as comfortable as his bed. But he’d been happy to give it up for his sweet Chaucey.

She had left the bedroom door open, so he peeked in to check on her, and saw

that she was still sleeping. He tiptoed in to get a closer look.

She is such a beautiful woman, he thought, as he stood next to the bed. He wanted to protect her, as though he was the father and she was the young daughter.

He leaned over and studied her lovely face and her long, dark, silky hair. As he explored every smooth curve of her face, each eyelash, and her full lips, he was overwhelmed with the desire to kiss her. But he knew it would be improper, so he restrained himself.

He quietly turned and walked out of the room.

She heard him leave, but still didn't open her eyes. She was in the middle of some serious soul searching.

Chaucey had always been critical of beautiful women who would only date men of equal or greater attractiveness. In high school, all the best-looking guys asked her out. But she soon learned to turn them down. She didn't appreciate them showing her off like a new car.

Not that average-looking boys didn't sometimes do the same thing. For the most part, though, those guys were afraid to even talk to her. The way they saw it, she was not just out of their league, she was a completely different species.

So, she started being the initiator. The first time she tried was the most memorable. She walked up to a classmate who was getting books out of his locker. "Hey, Johnny."

When he turned around and saw who was talking to him, he dropped three of his books. One of them landed on his big toe, causing him to hop for a couple of seconds. "Oh...hi."

"I'm Chaucey Reed and I sit across from you in Algebra class."

"Uh, yeah."

"Well, I was just wondering if you'd like to take me to the movies on Friday night."

Judging by his reaction, she was pretty sure he had just squirted a little pee in his briefs.

“Uh...”

“Great. Pick me up at 6:00.” As she walked away, she spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear, “Can’t wait ‘til Friday night, Johnny.”

The date had been okay, but nothing special. Nevertheless, by Monday Johnny was bragging like crazy, even though there was nothing to brag about.

At one point, she decided to try some brainiacs. Again, the results were not at all satisfying.

She knew the other girls looked at her with envy. ‘She can have any boy she wants,’ they probably said. And that might have been true. The problem was she couldn’t find a boy she *wanted*.

Maybe if she had been less attractive the boys wouldn’t have freaked out and acted so weird. Then she might have actually liked them. It was a cruel irony that her teenage dating life had been ruin by her beauty.

Now she realized her recent actions had been even more ridiculous than that of those high school boys—all because she thought a certain man’s *brain* was beautiful. Her risky behavior had nearly gotten her raped or killed. And for what? Sure, the guy was smart, and his writing was eloquent. But his heart was as black as tar.

She had known for a long time that Crow was in love with her. Yet she had not allowed herself to consider whether she had feelings for him. Why? Was it because his IQ was lower than hers? Or because he was a grocer? Or maybe it was the fact that he lived across the hall. That was just too convenient.

Perhaps it was time for her to quit limiting her feelings. She had never pictured herself settling down with somebody like Crow. But he was the best friend she’d ever had. And he was very much in love with her. Why did she keep fighting it? She should just let the feelings flow, for a change, and see what happens. Maybe she didn’t love him anyway.

But maybe she did.

Chapter 29

Sandy waited in his car while Rebecca went in to pay for the repairs on her Lincoln. When she walked out, he rolled down his window.

“Okay. I’m good to go.” She turned and started to walk away, but then turned back to him. “Now remember: Friday night, seven sharp. Don’t be late.”

“I’ll make it a point to be early,” said Sandy.

“Oh, I get it. You’ll come early hoping to catch me before I’m dressed.”

“No, no. I didn’t mean—”

“—well, if you get there *too* early, Buddy, you’ll just have to wait in the car for a while.”

“Okay. I will ring your doorbell at *exactly* seven o’clock.”

“That’s more like it.”

She leaned in close and said, “Seriously, thanks. It’s been an adventure.” She surprised him with a kiss on the lips, and walked away before he could think clearly enough to say anything.

Wow, he thought. Thanks, Greg and Cynthia.

Rebecca had missed talking to her dad for the past couple of days. Then she realized it had only been one *day*. But when you’re awake almost around the clock it seems like more.

Soon after his death, she developed a habit of talking to her dad while she drove. His old car had been the place they had spent much of their time together—especially when she worked with him.

“I wish you could meet him, Dad. He’s really a nice guy—but not *too* nice. He’s kinda rough around the edges. Sort of like you. And I really believe I can trust him. I know—I’ve said that before and been wrong. But I’m smarter now. I know what to look for. But I’ll be careful, so don’t worry.”

She picked up her cell phone and called her office.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Wendy. Good morning.”

“Morning, Rebecca.”

“Listen, I’ve had a crazy weekend. And I’m way behind on sleep. So, I need you to reschedule all my appointments for today.”

“Okay. No problem. But we got a scary voice mail this morning.”

“Some husband who’s mad because I shot pictures of him doing his girlfriend, huh?”

“I guess so. But this one’s weird. It rhymes.”

Rebecca was afraid she knew what that meant. But how and why?

“I wrote it down. I’ll read it to you.”

You spoiled my plans for her, you know;

You had to save the day.

So, now my body is sinking low,

Halfway down to the grave.

But be assured I’ll find my rest

In peaceful revenge sublime

Just to know in my heart, your body

Will be buried under mine.

If there had been any doubt as to the author, that last line clinched it for Rebecca:

Your body will be buried under mine.

Barry Undermine.

Rebecca felt a cold chill creeping up her spine, but couldn't stop it. The shivers spread across her shoulders and up the back of her neck.

She wondered how he even knew her name. Then it hit her: he had Melanie's business card. And the card had Rebecca's name on it too. He might have heard Greg or Sandy call her by name. He probably figured that was how Greg tracked him down—with the help of Melanie's partner.

"Don't erase that message, Wendy. I might want to let the police hear it."

"Okay."

Rebecca could not think straight. She was upset by the message, but too tired to deal with it. If she slept until the next morning, that was fine with her. She wouldn't even bother to set the alarm clock.

She didn't really think Larry wouldn't try to slip in during the night and stab her to death. But, at the very least, he'd give her nightmares.

*

Sandy made it to the campus just in time for his 9:00 AM music theory class.

"New look, Mr. Vockelman?" said the smart aleck on the back row.

It was Sandy's second day without shaving and his third day in the same clothes. If his students thought he *looked* bad, they certainly wouldn't want to *smell* him.

He opened his grade book and picked up a pencil. "So, I take it you'd like a big fat 'F' for today, Mr. Kelley?"

"Uh, no Sir. I was just kidding...Sir."

"Well, Mr. Kelley, I am impressed. That's the most 'sirs' I've heard from you all year."

The class laughed.

The students might have thought Sandy would be in a bad mood, judging by his

appearance. But they didn't know about Rebecca.

"Alright. Time for a little melodic dictation."

They got their staff paper and pencils ready to go.

Melodic dictation is an exercise wherein the teacher plays a melody on the piano while students listen and attempt to write it down.

Normally, Sandy played from a book of melodies. Today he was making it up as he went along. Would he be able to remember what he had played so he could grade their papers? Hopefully. But he was so lost in his newfound joy that he just didn't care. Everybody would get an 'A' today.

*

Larry's perfect plan to win Cynthia had failed miserably. But he saw it as only a temporary setback. He might not ever win her *heart*, but he *would* win her *body*. If she didn't give it up willingly, he would just take it.

What bothered him most was the thought that Cynthia might be somehow immune to his powers of luck. Ever since high school, ever since the big game, Lucky Larry had always seen things work out well for him.

When he had decided to drop out of college after just one year, his parents were very upset with him. But he tried to make amends by taking over the yard work and promising to get a job. He had even helped his dad work on his car.

It had been unfortunate that Larry had not fully tightened the brake lines though. His father had been unable to navigate the curve in the road and had rammed into a telephone pole at 65 mph. The police said he might have survived the crash if his seat belt had been functioning properly.

Then there was dear old Mom. Larry had been talking with her at the top of the stairs when she lost her balance. It was the broken neck that had killed her. He had made a heroic effort to catch her when she started to fall. He could still remember the look in her eyes as her fingers slipped through his, just before she tumbled down the long staircase. She seemed to be saying: 'Don't worry, Larry, you will inherit a small fortune. We planned ahead. We thought of you.'

He sat down in the chair and took off his shoes and socks. He needed a good nap before making the long drive. Taking a plane was out of the question. The authorities might already be watching for him.

Greg and Cynthia would be arriving at Walt Disney World soon. They would check in to the Grand Floridian Resort. And then, no doubt, she and Greg would consummate the marriage. The thought of it made him sick. So, he tried not to dwell on it.

The perfect couple would enjoy a blessed night of bliss. And the next day, he might even let them have some fun with Mickey for a while. But soon he would intervene. He would find an opportunity to snatch Cynthia away again—just when they thought they were safe.

He stood up, took off his shirt and pants, and laid them across the chair. Then he picked up the yearbook and studied the picture. She was so much prettier than the other cheerleaders. No surprise that she had been elected captain.

He took off his underwear and threw it on top of his other clothes and admired his naked body in the full-length mirror. He checked himself out from several angles. In his mind, he was muscular and well-toned.

He slipped between the sheets and turned off the lamp. The drapes blocked out most of the sunlight. For the first time since the start of puberty, he would skip his bedtime self-gratification ritual. Because he knew his dreams would be vivid. And that when he woke up, the sheets would be wet from virtual lovemaking. No matter how exhausted he was, he knew these would be the most sex-filled dreams ever. How could they *not* be? He was sleeping in her bed.

Chapter 30

Larry stepped into the cloud of steam and shut the door. He closed his eyes and stood still for a few moments, inhaling the mist of Cynthia's shower. His hand tingled when he picked up her half-used bar of Dove. This is *her* soap, he thought. He pictured her rubbing it on her arms, her breasts, and her legs as he lathered himself to immense pleasure.

He had only slept three hours—until noon. But that would be enough to sustain him for the 15-hour drive to Orlando. He didn't need much sleep—especially when he thought about *her*.

Soon Greg and Cynthia would be in bed and Greg would finally have a chance to prove his manhood. But, of course, he would not be able to satisfy her. He seemed like a nice guy, and Larry was certain Greg would give it his best shot. But anybody could see he was way out of his league.

Cynthia needed a *real* man—not some *girly* man. Greg would be kind and gentle, and say sweet things to her—like a *woman* would do. That just wouldn't cut it for the super-hot redhead.

Larry was what she really needed—even though she might not realize it. He would tear her clothes off, throw her down and ride her hard. That was the only way to make her happy. Domination.

So, he would rescue her from the sad disappointment she had married. She would resist—but mostly to spare Greg's feelings. Why should a fine woman such as Cynthia be sentenced to life with a limp lover?

All Larry had to do was rent a motel room near Disney World, catch her alone and take her away. Once she had a good taste of *Larry Lover*, she would never want to go back to Greg.

*

Greg pushed the third floor button and the elevator doors closed.

"Can't wait to get in the shower," said Cynthia.

“I hope the bed is comfortable.”

“Right now I think I could sleep on the floor if I had to.”

They walked off the elevator and down to their room. Greg sat the overnight bags down, unlocked the door, pushed it open, and held it with his foot.

“I think we need to try this again,” he said, extending his arms.

“Good idea.” She smiled and let him pick her up.

“My dear Mrs. Tenorly, *this* is the *official* carrying over the threshold.”

“So noted, Mr. Tenorly.”

Greg carried her into the room. He expected a quick peck on the lips before she got down, but instead she gave him a soft, sensual kiss and then looked deep into his eyes. “I love you so much, Baby.”

Then she jumped down and ran for the bathroom. “First dibs on the shower.”

“Cheater,” said Greg playfully.

He opened the door and grabbed their overnight bags from the hallway. Their suitcases would be delivered soon.

Greg could hear the shower running.

“Okay if I bring your bag in?”

“Sure, Honey. Come on in.”

Greg opened the bathroom door just enough to slip the bag in. Then he closed it, walked over to the TV, and picked up the remote.

When Cynthia finally came out, he was sitting on the bed watching the Disney promotional channel.

“Look at this cool new ride, Sweetie,” he said without turning around.

“Can’t wait to ride it with you.”

Greg glanced up and saw her in the mirror standing behind him. She was wearing a lacy red nightgown. It was conservative—not too revealing, but very sexy. But then again, Greg thought, she'd look just as sexy to him if she was wearing *overalls*. How about when she's wearing *nothing*? He feared his head would explode. Well, maybe not his *head*. He turned around "You look amazing, Cynthia."

She smiled. "Thanks. I *feel* a lot better now."

"Okay. My turn."

He picked up his bag and walked way around her to get to the bathroom.

"Afraid I'll try to attack you?"

"No. I'm afraid you'll *smell* me—now you're all clean and fresh."

Greg went into the bathroom and closed the door.

Cynthia teased him through the door. "That's right. I'm fresh as a daisy, waiting to be picked. And I want you to pick me, and pick me *good*. You can pick me *all night long*."

Greg cracked the door and peeked out. "Look, it's hard enough to wait as it is, without you saying stuff like that." He stuck out his tongue at her and then closed the door.

"Oh, really? So, I'm making it *harder* to wait? Well, that's good. I like it harder."

"Quit saying that or it may not *be* harder by the time I get out there."

"Okay. I'll leave you alone. Happy showering, Baby."

Greg stripped quickly, throwing his clothes in the corner. Then he stopped and took a deep breath. He wanted to get out to her as soon as possible, but he decided to slow down just a little. If he tried to break the world's record for showering speed, he might slip down and break an arm. And the emergency room was the last place he wanted to spend the night. Not that it was nighttime. It wasn't even *dinner time* yet.

Why was he thinking about the time of day and dinner? He was about to get into that king size bed and make love to the most beautiful, caring, loving woman he had ever known. His only regret was that he hadn't met her much sooner.

Why not ten years ago when he was only 25? No, he thought, that was too far back. She was only 20 then. Maybe five years ago when they were 30 and 25. And why had they both fallen for the wrong people and had to suffer through unhappy marriages?

But maybe they wouldn't have been right for each other five years ago. Perhaps the exact time they met was *the* only perfect time for them to meet. Did God plan it this way? He didn't know for sure, but he did *thank* God for her every day.

When he walked out of the bathroom he was disappointed to see that she was already asleep. That was okay, he thought. They were both exhausted.

He turned off the TV.

There was a knock at the door.

It was their luggage. He had the man quietly carry it into the room. Then he tipped the man, and closed and locked the door.

Just before turning off the last lamp, Greg took a few seconds to savor the vision before him. His lovely bride looked like a sleeping princess. A sleeping beauty, he thought. How fitting.

He couldn't remember the last time he had taken a nap in the afternoon—and under the covers.

Once his eyes had adjusted, there was just enough light seeping through the drapes that Greg could see Cynthia lying there—three feet away. He slid over, trying not to wake her. But when he leaned in to kiss her delicately on the lips, she immediately began to kiss him back.

She scooted closer to him and put her arm around him under the covers. He responded in kind. It was then that he realized she was naked. What had she done with the gown? Who cared? "I thought you were asleep."

“I was just resting.”

“Your body feels so amazing.”

“Well, thank you. I’m glad you like it.”

He kissed her cheek and then began to nibble on her ear lobe.

She moaned and moved in closer.

Greg could feel her firm nipples against his chest.

He felt like the man who received a huge refund check. The guy was overjoyed—until the IRS realized their mistake and took the money back.

He looked into her eyes, which were barely visible in the faint light. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Yes, you do. And *I* deserve *you*. We deserve to be happy together for the rest of our lives.”

Greg thought about it for a second. One thing he knew for sure: there had never *been* and would never *be* another man who could love Cynthia as much as he did.

“You know what?” he said. “You’re exactly right.”

“I’m glad you agree. But is that all you have for me today, Mister? Just a lot of talk?”

As she spoke, she ran her soft hand down his back and across his butt.

He watched her lips form a sexy smile as she said, “Don’t you have something more *substantial* for me?” She slid her hand around to the front. “Oh—wait a second. *This* is what I *want*.”

And he was more than happy to give his wife exactly what she wanted.

Chapter 31

“I don’t know if I feel like watching a movie, Crow,” said Chaucey.

“Ah, come on—it’s supposed to be really funny.”

She sat down on his couch. “What’s the name of it?”

“*Flushed Away*. It’s animated.” He handed her the pizza box. “Here—dig in.”

“Thanks.” She took out two slices and put them on her paper plate.

“So, they got your door fixed?”

“Yeah.”

“How much did they charge you? I want to pay for it.”

“That’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

“Hey, *I’m* the one who busted it.”

“Yeah, but you did it to save *me*. There’s no way I’m letting you pay for it.”

Crow slid four slices of pizza onto his plate. “Did you get any work done today?” He took a big bite out of a slice. “Or did you rest all day?”

“I worked for a little while, but I had trouble concentrating.”

“You’ll feel better tomorrow. I’m sure your bed is lot more comfortable than mine.”

“It was fine, Crow. And you were so sweet, letting me have your bed while you slept here on the couch.”

“Happy to do it for you.”

He took a sip from his Dr. Pepper and then clicked the remote to play the DVD.

Just as the movie as started, he heard Chaucey sniffing. “You okay?”

She nodded.

But Crow noticed that her eyes were puffy. “Are you sure?”

She broke down and wept.

He stopped the movie, sat his plate down and slid across the couch to her.

“What’s the matter?” He put his arm around her.

She dropped her plate on the coffee table and put her head in her hands and cried.

“He gave me nightmares last night.”

“I’m sorry, Chaucey.”

“And I was so tired all day, but every time I tried to take a nap I saw his face.”

“I just want to *break* his face,” said Crow.

She looked at him and smiled for a brief moment, and then started crying again.

“I just don’t understand how you got involved with the guy.”

“It was stupid. He’s writing a novel online and I was reading it, and I thought it was really good. So, I left a comment and he responded.”

“Okay. So, how did that lead to you meeting him in a motel room?”

She cried louder. “I was an idiot. He could have raped me and killed me right there. I was lucky to get away.”

“It’s okay. You’re safe now.”

“I don’t know what I was thinking. And he had that other woman with him—it must have been the redhead from the novel. Apparently, his book is *not* fiction. No wonder it sounded so real when he talked about the main character poisoning his girlfriend and burning up her body in a barbecue pit. He must have really

done that!”

“That’s awful.”

“And if he murdered his girlfriend, he wouldn’t have hesitated to kill me—at the motel or in my apartment. I’m telling you, Crow, you got there just in the nick of time.”

Crow felt a sudden rush of anger. He wanted to take Barry out into the woods, grab him up in his powerful, big hands and break him over his knee like a skinny, dried-out tree branch. Then he would use his body for kindling to build a roaring campfire.

Having those thoughts made Crow think he was no better than Barry. He couldn’t really do that, could he? But it was painful to see Chaucey hurting so much. And would she ever really feel safe, knowing Barry was still out there somewhere? Crow wouldn’t necessarily have to *kill* him. He could just torture him for a while and then turn him over to the police. But first he’d have to find him.

Then he had an idea. “What was that man’s name who came by with his friends last night, asking about his wife?”

“The redhead’s husband.” Chaucey had a talent for remembering names. “It was Greg...Tenory. No—Tenorly. Greg Tenorly.”

Crow said the name in his head repeatedly. “I’ll be right back. Gotta go to the ‘little boy’s room.’”

He walked to the bathroom. Once inside he pulled out his cell phone and recorded a voice memo: *Greg Tenorly*. Greg could probably give him some clues to help him find that sleaze, Barry.

When Crow walked back into the living room he could see that Chaucey had pulled herself together.

She said, “Now, what’s this movie about?”

“Let’s see.” Crow picked up the DVD box and read the blurb. “It says it’s about this well-to-do mouse living in London who gets flushed down the toilet to the

world of the common mouse.”

“Gee, I don’t know, Crow...”

“It stars the voice of Hugh Jackman.”

“Okay. Sounds good.”

“I *knew* it.” He pointed at her, grinning. “I knew you were hot for Hugh Jackman.”

She tried not to smile, but couldn’t stop herself. “Okay, yeah, I like him. But who’s the leading lady?”

“Kate Winslet.”

“Your girlfriend,” she teased.

His face turned red. “She’s *not* my girlfriend.”

“Do you dream about her?”

“Maybe. Do you dream about Hugh Jackman?”

“Just *day* dreams.”

Crow thought a second. “So, you’re gonna be getting all turned on hearing his voice in this movie?”

“Well, that’s not so bad. ‘Cause maybe when it’s over I’ll let you kiss me.” She couldn’t believe she had just said that.

Crow couldn’t believe she had said it either.

She slapped him on the arm. “I’m just kidding. Start the movie.”

But he wasn’t absolutely sure she had been kidding. Maybe she *really did* want him to kiss her. But he wouldn’t try it unless he was sure.

How could he be sure?

*

It was 8:20 PM, and Greg and Cynthia were sitting in their robes, enjoying a room service meal.

“I have never slept that sound before in my entire life,” said Greg.

“Me either. It was fantastic. And I’m so hungry. I’m afraid I’m going to eat too much.”

“It’s our honeymoon. Enjoy it. Quit worrying about your weight.”

“Okay.” She smiled.

He stopped eating and just watched her.

“What?” She put down her fork. “Why aren’t you eating?”

“I was just enjoying the view. *Loving* the view, actually. Loving *you*.”

“You loved me *very well* this afternoon. I think I may have underestimated your level of endurance.”

“That’s because I can’t stay up with you when it comes to jogging. But when it comes to sex—well, you just make me go crazy.”

“Now *that’s* the kind of crazy I like.”

“I just hope I can walk tomorrow.”

She giggled. “What you mean? You seem to be getting around just fine.”

“Yeah, but we’re not done...are we?”

When she saw the look in his eyes, she forgot about the food. She stood up, seductively removed her robe and laid it across her chair. Then she rolled onto the bed and smiled at him.

It was the first time he had seen her completely naked in the light. Amazing, he thought. But, *his* body was *far* from perfection, so he began to turn off all the lamps. He was about to click off the last one.

“Leave that one on,” she said. “I want to see you.”

“You sure about that? You know it’s too late to get out of this thing. We *are* married.”

“Take off your robe and come here, Silly.”

“Well, okay.” He pulled his robe off and threw it toward a chair. It landed on the floor instead.

“Now, get over here and kiss me,” she said.

Greg’s cell phone rang. He wanted to ignore it, but answered it anyway. “Hello?”

There was no answer—just somebody breathing.

“Hello?”

Still just the sound of someone breathing.

Greg hung up.

“Wrong number?” said Cynthia.

“I guess so. I don’t recognize the number or even the area code.”

“Maybe you should turn it off. We don’t want any more interruptions.”

“Good idea.” He turned it off. “In fact, I think we should leave both of our phones off the whole time we’re here.”

“Fine with me. Of course, I don’t even have mine. Larry took it from me.”

Great, thought Greg. Now she’s thinking about Larry. That can’t be good just before we make love.

Cynthia quickly added, “Forget I brought *him* up.” She paused for a moment, and looked as though she was solving a math problem in her head. “There—forgotten. Now come here and make love to your wife.” She shot him a very sexy smile.

He instantly forgot about Larry too. “Yes, ma’am, I’m coming—literally.”

He got down on hands and knees and crawled across the bed to her. Then he bent down and kissed her passionately.

She said, “You have wonderful lips, Honey.”

“Well, I’m glad you said that.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m about to use them on every inch of your glorious naked body.”

“Ooh, that gave me tingles in all the right places,” she said.

He started kissing her on the neck. “Good.”

Next, he began to slowly walk his wet lips down the middle of her chest. “Now let’s see if we can work those tingles into tremors.”

“Mmm,” she moaned.

“Then I’ll build the tremors into full-blown throbbing.”

“Oh, yeah.”

He gently kissed along the underside of her right breast.

She lay in a hypnotic state as she softly said, “I’m all yours, Baby. Do whatever you want with me.”

*

It was nearly 9:00 PM, and Larry was dying for a big, juicy steak and fries. He exited Interstate 10 to find a restaurant in Pensacola. He would easily make it to Orlando in time for a nap before the Disney World parks opened.

He had finally checked the results of the Texas Lottery drawing from Saturday night and found that he had *lost!* It had been quite a shock when he realized that *his* \$45 million would be going to someone else.

Perhaps he had somehow disappointed his God of Luck. Maybe he was being punished. Or, more likely, he was being protected. Because if he tried to collect the money, the police might be waiting there to arrest him for the murder of his girlfriend, Erin, or that lawyer, Melanie Maylin, or that old lady in the parking lot.

And because the authorities were probably looking for him, he couldn't take a chance on using one of his credit cards. Yet he now had less than \$100 cash in his wallet. He needed money for gas, a motel room, park tickets, meals, *etc.* Where could he get some?

He spotted a steakhouse across the street from a convenience store. The 24-hour store had two ATM machines—one inside, one outside.

Larry had plan. A perfect plan.

Chapter 32

Larry parked the Jaguar around the corner from the steakhouse—just in case. But wasn't that hedging his bets? Why was he afraid to park the car right out front? A true believer would not give it a second thought. A true believer would jump off into the darkness, trusting his luck to protect him. Just like he had done at the football stadium. But maybe that hadn't really been faith at all. Maybe it was pure desperation.

He hated to admit it, even to himself, but losing the lottery had put doubts in his mind. He had been so sure he would win. His faith had been completely blind. Oh, the sweet freedom of throwing caution to the wind, he thought. He would regain that kind of faith. But perhaps not tonight.

He opened the glove box and took out his .45 caliber semi-automatic pistol and suppressor. A typical suppressor changes the sound of a shot, but does little to reduce the volume. But this one took advantage of phase shifting technology. It's similar to how a person's voice changes after breathing helium from a balloon. The sound of the shot gets phase shifted to a higher frequency than humans can hear.

He got out of the car, took off his jacket and threw it on the front seat. Then he opened the trunk and pulled a windbreaker out of his bag. It was a fairly chilly night, and the windbreaker didn't provide much warmth, but it was part of his plan. He put it on and pulled the hood over his head.

The 40-something year old woman standing outside the store at the ATM didn't seem to notice him approaching.

"Don't move—I've got a gun." His voice was soft, but intense.

"Please don't hurt me."

He put his left arm around her, pretending to be the husband. "I want you to withdraw \$1,000."

"I don't know if I can—there's a daily limit. I think it's \$500."

“Okay, fine. But hurry up.”

Her hand was shaking so much she had to punch the buttons very deliberately to be sure she didn't make an error.

That's good, he thought. She knows she'll probably die if she makes a mistake or takes too long.

He looked around. Amazingly, there was nobody in sight, except in the store. But those people were too busy purchasing overpriced beer and junk food to notice what was happening outside.

“Okay. Here it is.” She started to hand it to him.

“No. Hold on to it. Now do exactly as I say and you won't get hurt.”

“I will.”

“We're going to walk around to the side of the building.”

“Okay.”

Larry kept his arm around her as they walked around the corner, and then to the back. He released her and pulled out the pistol.

She held out the cash. “Here's your money. Now please let me go.”

He took the cash and aimed the gun at her.

“Please. I've got a husband and three kids. I promise I won't tell anybody.”

“Oh, I'm sure you won't.” He squeezed the trigger.

The bullet ripped through her chest like a hatchet through crepe paper. He watched her lifeless body fall to the ground. It was the first time he had killed with a gun. He was surprised how good it made him feel.

He pulled the hood back and walked around the other side of the store and walked inside. Going so long without food was starting to bring on a dull headache. A couple of Excedrin would fix him up.

“Beautiful evening,” said the middle-aged female clerk.

“Brisk,” he said. “I love it.” He pointed to the steakhouse across the street. “Do you know how late they’re open?”

“Usually ‘til about eleven.”

“*Usually?*”

“Yeah. But they quit taking orders at 10:00.” She glanced at her watch. “It’s 9:50, so you’ll be fine if you get on over there.”

“Great—I’m starved.”

Larry stepped out of the store and took a deep breath. Wonderful evening, he thought. He walked across the street to the steakhouse. When he saw the police cruiser pulling into the one available spot in the front, he figured the food must be good.

Then it occurred to him that cops could be trouble. Why hadn’t that been his *first* impulse? Because his luck was back—_big time_. He could feel it running through his veins. Let them serve and protect all they want, he thought. Nobody can touch me.

The place was packed and it smelled fantastic. A young lady showed him to a table in the back near the kitchen. He realized right away it would be a noisy place to sit. Why should he have to put up with the sound of pots and pans clanging, and cooks yelling? The cops got a great seat in the front. Maybe he’d call the manager over and complain.

Nah. He didn’t mind pushing his luck, but no sense wasting it on something trivial.

*

Larry had been very impressed with his steak and the generous serving of fries. Even their home-style apple pie was excellent.

And the cops seemed to be enjoying their meal as well—until a man came running in and went straight to their table. Almost immediately, they jumped up,

put on their hats, and ran out.

It seemed like Larry might have stayed a little too long. How could he exit unnoticed?

His waiter brought the check and poured him another cup of coffee.

“What was that all about with the police officers?” said Larry.

“Something happened at the mini-mart across the street. I don’t know if they got robbed or what.”

“I see. Well, I just hope nobody got hurt.”

The waitress shook her head. “Yeah. I always thought of this as a safe area.”

“Well, you just never know, I guess.”

As soon as she walked away, Larry pulled two twenties out of the ATM envelope and threw them on the table. He had not intended to be a big tipper tonight, but he didn’t have time to wait for change.

He ducked into the kitchen and hurried toward the back, looking for the exit.

“Hey, what are you doing back here? It’s employees only.”

What I’m doing back here is putting a bullet right between your eyes, thought Larry. Be careful what you say, Dude, or you’ll be as dead as the beef hanging in the freezer.

But Larry didn’t have time for any more trouble right now. “I’m sorry, but I was sitting next to the kitchen and I started feeling really sick.” He acted like he was about to barf. “I need to throw up, Man. Where’s the back door?”

“Oh, don’t throw up in here. There—go through there. And hurry. And don’t puke on the sidewalk either. Go way out there in the grass.”

Larry ran out holding his hand over his mouth. Once he was outside, he casually made his way to the sidewalk, and down to the Jaguar.

He drove out of town at the speed limit, and knew he was safe. Nobody had seen

his car and nobody had seen him kill her. The ATM camera probably got a good shot of him, but with the hood pulled down over his face, all they got was a mouth surrounded by beard. They had nothing.

Larry had executed his plan flawlessly. Murder by gun suited him well. He decided to make it his new weapon of choice.

*

After a second round of lovemaking, Greg was tired, sore and *very* happy. And although he was sleepy, he needed to make a quick trip to the bathroom.

He had washed his hands and he was about to turn off the light and go back to bed when he glanced at himself in the mirror.

“Do you have *any* idea how lucky you are?” his reflection said.

“Of course I do.”

“No, really. I don’t think you do. I mean, you’re a nice guy, and not bad looking. And you’ve got a pretty good sense of humor, but *come on*. Are you kidding me? The girl is fabulous, Man. She’s a supermodel. Can’t you see that?”

“Sure. But *she* says it’s what’s on the *inside* that counts.”

“Well, then you’d better keep your insides in tip top shape, Buddy. ‘Cause you don’t want to *ever* lose *that* lady.”

“I know, I know. Now be quiet while I say a prayer. *Lord, I thank you again for Cynthia. I’ll never feel like I deserve her, but I promise to care for her and love her with all my heart every day for the rest of my life. Amen.*”

“That prayer sounded a lot like your wedding vows,” said his reflection.

“And I’m serious about those vows.”

Then he heard Cynthia calling to him from the bed. “Greg? Who are you talking to?”

He opened the door. “Nobody. Well...actually, I was talking to myself.”

“I see. And just what was *yourself* telling you?”

“He was telling me how lucky I am to have you.”

She smiled. “Well then, you can tell *yourself* he’s a pretty smart guy.”

“I think he already knows that. He’s kind of a smart aleck, really.”

“Well, bring him over here anyway, because I want to kiss *both* of you.”

“Whoa. This is getting kinda kinky.”

“That’s right. Think you can handle it?”

Suddenly, he wasn’t tired at all.

Chapter 33

Rebecca tried to ignore the phone, but it just kept ringing. She recognized the ring tone—it was Wendy calling from the office, even though she had been instructed not to.

As soon as she yanked the covers off her head, the sunlight beaming through the slim opening between the curtains hit her in the eye like a laser. “Hello?”

“Just wanted to find out what time you were coming in. Mrs. Smithers has already called to confirm her appointment.”

“But, Wendy—”

“—oh, and that police detective called yesterday. He’s got some more questions for you.”

Yesterday? Yesterday was *Sunday*. Wasn’t it? “Wendy, what is today?”

“The 27th.”

“No. What day of the week is it?”

Wendy hesitated, and then said, “It’s Tuesday.”

Rebecca had already glanced at her clock radio, but thought it was broken. “It’s 8:25 on *Tuesday* morning.”

“Yes... What’s the matter, Rebecca?”

“I was asleep for 24 hours. I knew I was tired, but—okay, I’ll be in soon. Thanks, Wendy. Bye.”

Rebecca sat on the side of the bed and checked her cell phone for missed calls and messages. It would have been nice to have one from Sandy. Their upcoming Friday night date seemed a year away.

By now, Greg and Cynthia should be enjoying one heck of an afterglow, she thought. After waiting all that time, their first night must have set the sheets on

fire. She imagined what it would be like to get naked with Sandy.

Surely Greg wouldn't mind a quick call. It would be nice to know for sure that the honeymoon was finally on track—with no more interference from Larry the Loser.

Rebecca located what she thought was Greg's number in her 'Dialed Calls' list and pressed the Send button.

"Hello?"

She must have woken Greg up, she thought. He didn't sound like himself. "Hey, Greg, this is Rebecca Ranghorn."

"Oh, yes, Rebecca. Thanks for calling. But, this is not Greg's number—it's Cynthia's."

"Who is this?"

"It's me—Barry Undermine. And I will be seeing my darling Cynthia very soon. In fact, I plan to impregnate her this very evening."

"What?"

"You heard me. I'm going to plant *my* seeds in *his* garden." He began to laugh.

"Larry Luzor." She spit the name into her phone.

He stopped laughing. "How did you know my real name?"

"Oh, I know everything about you. Number one: you're a coward. Number two: you're a woman killing, slimy, sorry excuse for a human being. And...that's it. You're just a Number One and a Number Two. You're something people flush down the toilet, Larry. I guess that makes you a *potty person*. Minus the *person*, of course."

"That's brave talk, coming from a mere woman."

"You haven't dealt with *this* woman. And when you do—you're gonna be sorry you ever laid a hand on my partner."

“Candy?”

“Her name was Melanie.”

“Oh, I think Candy is more fitting, since *Candy* let me lick her all over, and I’m telling right now: she was *delicious*.”

“You pig!”

“What about you? Did you ever get a lick of Miss Candy?”

“You make me want to barf!”

“I can’t tell you how much fun it was to hump her fine body over and over, and then pop her cute little neck like a chicken bone.”

“Just name the place and I’ll be there. But you won’t, will you? You ain’t got the balls to try that with *me*.”

“Honey, I will be more than happy to take you on. But first, I’ll have my date with Cynthia. I’m gonna introduce that redhead to the business end of a fourteen year-old hard-on. But, don’t worry—I’ll get back to you.”

“You just leave her alone, or I’ll—”

“—you’ll what? There’s nothing you can do to stop me, so don’t waste your time. And speaking of time—thanks for the wakeup call. Although, it was a little late. It’s already 9:30, and I’ve got a woman to stalk. So, have a nice day, Honey. See you soon.” He kissed into the phone and hung up.

She threw her cell phone at the wall. Chasing Larry around for the past few days had kept her mind off Melanie. Now her heart ached as though she had just found her friend’s lifeless body in that rundown motel room.

Rebecca’s mind wandered to the time she caught Melanie. It happened just a few weeks after they had become partners. At around 8:30 on a Wednesday night, Rebecca was on her way to make Cheating Husband Video No. 37 when she realized that her video camera was not in the car. So, she swung by the office to pick it up.

There was light coming from Melanie's office, so she walked in to turn it off, and was startled to see a hooker sitting at Melanie's desk.

"What are doing in here?" Rebecca grabbed her cell phone and was about to call the police.

"Rebecca."

Rebecca was surprised the hooker knew her name.

The woman stood up. "Rebecca, it's me—Melanie."

If that coal black hair is a wig, thought Rebecca, it *could* be her. Man, was she hot! The tight mini-skirt and low-cut blouse accentuated all her nice parts. How could any man with blood in his veins resist her? "Melanie, why in the world are you dressed like that?"

Melanie smiled bashfully. "I'm working."

"*Working?* Working the *streets*?"

"Yeah, sort of. I'm gonna try to pick up a certain husband in a certain bar and take him to a motel."

"You're crazy."

"Yeah, a little. But I've got to catch this guy. I've tried everything else. And the wife is absolutely sure he's cheating."

"What makes her so sure?"

"She found a condom in his pants pocket."

"And?"

"His wife had a hysterectomy two years ago."

"So, now you're going to seduce him—and what? Secretly videotape him getting naked with you?"

"Well, yeah."

Melanie was like a little sister to Rebecca. “Sweetie, please don’t do that. It’s gonna make you feel so dirty, and it could be dangerous. It’s just not worth it.”

“But it’s the only way I can nail him.”

“No. Don’t do it.” It was more of an order than a request.

“Well...okay.”

Rebecca grabbed her camera and left. “Bye. See you in the morning.”

The next morning when Rebecca walked into the office with the donuts, she found Melanie sitting at her desk watching a video on the camera’s LCD screen, smiling. “He’s a goner,” she said, with great satisfaction. “The wife will get everything she wants and deserves.”

Rebecca walked around the desk and watched the video over her shoulder. “You had sex with him? What were you thinking?”

“I got him.”

“Yeah, we’ll it looks like *he* got *you*. I don’t understand. How could you degrade yourself like this, Melanie?”

“It’s worth it to catch a cheater.”

“No, it’s not. You’ve turned yourself into a—”

Melanie jumped up from her chair. “—a slut? No, I haven’t. My ex-husband did *that*.”

“By cheating on you with hookers? How did that make *you* a bad person?”

“Look, I understand what you’re saying, Rebecca, and I *wish* I could feel that way about it. But after I went up to Little Rock and met that prostitute, Cherry, and found out he had sex with dozens of women like her, I knew I was just another hooker to him. And it was as though I had slept with all of those women too.”

“That’s crazy, Honey.”

“I know it’s crazy. But I can’t get it out of my head. So, I decided I might as well put it to good use.”

When the husband had seen the video, he agreed to his wife’s divorce terms. The wife never saw it. Once all the paperwork had been signed, Melanie destroyed her little sex tape.

Rebecca had made Melanie promise she would never do it again. But now she thought about all the cases her partner had closed in short order, and knew why. She shuttered to think that her friend got any pleasure from the lurid encounters. If so, she was even more damaged than Rebecca had realized.

But she still didn’t understand how Melanie had hooked up with Larry. Maybe on that particular night, the cheating husband was a no-show at the motel. So, she went on the prowl for cheaters and found Larry. Perhaps she saw a wedding ring or a tan ring and decided to see if he’d take the bait.

Rebecca wondered what she could have done differently that might have saved her dear friend.

Her cell phone began to ring. At least it still worked, she thought. She walked over to pick up the pieces and saw that there were only two. The cover had just popped off. “Hello?”

“Hey, Rebecca, it’s Sandy.”

She grinned broadly. “Hi, Sandy.”

“Have you seen Larry’s new chapter?”

“No.”

“I’m afraid we’ve got trouble.”

Chapter 34

“In the new chapter, he hunts down the redhead and rapes her,” said Sandy.

“Before, it sounded like he was in *love* with her. But now, he just wants sex, and he’s determined to get it—no matter what.”

“I just talked to him on the phone,” said Rebecca.

“He *called* you?”

“No. I called him. I thought I was calling Greg’s cell phone, but it turned out to be Cynthia’s. Remember Saturday night—how I called her phone, thinking Larry might answer it if he saw that it wasn’t Greg calling?”

“Yeah. So, what did he say to you?”

“Basically, the same thing you just told me—that he was going to have sex with Cynthia tonight. Oh, but it gets worse. He said he was going to get her *pregnant*.”

“Yeah, that’s what it says in the chapter too. He’s an animal.”

“I thought he was lying—just mouthing off. He said my call woke him up and... I just realized something.”

“What?”

“He said it was 9:30. That’s an hour later than it is here. That’s Eastern Time.”

“So, *if* he was telling the truth about the time, he might already be in Orlando,” said Sandy. “I tried calling Greg’s cell phone, but it was turned off. And they didn’t answer their hotel room phone. But it’s probably just as well, because I really hate to spoil what’s left of their honeymoon. And I really think Larry’s lying. We know he made up the story about what happened in the motel room with Chauncey Reed. And he’s got to figure Cynthia went to the police and that there’s a warrant out for his arrest. But, just to be on the safe side...I have a proposition for you.”

Rebecca hesitated. “What *kind* of proposition?”

“I did some checking. We could catch a noon flight out of DFW. There’s an hour layover in Atlanta, but we’d be in Orlando by dinner time.”

“I see.”

“Then we could enjoy Disney World for a couple of days while keeping an eye on Greg and Cynthia. And if Larry is crazy enough to try something, we could nab him.”

“*Nab* him?”

“Well, isn’t that what you private eyes say?”

Rebecca laughed. “Sounds like you’ve been watching too many old movies. *Nab* him?” She laughed harder.

“Well, at least I made you laugh. And I do love to hear you laugh. So, what do you say? Want to go see the Mouse?”

“I’d have to reschedule some things...but, sure.”

Rebecca agreed on a time and place to meet Sandy at the airport and hung up. Then she realized several details had not been discussed. Where would they stay? Would they get separate rooms? Was he expecting to sleep with her?

This could be a very interesting trip, she thought.

*

“Pretty good food, huh?” Greg took another bite of his scrambled eggs.

“*Very* good. But I know the real reason you wanted to eat here,” said Cynthia.

“What do you mean?”

She nodded to whomever was behind Greg.

He turned around. “Oh, hi.”

“Good morning.” It was Cinderella. “I hope you’re enjoying your magical vacation.”

“We’re on our honeymoon,” said Cynthia.

Greg frowned at Cynthia. “Great—now you’ve blown my chances with her.”

Cynthia punched him in the arm.

Cinderella giggled and said, “Have a wonderful honeymoon.” She moved on to the next table.

“Oh, there’s the prince,” said Greg. “I suppose you’ll want to flirt with him. Go ahead—I deserve it,” He pouted and bowed his head.

“I already have my prince.” She smiled as she gently took his chin in her hand and lifted his head.

“And I have my princess.”

“So, where shall we go today, My Prince?”

“How about Disney-MGM, My Princess? That Rock ‘n’ Rollercoaster ride sounds great!”

“Oh, yeah, and I want to ride the Tower of Terror.”

“This is gonna be so much fun. I can’t believe we’re actually here. And, by the way, have I ever told you how beautiful you look in the morning light?”

“Thank you.”

“In *any* light, really. But this morning you’re...almost glowing.”

Cynthia leaned toward him and whispered. “It’s because my husband made love to me last night...and yesterday afternoon...and this morning. And he made my body feel *amazing*—better than it’s ever felt before.” She leaned back. “I might actually be *younger* today.”

“I *feel* younger. That’s it—now I understand. We’ve discovered the elusive secret sought by so many throughout the course of history—the Fountain of Youth.”

“Well, since we’re feeling like a couple of teenagers—let’s go act like it!”

Greg jumped up from the table and took her hand. “You got it, Baby!”

They paid for their breakfast and headed for the Disney-MGM Studios bus stop.

Nothing could spoil their fun.

*

After hiding behind a beard for seven or eight years, he wasn’t sure what he looked like under there. But with each stroke of the razor, he became less Larry Luzor and more somebody else.

He studied his clean-shaven face in the mirror. “They’ll never know it’s me.”

Brushing his hair back into a ponytail changed his look even more. I’m a graduate student, he thought. But it was February, so okay—he was taking a semester off. He laughed. Whatever. The important thing was that the guy in the mirror looked way too young to be either Larry Luzor or Barry Undermine.

The drive from Coreyville had been exhausting. He had not arrived in Orlando until 5:00 AM. But as his body attempted to rest, his mind kept itching until he got up and scratched it by writing and posting another chapter. Then he had slept soundly for three hours—until Rebecca Ranghorn called. She must have been quite proud of herself, he thought, for helping to rescue Cynthia at the football stadium. But she would never have the satisfaction of avenging Melanie’s brutal murder.

The plot of Larry’s novel had taken some unexpected and undesired twists, and now his main character had become desperate. The title of the book, *Illusion of Luck*, had become all too appropriate. The leading man had loved the redhead for many years. But now, she had rejected him—repeatedly, and gone off with another man. Even after proving he was willing to *kill* for her, she still did not believe in his undying love.

And now, knowing there would be no happily ever after, that she would never welcome him into her arms, he altered his ultimate goal. Since she would not willingly offer herself to him, he would take her by force.

Deep into her rich soil would he thrust his seeds, with full knowledge that the harvest would come in time. And with all confidence he knew she would resist

the mighty urge to dig up the precious seeds and toss them to the swine, since this would go against her deeply-held beliefs.

And though he might die in the fields with his plowshare yet exposed in the blazing sun, withering away slowly, day by day; his seedling would live on, and thereby, would he.

The redhead would nurture the child, though it be him, reincarnated. She would hold him lovingly to her breast for suckle, wash his body tenderly and whisper to him with a mother's sweet breath.

So, if he must die and be born again in order to be one with her... so be it.

*

“Hey, son, you should be working instead of playing around on the internet.”

“I’m on my coffee break, Dad,” said Crow.

“Well, then where’s your coffee?”

Crow frowned at him.

“I’m just kidding. But you’re wasting your time. There’s nothing but trouble out there.” He walked off.

You may be right, thought Crow. Barry Undermine’s book was disgusting. Sure, he used a lot of flowery words, but to Crow it was just frilly ribbons tied around piles of dog poop.

He wondered if Barry had really followed Greg Tenorly and his new wife all the way to Disney World. Maybe Greg would push Barry off the top of a rollercoaster. It was fun to imagine him falling...falling...falling to his death. Oh, the horror that would race through his mind as he fell. It wouldn’t be enough payback for what he had done to Chaucey, but it would help. Maybe Barry could make up a nice poem about his death as he fell.

But what if Greg couldn’t handle the creep? What if he needed help? A rage began to build in Crow’s chest when he thought about Barry touching Chaucey, pushing her, trying to rape her.

He pictured himself grabbing Barry's head and squeezing it as hard as he could, until his eyes began to bulge, and then twisting his head a full 360 and ripping it right off his body. Then he could spin around and hurl it into the sky like a shot-put. He'd look back just in time to see Barry's headless body collapse to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Kroger Bagley, Jr. was not a savage beast.

But with Barry Undermine, he could sure act like one.

Chapter 35

Normally, Chaucey's work consumed her, and she thought of nothing else for eight to ten hours. At 7:00 AM, before sitting down at her computer, she always made herself a ham and cheese sandwich for lunch. Then, at around noon, on her way back from one of her few bathroom trips, she would grab it out of the fridge, along with a Diet Coke, and rush back to her computer desk. A couple of times she had forgotten to put the ham on her sandwich. No problem. She never even noticed it was missing.

Even trips to the bathroom were not wasted. There were always design issues to work out in her head while walking to and from, and even while on the pot.

But today was different. She stared at a computer screen of images that made no sense to her. All Chaucey could think about was Crow. In the past, thoughts of him only concerned what movie they would watch or what would be ordered for dinner. He was just a buddy to unwind with after a hard day's work.

She picked up her cell phone. This was so strange to her. Why did she feel she must hear his voice right this minute? They would be together for dinner. Couldn't she wait until then?

Crow's cell phone went directly to voice mail, and she hung up.

Just as well, she thought. What kind of message would that send if she called him while he was at work? She'd never done that before.

Reading a little news would get her mind off him, she figured. But after reading only two paragraphs, she found herself googling Bagley's and calling the store.

"Bagley's Food Mart." It was a young-sounding woman's voice.

"Yes, could I please speak to Crow Bagley?"

"Uh, just a moment, please."

Chaucey could only hear mumbling.

Then Crow's father took the phone. "This Kroger Bagley. May I help you?"

“Hi. This is Chaucey Reed, and I’d like to speak with Crow—that is, if he’s not too busy, Sir.”

He sounded thrilled. “Oh yes, Chaucey. We’ve heard so much about you. Crow’s always saying ‘Chaucey did this’ and ‘Chaucey said that.’”

What had Crow been telling his parents? Did they think she was dating their son? Sleeping with him? “Well, I would like to meet y’all.”

“Great.”

“I know Crow’s working, but is he available to talk for just a minute?”

“He’s not here, Chaucey.”

“Oh.”

“When he asked me for a couple of days off this morning I figured the two of you had special plans. But I didn’t ask. I try not to pry too much.”

“Oh, I see.” Surely Crow wasn’t about to knock on her door and ask her to elope. “Must be a surprise.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Please don’t tell him I said anything.”

“No, of course not.”

“Well, you two kids have fun. Can’t wait to meet you, Chaucey.”

After she hung up, she walked over to Crow’s apartment and let herself in. He had entrusted her with a key many months earlier.

Maybe there was a brochure or a scribbled note somewhere, she thought. But she found nothing to indicate what he was up to. Then she bumped the mouse to bring his computer to life.

His email program was open. She hated to snoop, but really needed to know what was going on. The subject for one of the emails was an airline ticket confirmation.

Oh no, she thought. He *is* planning a trip. How would she let him down gently?

She just wasn't ready for that. What if the tickets were non-refundable? Then she might feel obligated to go.

But the reservation was only for one person—to Orlando. What's going on here?

She opened the other browser window and saw the familiar page of Barry Undermine. Crow needs to just forget about Barry, she thought. Chauncey wished *she* could.

She had not seen this chapter. It made her cringe, reading about the beautiful young woman who met the manipulative writer in a motel room and had wild sex with him. That woman was *her*. What if Crow thought that was what really happened?

Chauncey refreshed the page to see if anyone had commented, and was surprised to see a new chapter that had been posted early that morning.

Clearly, Barry was still after Cynthia. But how foolish of him to announce his intentions on the web. Greg and Cynthia would surely be following his writings and alert the police immediately.

She couldn't believe she had ever been interested in such a man. The writing that had days before seduced her, now made her skin crawl. He would force Cynthia to have sex with him so she would have his baby. What kind of sick, twisted mind would refer to that as 'the fulfillment of my fantasy in Orlando?'

Then it clicked. "Crow went to Orlando to hunt down Barry."

But it could go terribly wrong, she thought. Crow might yell to him from across the street. Barry starts running and leads him into a dark alley. When Crow follows him in, he doesn't see Barry at first. Then he sees the gun—too late.

If Crow would only answer his phone. She knew that once his mind was set, there was no stopping him. Crow was on a mission: to avenge the attempted rape of the woman he loves.

Now she wondered if she loved Crow. Just two days earlier she wasn't even thinking 'Crow' and 'love' in the same sentence.

The question of love could be decided later. Right now, she had to keep him

from doing something crazy and getting himself killed.

She clicked back to the confirmation email, picked up the desk phone, and called Continental Airlines to see if there was still a seat available on Crow's flight.

*

Greg and Cynthia were in Disney-MGM Studios park, on their way to The Twilight Zone Tower of Terror.

"I need to stop by the restroom, Sweetie." Greg gave his wife a quick peck on the lips and walked toward the restroom.

Cynthia took a deep breath and closed her eyes, bathing her face in the warm Florida sun. It was late February, and 70 degrees in Orlando—about ten degrees warmer than Coreyville, she figured.

"Nice day, huh?"

She heard the man's voice, but didn't realize at first that he was talking to her.

"Uh, yes. Yes, it is."

"You and your husband look like newlyweds."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. I saw him kiss you before he went in the restroom."

"I see." What made this ponytailed guy an authority on marriage? He couldn't have been over 25, and he wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

"Have you two been to the Tower of Terror?"

"We're on our way."

"Oh, you'll love it. As long as you don't have a weak stomach like I do." He laughed. "Yeah, the first time I rode it I ended up shooting chunks all over the gray-hairs in front of me."

"Oh, no."

“Yeah, I felt sorry for those poor old ladies. They got mad at me. But then *they* started throwing up too.”

“So, they couldn’t handle the ride either.”

“No, I think it was so much the ride as it was the puke running down the back of their necks.” He laughed. “I’m sorry. I really shouldn’t laugh at those old ladies.” He saw Greg coming out of the bathroom. “Well, anyway, have fun!” He walked away.

“Who was that?” Greg put his sunglasses back on.

“I don’t know. But he was warning me about the Tower of Terror. Made me wonder whether I have the stomach for it.”

“Oh, don’t be silly. I’ve seen you handle some very tough situations. I can’t imagine there’s anything out *here* that can take you down. Now, me, on the other hand...”

“Don’t worry, Baby. I’ll hold your hand.” She took his hand and kissed it.

“Well, then I guess I’ll be okay.”

She smiled seductively as she slowly licked one of his knuckles.

“There is *one* wild ride that doesn’t scare me at *all*. In fact, I could ride all night long. And unless you want me to hop aboard right now, you’d better quit licking my hand.”

She stopped abruptly and grinned. “Okay. Let’s go ride the Tower of Terror.”

They started walking.

“We’ll save your *favorite* ride for tonight. It’s my favorite too,” she said with a wink.

*

The ponytailed young man watched Greg and Cynthia walk toward the Tower of Terror. He had raised the pitch of his voice slightly and used a Midwest accent.

That, along with his clean-shaven face, the ponytail, and his youthful attire had completely fooled her.

Now he knew he could walk up to her and start talking, and she would not be afraid of him. And by the time she realized his true identity, she would be *his*.

Chapter 36

Chaucey barely caught the 1:15 PM flight on Continental Airlines out of Houston. By the time she found her seat, the door had already been closed and the plane was ready to pull away. There was just enough room in the overhead for her small bag. The teenage boys in the aisle and window seats were thrilled to have a hot chick sitting between them.

Once they were in the air and the seatbelt sign went off, Chaucey got up and headed for the back of the plane. It was nice to get away from the smothering heat of the testosterone twins.

There he was—near the back of the plane in a middle seat.

“Crow?”

He looked up. “*Chaucey?*”

She leaned over and spoke quietly. “Crow, what are you doing?”

“Going to Orlando.”

“Because you think Barry’s there?”

“Yes.”

The middle aged man in the aisle seat was enjoying a lovely view down Chaucey’s blouse. She sensed that at any moment he might press his face against her cleavage, like a kid at a candy counter.

When she stood up, his neck stretched impossibly long as his eyes followed her breasts.

“Sir, would you mind trading seats with me?”

The expression on his face said he would give up his seat, open the emergency door and jump out of the plane—if that’s what she wanted. “Oh, uh, sure.”

“It’s 18E. Thank you so much.” She was careful to make her smile friendly, but

platonic.

He got up and began to walk toward his new seat. She sat down next to Crow.

Then the man came back. “Forgot my headphones.” And before she could get them for him, he reached to the floor, rubbing his arm against her smooth, firm calf. Then he slid his hand across the top of her thigh and unplugged the wire from the armrest. “Thanks.”

In her mind, she slapped him so hard that he tumbled to the back of the plane and bowled over a couple of flight attendants. But he had given up his seat for her, so she smiled and told him he was welcome.

Chaucey turned to Crow and whispered, “So, what were you planning to do—just walk up and strangle him? Or maybe you were gonna knock him down and bang his head on the pavement until it split open and his brains fell out. Is that your plan?”

“No...”

“You took off work and hopped on a plane without telling me anything. And your dad thinks the two of us are on some kind of lovers’ retreat. What have you been telling your parents?”

“Not that much really.”

“Look, this guy is bad news. You could get yourself killed messing with him. What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that I can’t stand for that cockroach to be running around free after what he did to you.”

“Cockroach, huh?”

Crow couldn’t stop himself from smiling.

“This is nuts, Crow. He’ll never bother me again. So, just forget about it.”

“But what about Greg Tenorly? And his wife—that redhead at the motel? I called Disney World and found out where they’re staying. I wanted to warn

them. But they're not answering the phone."

"Okay. When we get to Orlando we'll try calling them again. If there's still no answer, we'll go to their room and tell them in person."

"Good."

"And then we'll catch a flight back home. And you will NOT, under any circumstances, go after Barry Undermine. Right?"

"I guess."

"No. You've got to promise."

She was waiting for him to say something, but what he really wanted to do was to kiss her. "Fine."

*

Delta Flight 1595 would begin boarding any minute. Sandy and Rebecca had just arrived in Atlanta thirty minutes earlier. He sat in the waiting area, watching for her to come out of the bathroom. Just five minutes of separation, and he was already missing her.

When she came out and walked toward Sandy, he studied her carefully. What was it about her that made him want to be with her so much?

A little girl was trying to catch up with her mother and siblings when she tripped and fell down and began to cry. Rebecca rushed to her side and reassured her until the mother could take over.

She smiled and said 'hi' to an old man who looked like he didn't have one friend in the world. Almost instantly the man had more spring in his step.

How could a woman be so tough and blunt, yet so kind and loving?

Sandy grinned at her. "Everything come out alright?"

She punched him hard in the arm and sat down beside him. "You don't really think Larry is in Orlando, do you?"

“I hope not, but it’s possible. With the police after him, he’d have to be crazy.”

“But, as we know...”

“Yeah. He *is* crazy.”

“Did you try calling Greg again?”

“Yeah. His cell phone is still off. But I left a message on their room phone.”

“I thought you were afraid that leaving a message about Larry would spoil their honeymoon?”

“Well, after a little more thought I figured Cynthia disappearing again would spoil it even more. And Greg would kill me if that happened and I hadn’t even tried to warn him.”

“So, we’ll go warn them about Larry—and then what?”

“I don’t know. Grab a room somewhere and—”

“—wait a second. Grab *a* room? As in a single room for the two of us?”

“Sure. Why not? No sense in paying for two.”

“Okay. Now I see what this trip is really about.”

“We can get *two* beds, if you like.”

“If I *like*?”

“Strike that. We will get two beds. Okay?”

“Right. One to put our luggage on and the other for you to put *yourself* on *me*.”

He smiled slightly. “No, not at all.”

“You dog,” she snarled, but only half-seriously.

“Yes, I *am* a dog. I’ll admit it. And as such, I will jump your bones at any time of the day or night. But *only* if you want me to. I’m a *gentleman* dog.”

“Really? A gentleman dog. Now I’ve heard everything.”

“And I know many commands, such as ‘stay,’ ‘fetch,’ ‘rollover,’ and ‘pounce.’”

“Pounce. Is that the one where you—”

“—yes. So, don’t say it now, in front of all these people.” He grinned.

“Sandy, you are one sick puppy.”

He laughed. He certainly was one sick puppy. And he was in puppy love. Or maybe even *people* love.

*

Sandy and Rebecca stopped off at the restrooms and then headed for Disney’s Magical Express. Their plane had landed at 5:38 PM—right on schedule. The free bus ride would deliver them to Disney’s Grand Floridian Resort, where Greg and Cynthia were staying.

“Won’t be long now. It’s only 35 minutes,” said Sandy.

Then they saw the lines.

Rebecca said, “Yeah—once we actually get on a bus.”

They had been standing in line for just a few minutes when she noticed Sandy staring at the most beautiful woman in the room. “Why don’t you take a picture?”

“I think I know her—and him. But I can’t place them.”

Rebecca took a closer look. “That can’t be Chauncey Reed.”

“Yes! That’s it. And that’s her neighbor.”

“Or boyfriend.”

“Nah. He_ couldn’t_ be a *boyfriend*,” said Sandy.

“I wonder if they’re here for Larry. Let’s go find out.”

Before Sandy could try to stop her, she was ducking under roped aisles to get there. He followed her, feeling guilty all the way, knowing that at any moment some tired, irate vacationer with four young kids would holler, “Hey, you! No breaking in line, Buddy!”

“Thanks for saving our place, Sis.”

When Chaucey felt the arm around her shoulder, she nearly elbowed Rebecca. But she recognized the face from somewhere. And the guy seemed familiar too.

Rebecca spoke more softly. “We’re Greg and Cynthia’s friends. We were with Greg the other night at your apartment.”

“Oh, yeah. So, that’s her name—Cynthia.”

“What are you guys doing here?”

“Crow read Barry’s latest chapter and thought he had come here to Disney World.”

“Yeah,” said Rebecca. “That’s the reason we’re here too.”

“Barry’s gonna be sorry he ever messed with Chaucey,” said Crow.

Sandy said, “By the way, his real name is Larry. Larry Luzor.”

“How appropriate,” said Chaucey.

“Yeah,” said Rebecca. “But it’s spelled L-u-z-o-r.”

“I don’t care how you spell it,” said Crow. “I just want to teach him a lesson he’ll never forget.”

Chaucey grabbed him by the arms and made him look her in the eyes. “You mean you want to catch him and hand him over to the police. Right, Crow?”

“Okay. Fine.”

Rebecca whispered into Crow’s ear. “Yeah, and while we’re waiting for the police to come, I’ll give him a swift kick in the groin.”

Crow pictured it and grinned.

Chapter 37

It was nearly 7:00 PM. Greg and Cynthia had spent the entire day at Disney-MGM Studios.

“You still want to do room service for dinner?” He opened the door to their room.

“Yeah. That sounds fine. But I’m not very hungry right now.”

“I understand.” He smiled slyly. “We’ll play around for a while. That’ll work up an appetite.”

“Actually, I don’t want to play around right now.”

Was she kidding? It was only the second day, he thought. She can’t be bored with sex already.

Cynthia put her arms around him, pulled him close and looked deep into his eyes. “I don’t want to play around. I want to get *serious*.”

“Okay...I’ll try to do better. Just tell me what you want, Baby.”

“No, Silly. You’re doing just fine. Perfect, in fact.”

“Then, I don’t get what you’re talking about.”

“I want to have your baby.”

Greg gulped. “Well, I want to have your baby too—I mean, I want to have a baby with you too.”

She smiled. “No protection tonight.”

“No argument here.” Greg was ready. *More* than ready. “But I thought you wanted to wait a while to have kids.”

“I thought so too. But then I realized today that there’s no reason to wait.”

“Really? When did that happen—during the *Beauty and the Beast* show? Were you thinking that even though I’m a beast we can still live happily ever after and our children will turn out okay? Or, did you figure it out when we were free falling in the Tower of Terror? Maybe you realized life is short, so better have the kids now—before we get in a freak elevator accident.”

She stuck out her tongue and then smiled. “I don’t know. I guess I was being cautious because my first marriage failed, and I wanted to be sure. But you’re no Troy. I was so glad I didn’t have kids with him. But, now I’m ready. No doubts. I want Greg Tenorly to be the father of my children.”

“*Children?*”

“Two kids—like we talked about.”

“Yeah. A boy and a girl would be great.”

“Or maybe three or four.”

“Whoa. Three or four? I don’t remember talking about *that*.”

“Well, that’s just a contingency—you know, in case we don’t get a boy and a girl with the first two.”

“So, do you have any kind of *limit* in mind, Mama Tenorly?”

“Limit?”

“Yeah. Suppose we have four boys and you still want a girl. What’s the cutoff number? Six? Eight?”

“It wouldn’t take that many tries...surely.”

Greg looked as if he had just watched a monster truck demolish his prized 1965 Bonneville. His libido had suddenly been rendered undriveable. How would they support that many kids? How old would they be when the last one finished college?

“It’s okay, Sweetie,” she said. “We don’t have to think that far into the future.”

His head was nodding along numbly in agreement.

“We definitely want to have at least one child, right?”

“Yeah.” He seemed to be coming back to the present.

“So, let’s just think about that one child when we make love tonight.”

“Okay.” The juices were beginning to flow again. “I can do that.” He began to smile.

“Great. So, why don’t you go ahead and take your shower? I’m dying of thirst. I’m gonna go fill up our ice bucket. You want a soft drink?”

“No, thanks. Ice water sounds great.”

Cynthia walked out with the ice bucket.

Greg went into the bathroom. He turned on the shower and began to undress, thinking about the prospect of several little redheaded girls running around the house. They would be so cute.

“Daddy, could we please go to Dairy Queen tonight?”

How would he ever be able to resist them? He’d say ‘Yes’ to everything. But that would be okay, because Cynthia would say ‘No’ when necessary.

“Daddy, will you buy me a car?”

“Dad, I want to go to Harvard.”

Ouch. But they would be so sweet—just like their mommy.

And what about boys? He could roll around on the floor with them, play football in the yard, and practice throwing a baseball. Gee—they would want cars and college too. But it would be nice to have at least one of each. A sweet little girl with long, shiny red hair and a cute, but tough, little boy with...

Greg frowned at his balding head in the mirror. Well, maybe the boy would have his *mother’s* hair.

*

Cynthia pushed the button, and ice cubes began to rumble out of the machine into her bucket.

“How did you do on the Tower of Terror?”

It was the young hippie-looking man with a ponytail from earlier in the day. He was putting money in the Coke machine.

“Oh. We did fine. In fact, it was my favorite ride of the day.”

An older gentleman walked up behind Cynthia with his ice bucket and stepped up to the machine when she was finished.

“So, you didn’t get queasy at all?”

“Nope.” Enough small talk with this guy. She had a horny husband waiting for her. “Well, nice to see you again.” She walked away.

Halfway back to the room Cynthia heard the young man calling to her, so she stopped and turned around.

“I think you dropped this.” He held out a twenty-dollar bill. “I found it on the floor by the ice machine.”

What was that odd scent—his cologne? It seemed familiar to her. “No, it can’t be mine. I didn’t have any money with me. But thanks.” She started to turn.

He grabbed her arm and whispered into her ear. “I’ve got a gun in my pocket, so do exactly as I say, Cynthia.”

She jumped back a bit.

“Easy.”

Pipe tobacco. Larry’s pipe tobacco—that’s what she was smelling. He looked so different without the beard.

“I don’t want to kill you, but I will if I have to. Because if I can’t have you, nobody can.”

Their door was twenty feet away. Why hadn't she walked faster or just ignored the ponytailed man? There were probably a dozen or so people in the lobby below. They would hear her cries for help. But would she be dead by the time anyone could get to her?

*

Greg finished drying off, and looked through the new sleepwear Cynthia had bought for him. He picked out a pair of red silk boxers with an industrial-looking label across the front that said 'Warning: Highly Flammable.'

As he walked out of the bathroom, he heard someone knocking on the door.

"I hope you remember the password," he said in a loud singsong voice. Holding in his stomach and flexing his muscles, he would model his new boxers for her.

But when he flung the door open, he was shocked to see Sandy and Rebecca.

And Chauncey Reed and some guy—maybe her friend from the other night.

"What are y'all doing here?" He stepped back, grabbed his robe, and put it on.

Sandy laughed. "It's a funny story, Man."

"Well, come in for minute." As happy as he was to see his old buddy, he had more pressing matters—like pressing himself up against his wife, thank you very much. But he would not be rude—as long as they left soon.

Rebecca said, "So, are y'all having a good time?"

"Oh, sure. We spent the day at Disney-MGM, and rode all the rides and saw most of the shows."

"Which park are y'all going to tomorrow?" said Sandy.

"EPCOT, I think."

"Rebecca and I might be there too."

"Really?" Greg was beginning to think he had missed a lot of what went on between his friend and Rebecca while they were looking for Cynthia.

“Yeah. And we could meet up with y’all for lunch and a couple of rides. If it’s okay with you.”

“Sure.”

Rebecca jumped in. “But we don’t want to impose.”

“No, no,” said Greg. “That would be fine.”

Sandy noticed the red light flashing on the hotel room phone.

Greg saw the concern in his eyes. “What?”

“Have you listened to any of your messages?”

“No. We just got back to the room about fifteen minutes ago.”

“So, then you don’t know about Larry?”

“What? Did the police catch him?”

“No.” Sandy had assumed, and was hoping, that Cynthia was in the bathroom.

“Greg, where is Cynthia?”

“She went to get some ice. Wonder what’s taking her so long?”

Sandy’s face went from concerned to panicked. “Greg, we think Larry might be here in Orlando.”

Greg ran out the door and down the hallway. The four visitors followed him. When he got to the ice machine, he began to freak out.

“Check every hallway, every floor! I’m going to the parking lot! We cannot let him get away!”

Chapter 38

“Where are you taking me?”

“To our little love nest,” said Larry, as he shifted into third gear.

Cynthia could only hope that Greg was following the Jaguar.

“You know the police are looking for you.”

“Well, I wish them good luck. Because they’re gonna need it.”

“You understand that I don’t want to be with you.”

“Yes. You’ve made that very clear.”

“Then what are you planning to do? Are going to rape me, Larry? I really thought you were more of a man than to do something like that.”

“Save your breath, Honey. Psychology won’t work on me.”

“So, is that all this is about?”

“It doesn’t matter what you say, Cynthia. Whether you’re a willing participant or not, it’s gonna happen. And I’ll *remember it* the way *I* want to.”

“You’re sick, Larry. You really do need help.”

“No, you’ve got it all wrong. I’m not *sick*. Remember? I’m *lucky*. Lucky Larry.”
He laughed.

“How can you still think you’re lucky? I got away from you once already.”

“But now I have you back. I have the love of my life.”

“I’ll never love you.”

“Sure you will. Tonight you’ll do a strip tease for me and beg me to get undressed. Then you’ll tell me how much you love me over and over again, as

you satisfy me in every way. It will be the night of our dreams, Baby.”

There had to be a way out of this mess, she thought. “And then what? You’ll just let me go?”

“That’s the plan. If you do everything I ask you to do, you’ll be back with Greg by morning.”

But would she be alive? And if so, would she *wish* she was dead?

*

“Hey!”

The young couple sitting in their car was startled by the crazy man in the bathrobe banging on the window.

“What’s your problem?” The young man yelled back, afraid to open the window.

“My wife was kidnapped. Did you see a man drive away with a pretty redhead?”

The young man rolled down the window. “Maybe. I’m not sure if her hair was red.”

“Yeah, it was,” said the woman.

“Did they leave in a dark green Jaguar?”

“I don’t know what kind of car it was,” said the man. “But I think it was green. Definitely some type of sports car.”

“Thanks,” said Greg. “And I’m sorry I scared you.”

He rushed back inside and found Sandy, Rebecca, Chauncey, and Crow in his room. Rebecca was sitting at the table, working at her laptop. Greg had not even realized she’d brought it.

“I found a couple making out in the parking lot. They saw Larry and Cynthia leave in his car. But I have no idea where he’s taking her. How am I ever going to find them?”

“Rebecca’s re-reading his last chapter,” said Sandy.

“He wrote another chapter?” said Greg. “Is that how you knew he was here in Orlando?”

Greg got in Sandy’s face and yelled. “Why didn’t you warn me?”

“I tried—but your cell phone was turned off and you didn’t listen to the message I left you,” he said, pointing to the phone on the night table. “I’m sorry. I should have told the desk clerk.”

“It’s okay.” Greg calmed down a bit. “It’s not your fault.”

Chaucey walked over to where Rebecca was sitting. “Any clues?”

“Not yet. But you know he probably gave one or two,” said Rebecca.

“Yeah,” said Chaucey, “he loves to do that. Thinks he’s smarter than everybody else.”

“For the apartment in The Woodlands, he used the name Revo Enim,” said Rebecca, “which, of course, is just ‘Undermine’ spelled backwards. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if he did something like that again.”

Greg said, “Yeah, but we don’t even know if he’s taking her to a motel or an apartment or what.”

“I can’t imagine him renting an apartment,” said Sandy. “He knows the police are looking for him, so he wouldn’t want to stick around for too long.”

“Good point,” said Rebecca. “So, I’ll look for anything that could be the name of a hotel.”

Chaucey leaned in close and read over Rebecca’s shoulder. She found something and pointed to it on the screen. “What about this? He’s talking about making his fantasy come true in Orlando?”

“What does that tell us?” said Greg.

“Try searching on the words ‘fantasy’ and ‘Orlando,’” said Chaucey.

After a few seconds, Rebecca said, “Bingo. Orlando Fantasy Hotel. That’s got to be it!” She clicked on the link, which took her to the hotel’s website.

Sandy opened his cell phone and called the number on the screen.

“Yes, can you tell me if you have a Larry Luzor registered there?”

“What was the name again?”

“Luzor. L-u-z-o-r.”

“No, we don’t.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Now what?” said Greg.

“Wait. He wouldn’t use his real name, would he?” said Chauncey.

“Doubtful,” said Rebecca.

“Call back, Sandy,” said Greg. “Ask for a Mr. Ruzol, which is Luzor spelled backwards.”

Sandy called the hotel and asked. But they had no Mr. Ruzol.

Just when Sandy was about to hang up, Crow said, “Ask about ‘Bigy Rules.’”

“What?”

“Bigy Rules,” said Crow.

Although Sandy couldn’t imagine where Crow was coming up with the name, he tried it anyway. “You do? What’s the room number? 343. Thanks.”

“You’re kidding me,” said Rebecca.

“No,” said Sandy. “They actually have a guest by that name.”

“Crow, how did you come up with that?” said Chauncey.

“Roulz. R-o-u-l-z is Luzor with the letters scrambled. And I figured he’d like that one since it sounds like rules, r-u-l-e-s, because he thinks he *rules*.”

“Okay,” said Rebecca. “But where did you get the ‘Bigy’?”

“Well, you were telling us all about Larry while we waited for the bus. And you said his real name is Lawrence Igby Luzor. So I just swapped a couple of letters in the name ‘Igby’ and got ‘Bigy.’”

“You’re smarter than you look, Crow,” said Rebecca. “No offense.”

“Bigy Roulz,” said Chaucey. “Yeah, that’s him. No doubt about it.”

“Come on,” said Greg, rushing out the door, “we’re gonna outsmart Mr. Bigy this time. But we’ve got to hurry.”

*

As Larry pulled the Jaguar into the parking lot of the Orlando Fantasy Hotel, Cynthia saw that there was a group of teenagers getting out of a bus nearby. Larry wouldn’t shoot her in front of all those witnesses, she thought.

“Now, I’m warning you, Cynthia. Don’t make a scene or you’ll regret it.”

She nodded humbly.

“Okay, let’s go.”

They got out of the car. Cynthia started running. She ran as fast as she could toward the hotel.

Larry thought about pulling out his pistol, but saw the kids and decided against it. So, he ran after her. “I’m gonna get you,” he yelled out, as though it was just a game.

She ran to the side entrance. Once she reached the front desk, she’d be safe. He might be capable of killing *her*, but she didn’t think he was prepared to shoot the desk clerk and several others.

But the door was locked, and according to the sign, required a key card at night.

Larry was approaching quickly.

Cynthia ran to the back of the hotel, where the big garbage bins were kept. It was dimly lit, and smelled like rotten fish.

Larry flew around the corner only to see something flying at his head. He ducked, but the large cinder block clipped his forehead anyway.

Seeing that he was stunned for the moment, Cynthia turned to run away.

But he lunged at her, grabbing her leg on his way down.

She tried to kick free, but he latched onto her like a bear trap.

As he crawled up her body, his dizziness began to dissipate. Finally, he planted himself on her thighs and pulled out his gun and pressed the barrel into her left ear.

Cynthia wondered if this would be her last moment on earth. Was this where she would die—in this smelly place behind a hotel? A popular hangout for rats and other vermin, no doubt. Her body would look like one of those cadavers on the CSI show—the top of her head blown off. Maggots coming out from everywhere. Could she fight him off and wrestle the gun out of his hand?

“Is this what you want? Huh? You want to die right now?”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have run away. That was stupid of me.”

“And you shouldn’t have hit me in the head. That could have left me brain dead.”

She wished.

“I’m gonna give you one more chance.”

“Okay.”

He started to get up, but changed his mind. “You don’t even think this gun is real, do you?”

“What? Of course I think it’s real.”

“Or, maybe you think it’s not loaded.” He pointed it toward the sky and fired.

Cynthia jumped. Even with the suppressor muffling the sound, there was no doubt he had just fired a bullet.

“Let’s go,” he said, as he got up and helped her to her feet. “Time to get it on, Baby.”

Chapter 39

“Okay, Baby, our time has finally come,” said Larry.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” said Cynthia.

“Alright. But don’t be long.”

She went into the bathroom and locked the door.

Larry opened the French doors and went out onto the balcony. He breathed in the crisp, 60-degree air. Wonderful night for his dreams to come true. It would take just a few minutes before Cynthia realized there was no escape. She *could* go out the bathroom window. But they were on the third floor, so it would be a killer jump. And there was nothing in the bathroom that could be used as a weapon—except maybe a towel to strangle him with. Good luck with that, Honey.

He took out his pipe and inspected it. Thank goodness it had not been damaged during the scuffle downstairs.

After puffing away for several minutes, he heard Cynthia calling to him from the bathroom.

“Larry? I’m sick.”

“Sorry about that. Come on out.”

“No. You don’t understand. I’ve got diarrhea.”

He tried the doorknob. “Unlock the door.”

“Believe me—you don’t want to come in here.”

“Unlock the door, Cynthia.”

“No. I’m embarrassed.”

“You’ve got five seconds to open this door before I kick it in! One...two...three...”

The door opened. Cynthia was fully dressed and the bathroom was odor free.

“Nice try. Now get your sweet little butt out here.” He closed the French doors.
“Go over there to the bed.”

Cynthia walked to the foot of the king size bed. “Why are you doing this to me, Larry? You said you loved me.”

“Oh, I *do*. Always have, since high school.”

“Okay, then. So, why would you want to *rape* me? If you really love somebody, you don’t force them to have sex with you.”

“Well, I don’t necessarily have to rape you.”

There was a glimmer of hope in her eyes.

“You can do it *willingly*.”

“I’m a newlywed. Are you trying to destroy my marriage?”

“Not at all. In fact, I want you and Greg to stay together for the rest of your lives.”

She was speechless.

“Yes, I want you two to be happy and raise a wonderful family.”

“Then, let me go.”

“I *will* let you go. As soon as we’re done.” He pulled the pistol out of his jacket pocket and secured it under the waistband of his pants. Then he took off the jacket and tossed it on a chair. “Now, take off your blouse. And do it in a seductive way. Make it fun.”

“Fun? You just said you wanted Greg and me to be happy.”

“That’s right. I want y’all to be happy so the kids will be happy. So, *our* kid will be happy.”

Cynthia was terrified. And the hope of getting away unscathed was fading fast.

“You want to get me *pregnant*?”

“Yes.” He smiled proudly.

“You’re a monster!”

He laughed. “That’s right. And this monster is gonna load up your womb with his monster sperm tonight, Baby. Now, take off your blouse before I rip it off!”

She reached for the top button and unhooked it.

“Now we’re getting somewhere.” He practically jumped up and down in anticipation.

*

Greg, Sandy, Rebecca, Chaucey, and Crow were in a taxi, on their way to the Orlando Fantasy Hotel.

“Are we going to try to get a key or just break down the door?” said Rebecca.

“I can do it,” said Crow. “I’ll knock down the door.”

“But what if it’s a solid door, and you have trouble getting it opened?” said Greg. “We need to surprise him.”

Sandy knew that Greg had not read the latest chapter about how Larry wanted to get Cynthia pregnant. But there was no reason to add to his worries. They were getting there as fast as they could.

Chaucey said, “If the desk clerk is a man, I can get the key.”

Rebecca said, “I’ll bet you can, Honey.” Men could no more resist a woman like Chaucey than they could resist a fine sports car, she thought. And this one was fully loaded.

The taxi dropped them off in front of the lobby.

“Y’all wait out here,” said Chaucey.

The desk clerk was male and in his forties. Piece of cake, she thought. “Hi.”

“Good evening.”

She giggled. “I feel so silly. I’m afraid I went off without my key. I was in a hurry when I left for dinner. It’s sitting right there on the TV in my room.”

“No problem, ma’am. If you’ll just show me some identification, I’ll be glad to give you another key card. What’s the room number?”

“343.” She dropped her purse on the floor and several items fell out. “Oh, my.”

The clerk watched with great interest as she turned around and her long, silky hair flung around too, seemingly in slow motion. She bent over while pulling her skirt up just a bit.

A little higher, he thought, as he leaned his head down close to the counter for a better view. It was taking quite a while for her to gather everything. He could almost see her panties. Please take longer, he thought. His head was resting on the counter, as though he was taking a nap. But he wasn’t. His eyes were *wide* open.

She suddenly turned her head and saw him gawking at her butt.

He jerked his head upright and nearly pulled a couple of muscles. In an instant, the key card was in his outstretched hand. “Uh, here you go.”

Chaucey stepped up to the counter. “Thank you.” She smiled warmly, as though she didn’t even realize his dirty thoughts were burning a hole in his pants.

After Greg and the others saw that she had succeeded, they walked in and joined her at the elevator.

*

“It won’t work, you know. You might as well put on a condom. I could have a disease. You might as well be safe.”

“I don’t even *have* a condom.”

“And you’re wasting your time, because I’ll just have an abortion.” She knew the rape would happen anyway, unless she could stall long enough for Greg to

find her.

“No, you won’t. You would *never* have an abortion.”

This is good, she thought. Keep the conversation going. “Yes, I would. Because there’s no way I’m having your baby.”

“But what about your mom?”

“Huh?”

“And what about *Jennifer*?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” But her eyes told him otherwise.

“You really miss her, don’t you?”

Cynthia began to tremble.

“Yeah, it’s too bad about your sister. You really think she can hear you when you talk to her?”

Tears began to run down Cynthia’s face.

“All these years...she could have been there for you...if you’re mother hadn’t ___”

“—stop!” Her eyes were red and her cheeks were drenched. “How did you know about Jennifer?”

“Oh, that’s right—I forgot to tell you. I spent a few hours at your house yesterday. Comfortable bed, by the way.”

“You animal.”

“And I enjoyed learning so much about you. You women really open up when you write in your diaries. So, you see, I *know* you won’t have an abortion—like your mother did when she killed your big sister, Jennifer.”

“My mother was raped!”

“Right. But you still hated her for having the abortion, didn’t you? She killed your sister.”

“Jennifer wasn’t really my sister—she was never born.”

“But she *would* have been. And your mother must have at least *considered* keeping the baby since she gave her a name.”

“You are the most cruel person I have ever met!”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear you say that about the future father of your firstborn. Now quit stalling!” And with one quick stroke of the hand, he torn her blouse open.

Larry was so consumed by the sight of Cynthia’s breasts, barely contained in her lacy red bra, that he didn’t hear someone unlock the door behind him. But he *did* hear the hinge squeak as the door opened. He spun around, as he pulled out the pistol.

Greg ran at him like a madman.

Before Larry could swing the gun completely around, Greg grabbed his arm.

Larry squeezed the trigger, and the bullet went into the wall.

Greg wrestled the pistol from Larry’s hand and it flew into the air.

Larry tripped Greg, threw him down, and then jumped for the gun, which had landed on the floor, near the bathroom doorway.

Chaucey tried to beat him to it. She reached down, and was about to pick it up when Larry grabbed her. So, she kicked the pistol out of the way, and Rebecca snatched it up.

Larry put his left arm around Chaucey’s waist and held her so tightly she could barely breathe.

Rebecca pointed the gun at him. “Let her go!”

“You think you’re in control here?” He reached into his pants pocket, pulled out

a large pocketknife, opened it and held it to Chauncey's neck. "Think again."

"No!" yelled Crow.

"I'm going to walk out of here with Chauncey, and you people are not going to try to stop me. And you're not going to call the police. Because I really don't want to cut up her sexy little body. So, don't make me."

"Noooooooo!" Crow ran at Larry.

Larry had less than a second to make a decision. This was the same meathead who had attacked him in Chauncey's apartment. Didn't the idiot see the knife? Doesn't he know I'll kill Chauncey? He's crazy!

Chauncey sensed Larry's uncertainty and felt him pull the knife away from her neck. So, she let her body go limp.

Larry couldn't hold her up with one arm.

Chauncey fell to the floor and roll away from Larry.

Now he was exposed. But he still had the knife. Just as Crow reached him, Larry slashed, nicking Crow's left arm.

Crow clamped onto Larry's hand and squeezed with all his might, until Larry released the knife and it dropped to the floor. Then Crow picked him up and ran toward the balcony. Larry felt no heavier than the cockroach he was, as Crow rammed his head into the French doors, which broke open to the balcony.

"You'll never touch Chauncey again!" Crow held his body upside down above the railing.

"Stop, Crow!" Chauncey ran to the balcony.

But it was too late. Crow released him.

"No!" cried Chauncey. A fall from the third floor would surely kill him.

Somehow, Larry was able to grab onto the top of the railing. His body flipped over and slammed into the side of the balcony. But he was still holding on,

facing them.

Chaucey breathed a sigh of relief. "Let's help him up."

Crow stopped her. "No. Why should we help him—after all he's done? He's a murderer."

"But if he falls, *you'll* be a murderer. And you'll go to prison. And I love you!"

"You do?"

Larry grinned. "Well, now. Isn't this sweet? But I don't need your help anyway. Remember? I'm Lucky Larry." He pulled his feet up to the bottom of the railing and pushed off as he let go and fell into the darkness.

They looked down, but saw nothing.

Sandy and Rebecca joined them on the balcony.

"He's probably okay, right? Maybe he fell in the pool," said Crow.

"I didn't hear a splash," said Chaucey.

"That's because there's no water in the pool," said Rebecca. "It's being renovated. I saw the sign in the lobby."

Sandy stepped up to the railing and looked down.

"I guess 'Lucky Larry' is not so lucky after all."

Chapter 40

“Sweetie, I’m so sorry you got hurt.” Cynthia kissed Greg on the forehead. “Are you in a lot of pain?”

“Just a bad headache. I must have blacked out for a second. What happened?”

“Well, Larry threw you down, and I think you hit your head on the arm of this chair.”

“What happened to Larry?”

“Crow threw him over the balcony. And somehow Larry grabbed onto the railing. But then he jumped.”

“He jumped or fell?”

“I didn’t actually see it. I was in here with you when it happened.”

Chaucey approached them. “He definitely jumped. Crow and I were going to help him, but he told us he didn’t need our help, because he was ‘Lucky Larry.’”

“So, what did he do—fall into another garbage bin? No—I’ll bet he jumped into the swimming pool,” said Greg.

“There *is* a pool down there, but it’s being renovated,” said Chaucey. “Rebecca saw the sign in the lobby. And we didn’t hear a splash.”

“You can’t *see* him?” said Greg.

“No. The lights are off—maybe because the pool’s closed. If you strain real hard you can see the outline of the pool, but that’s about it. Rebecca called the front desk and explained what happened, so I’m sure—”

“—they turned the lights on,” Rebecca shouted from the balcony. “Where *is* he?”

Chaucey ran out to the balcony to join Sandy, Rebecca, and Crow. “He’s *got* to be down there.”

“The pool has *some* water in it,” said Sandy.

“Looks like it’s less than half full,” said Rebecca. “They must be in the process of refilling it. But that’s not enough water to keep him from killing himself. At the very least, breaking some bones.”

“Wait—what’s that?” Chauncey pointed to a dark green rectangle located almost directly under the balcony.

“I’m gonna go find out,” said Rebecca.

“I’ll go with you,” said Sandy.

Rebecca looked at Crow and Chauncey. “You two better stay here.”

Crow and Chauncey understood that the police would be there soon with questions—especially for Crow.

After Rebecca and Sandy went out the door, Crow turned to Chauncey. “Did you really mean what you said?”

“What I said earlier?” Chauncey stepped in closer, but hesitated to say it. “Yes.”

“So, you do love me?”

She put her arms around him and looked up into his eyes. Why fight it? She finally had a man who loved her for who she was—and not just for her body. A guy who would want her even if she wasn’t beautiful. She had once thought only a *blind* man was capable of doing that. “Yes, Crow, I love you.”

Chauncey expected to see the familiar Crow grin. But instead, he looked very serious, and his eyes began to water.

“Chauncey, I love you with all my heart. You’re my best friend—the best friend I’ve ever had. After I met you and we starting hanging out, everybody at the store was saying, ‘Hey, Crow, how come you’re smiling all the time now?’ And it was because I knew I’d see *you* in a few hours.”

“You’re a wonderful, caring, funny, big lug-of-a-man.”

He smiled, and the tears rolled off his cheeks.

Chaucey pulled him closer. “Kiss me, my cro *magnum* man.” She didn’t know quite what to expect. Crow probably didn’t have great kissing skills. But, oh—he *does*, she thought, melting into his powerful arms.

Greg looked at Cynthia’s torn open blouse. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. He didn’t really hurt me.”

“But he was *about* to.”

“Yeah. But you saved me—again.” She smiled and gave him a light kiss.

“I’m never letting you out of my sight again.”

“Oh, Baby, it wasn’t your fault. And if he did manage to survive the jump, it’s just a matter of time before the police catch him. Hey, did somebody call the police?”

“Yeah, Sandy did.”

She kissed him again.

“You know what, Honey?” said Greg. “When you agreed to marry me, I thought I was the luckiest man in the world. But it wasn’t *luck*.”

“It wasn’t?”

“No. It was..._destiny_.”

“Yes, it was, Baby.” She leaned down and started a passionate kiss that made him forget all about his headache.

*

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Rebecca. “What’s this?”

The assistant manager heard her, and walked over to answer her question.

“They’re deck chair cushions. Our maintenance guys stacked them up there while they were cleaning the deck chairs.”

“Unbelievable,” said Sandy. “I’ve never seen such luck.”

“You think he knew they were there? Or is he just plain crazy?”

“You know what? I’m tired of thinking about Larry. Cynthia’s safe, and Greg gonna be okay. And it looks like Crow’s off the hook, since Larry is obviously not dead. So, now we can enjoy a couple of days together here.”

“I don’t know. What’s to say Larry won’t come back for more?”

“He won’t have a chance. I betcha the police have him in custody by morning.”

“That’s awfully optimistic.”

“Well, I’m just an optimistic guy.”

“Okay, then. Put your money where your mouth is.”

“Alright. I’ve got fifty bucks that says Larry is in the slammer by noon tomorrow.”

“Wait a minute—you said by morning, not by noon.”

“Is it a bet or not?”

“Fine. You’re going to owe me fifty dollars at noon tomorrow if he’s not in jail.”

“Or dead.”

“Okay, sure.”

“Good. So, we can catch a cab to our hotel room and...”

She frowned at him, but Sandy wasn’t buying it. He took her in his arms.

She resisted slightly and then reached up with both hands and grabbed his head, pulled it down to her, and planted a big kiss on him. “Let the fun begin.” She grinned.

“I knew you were faking.”

“But our room has *two* beds, right?”

“Yeah, sure. I think so.”

“What do you mean, ‘you *think* so?’ You *promised*.”

“Oh, alright,” said Sandy. “They might still have a double available.”

Rebecca punched him in the arm.

Sandy grinned. It felt *good*.

*

Larry didn’t know exactly where he was, but for now, it didn’t matter. The back road he had taken was dark and deserted—a perfect spot for typing up a new chapter. Later, he would go to a Starbucks parking lot and post the chapter via the free wireless internet.

He had outsmarted them once again. When were they going to learn? Having *his* kind of powerful luck was as good as having a super power. Like Superman—without the pesky Kryptonite issue.

In less than an hour, he had keyed in the chapter. The redhead would never be safe. And one day he would finally get her. Whether it took months or even years...he *would* get her.

He shut down his laptop and set it on the passenger seat. The Jaguar purred to life and he started to drive away. The shoulder was soft and muddy, and the tires spun out slightly before catching traction on the pavement. But then he realized that something was wrong. He pulled back over to the shoulder, killed the engine and got out to inspect the tires. The rear tire on the passenger side was completely flat.

He opened the trunk and got the spare tire, the jack, the tire tool, and a flashlight. It might be better to move the car over onto the road, he thought, to give the jack a firmer footing. But, what if some idiot came barreling down the road and slammed into his beautiful Jaguar? He couldn’t chance it.

After positioning the scissor jack and raising the car slightly, he used the tire tool

to remove the lug nuts, and then jacked the car up higher so he could take off the wheel. He tried to pull it off, but it was stuck. So, he repositioned himself, and yanked harder. It suddenly broke free more easily than he had expected, and the weight of the wheel threw him backward to the ground. At the same time, his left foot slid in the mud and went under car. Then he realized that the jack was sinking into the soft ground, and the car had become unstable and was shifting toward him.

He pushed the wheel off his chest and to the side as he frantically tried get away from the lunging Jaguar, which seemed determined to crush his body. And even though the ground was slippery and slimy, he somehow got away—except for his left foot.

The pain was excruciating. He needed to get his foot out—fast. But the jack was on its side, jammed under the frame of the car. He couldn't budge it.

Call 911, he thought, reaching for his cell phone. Then he remembered he'd left it in the car. Maybe somebody would come along soon.

Larry tried to relax, hoping it would ease the pain. But as his flashlight went black, he began to worry about creatures lurking in the darkness. He held his hand up to his face and could barely see it.

What was that? Sounded like a splash. He hadn't realized he was near water. You idiot, he thought, this is Florida! Oh, please, don't let it be an alligator!

But alligators don't usually attack people for no reason. At least that was what he'd heard somewhere. So, he would just hold still, and it would go away.

But something was moving toward him. He could hear it getting closer, but forced himself to be as still as a rock.

The alligator clamped onto his right arm and he could feel the teeth cutting through his flesh. He screamed and began to thrash wildly. But the beast held on tight. So, he started punching it with his left fist, and the animal finally let go. Larry half expected his head to be bitten off at any moment. He cried and screamed until he was hoarse.

After a few more seconds, he realized the alligator was gone.

Lucky Larry had been victorious. He had beaten impossible odds once again.

He couldn't feel or see the blood gushing from his arm.

After a while he fell asleep. He figured somebody would find him in the morning. They would call an ambulance. He would be fine.

But then he woke up, and realized the alligator was back. He would hit the animal with his left fist, and scare it off the way he had done earlier. But his left arm was heavy. Very heavy. He couldn't pick it up. He tried to yell, but didn't have the strength.

Now the alligator was ripping the shirt sleeve off his right arm. No, wait—that's not my shirt he's tearing off—it's my flesh! He's tearing my arm off! No!

Then the alligator clamped onto his torso.

He's eating me alive, but I can't move!

The horrendous things he had done throughout his life began to flash across his mind. Shooting the woman behind the convenience store after stealing her money. She had told him she had a husband and three kids, but he didn't care. Bludgeoning that old woman's head into the side of her car. Breaking Melanie Maylin's neck. Poisoning Erin and incinerating her body in the barbecue pit. Murdering his own parents.

He heard splashing nearby. Another one, coming to the feast!

As he lay there in horrible agony while the alligators ripped him apart, Larry's final thought was that his luck had finally run out.

He had lived his life as though he was special—thinking he had been blessed by the god of luck. And that he could do anything he wanted—without consequence.

But luck is not real. It only exists in the mind.

And Larry was not special. He was just a murderer and a fool—seduced by the ILLUSION of LUCK.

THE END

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