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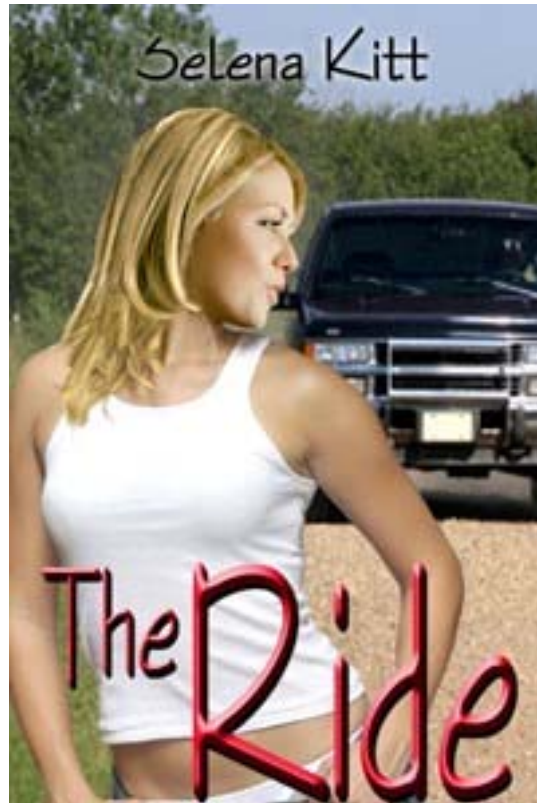
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Shivers

By Selena Kitt



The Ride

The sky was a light, bright blue and clouds drifted, billowy and soft, playing tag with the sun. The black pick-up rumbled down Newberry Road, kicking up gravel and dirt with over-sized tires. Trees and a few houses dotted Newberry on the east side where Annabelle stood, her bag slung over her left shoulder, sticking her thumb out.

It's not gonna stop. She shaded her eyes with her other hand trying to see the gender of the driver, anything that might give her a clue. *The only damned vehicle that's passed by in an hour, and it's not gonna stop.* Hitching wasn't what it used to be, even in small towns like these.

The huge truck passed her and Annabelle glimpsed blonde hair and sunglasses, thinking for sure she was out of luck, but the truck slowed to a stop a few yards ahead. She ran to catch up with it and opened the door.

“Hi!” She tossed her backpack on the floor and pulled herself in. “Thanks for stopping. I think my blood was beginning to boil in this heat!” She shut the door and turned to smile at her rescuer.

“That would be a shame.” She faced the blonde wearing sunglasses all right, but the length of the hair from a distance had fooled her. Her ride wasn’t a woman. “I know what it’s like being on the road.” He nodded toward the guitar tucked behind the seat as he smiled at her and the truck began to move. “Where are you headed?”

“Cloverdale,” she told him. “How about you?”

“Same general direction.” He shrugged. “I can get you there and not go out of my way.”

“Cool.” She reached for the radio knob. “Mind if I turn this on?” The radio blared to life through the speaker on the door next to her.

“Be my guest.” He flashed her an amused smile as he watched her already fiddling with the stations. Small towns never got good reception. “Care for a beer?”

Annabelle looked over at the bottle of Stroh’s as he lifted it and tilted it toward her in invitation. She hadn’t noticed it sitting there propped against the faded denim crotch of his blue jeans until then.

“No, thanks.” She shook her head, busying herself with finding a radio station while she snuck glances at the man beside her. She worried about the beer, but he didn’t look drunk to her. She flipped past a country and western station wondering what

this guy did for a living. There weren't a lot of choices out here in Hicksville. His faded jeans, black t-shirt, black boots and mirrored sunglasses were a little out of place in a small town. His pale blonde hair nearly brushed his shoulder blades.

Annabelle settled on a pop station for a moment before moving on, now checking out his hands—one resting on the steering wheel, the other on the open window ledge. They were soft hands, no telltale farmer or mechanic dirt under the nails. The long hair and guitar could mean musician, of course. Couldn't swing a dead cat around here without hitting a guy who was in some sort of band.

She settled on a classic rock station, leaning back to listen while she watched him out of the corner of her eye. He was concentrating on the road, so she dared to take more than a glance. He was good-looking, for sure. He had "I wanna be a rock star" written all over him—long and lean, a good build with a little bit of muscle. *Nice arms. Pale, though.* Which meant he was an indoor kinda guy. No office work for this one, she guessed, with the long hair and the earring. *Right ear. Does that mean anything anymore?*

If nothing else, he was an interesting change from most of her rides, whom were usually twice her age, balding, with beer bellies and full of rude and profane comments. Most of them picked her up with high hopes of a motel room stop along the way.

This one had barely even glanced at her. In fact, he seemed quite indifferent. He hadn't said anything suggestive and Annabelle wondered about it.

"What's your name?" She reached over to turn the radio down. It was a commercial now, anyway.

“Lee.” He turned the truck smoothly around the corner on to Jarvis, which was paved, but still no smooth ride.

“Really? Huh.” She toed off her sandals, the worst shoes in the world to be walking in. “I had a brother named Lee. Must be a southern thing. God, my feet are killing me!”

She pulled one bare foot up to rest on her thigh and examined it. “Look at this!” Her voice was filled with disgust. “Another blister to add to my collection, I guess. I swear, I’m never gonna hitch again.”

Lee looked over at the blister. She watched his eyes travel past the pink instep of her foot, up her long, bare, tanned thighs, her frayed cut-offs, the white shirt that read “Angel.” He met her eyes, and she cocked her head to one side, curly honey-colored hair covering one shoulder, and smiled at him.

He looked back at the road stretching out in front of them. “I’ve got to get some gas.” He turned the wheel and pulled into a pump at Taylor’s. He turned the key and the engine quit. “Do you want anything?”

“A pack of gum?”

“Sure.” He got out of the truck.

She noticed he left the key in the ignition. *Gotta be a small town boy. Who else would be so trusting?* She watched him pump gas, his hair blowing back away from his face in the slight breeze. He went in to pay. Leaning back in her seat, she waited, looking down the long, empty road to nowhere. She closed her eyes against the brightness and drifted, keeping an ear out for him returning.

The song on the radio changed twice before she decided to go see what was taking him so long. Besides, she had to pee. The gas station lot was empty except for an old flesh-colored station wagon that had seen better days. The bells on the door tinkled when she pulled it open and peeked inside. *Cool in here.* The air felt good against her warm flesh and she stepped fully in, glancing around. The blonde musician guy was nowhere to be seen—and there was no cashier behind the counter either.

Frowning, Annabelle walked down the end aisle filled with snacks and turned right down the soda aisle. There was the bathroom, next to the fake Slurpee machine.

She pulled on the door, but it was locked. “Hello?”

“Just a minute!”

Ah. There he is. That explained her missing ride. Annabelle went to the magazine rack and glanced again toward the register. *Where is everybody?* She reached behind the white cardboard sign on the top magazine rack which looked as if it had been cut from a shirt box that read: “*No Browsing Girlie Mags! You touch, You Buy!*”

Yeah, whatever. She pulled one out looking at the big-busted girl on the cover with her pouty red lips. I’m *prettier than that.* Okay, so her breasts didn’t look like gravity-defying cantaloupes, but men had to know those damned things were fake, right? She peeked over her shoulder, but didn’t see anyone, so she leafed through, comparing herself with the girls, one after another. *I’ve got better legs... ugh, what a fake smile... that one is as high as a kite... oh please, you call that a come-hither look? It looks more like come-take-me-to-the-psycho-ward!*

When the bathroom door opened, she jumped, shoving the magazine back in its place and glancing up at her new blonde musician friend. He was wiping the back of his mouth with his hand, his sunglasses still mirroring her image back to her as she looked up at him.

“Everything come out all right?”

He laughed, shaking his head. “It’s all yours.”

She slipped by him into the bathroom, locking the door behind her. Doing her usual gas station squat over the toilet, she relieved herself, looking around the little bathroom. It was actually cleaner than most—someone took care of the place, anyway. *So where are they?*

When she went to the sink to wash her hands, she glanced up into the mirror and smiled at her reflection. A truly beautiful, nubile, sun-kissed blonde looked back at her and winked. *What man wouldn’t want me?* She licked her lips and tried her own come-hither look. *Putty in my hands.* Grinning, she reached down to turn on the water and frowned at something on the edge of the white porcelain sink.

Tentatively, she touched it, a single red drop of what couldn’t be anything else but blood—still wet, not tacky. *What? Did he cut himself shaving?* Annabelle quickly washed her hands, opened the door and saw him standing by the exit, waiting for her. She gave him a little wave, going past the soda and up the snack aisle.

“Come on, daylight’s burning.” He gave her a wink, opening the door. The bells over their heads tinkled as he waved her through. She didn’t notice the six-pack of beer he was carrying until they climbed into the truck. When he set the beer on the floor, her eyes went from it to him. He smiled.

“More fuel.” He winked and pulled a pack of Juicy Fruit out of his t-shirt pocket and handed it to her.

“Thanks.” She started to unwrap it as he popped the top off a bottle of Stroh’s. Annabelle reached over to throw away the gum wrapper and her hand brushed his as he moved to put the cap in the litterbag suspended from the lighter.

She looked up, her eyes widening. Her hand tingled where it touched his, like it had just woken from a sleep. The sensation seemed to seep up her arm and through her body. She saw her own reflection in his sunglasses.

Then a voice, a voice inside her head. *Do you...*

A car horn blared behind them.

“Sorry,” Lee apologized, pulling his hand away and glancing in his rear view mirror at the Jeep that had just pulled in.

“That’s ok.” She sat back in her seat, her ears ringing.

He was still looking in the rear view mirror as he started the truck and pulled quickly out of the gas station. She had to hold onto the dashboard as he took the first corner, and she felt the truck slip sideways on gravel.

“Easy, cowboy!” She glanced at him, frowning. “What’s your hurry?”

“Hate those tiny little stations.” He shrugged, glancing again in the rear view. “Just like to keep moving.”

She sat back in her seat, watching him out of the corner of her eye. He didn’t seem to notice her at all. He didn’t even glance her way! He just kept looking up into the rearview mirror behind them.

Annabelle was determined to fill the silence. “You know, my mom used to say that you were really in cow-country when you didn’t have to pay first to pump your gas.” She waited for him to respond, make small talk, something, anything, as she watched the rolling fields pass them by. “Thanks for the gum, by the way. Juicy Fruit’s my favorite.”

She blew a small beige bubble to prove it. “Don’t you hate small towns?”

“Sometimes.” He didn’t look at her, but he asked, “Where do you come from?”

Now we’re getting somewhere. She pulled at her gum with her fingers, making long strands before stuffing them back into her mouth. “Smalltown, USA. It doesn’t even have a gas station. Are you from a place like that?”

He laughed, his eyes still on the road. “No. I’m not.”

“So, where are you from?” She pushed ahead. The tingling in her hand was fading now, and so was the memory of it.

“Not around here,” he replied. “I travel a lot. Place to place. Sometimes I stay in one town for a time, but you get tired of the same faces after a while. So I move on. Like I said... I like to keep moving.”

She looked out over the landscape, fields as far as the eye could see, head-high with corn, farm houses, once-red barns faded gray with weather and time where cows and horses grazed nearby. She knew there were people in big cities that dreamed about lives like this—perfect, picturesque.

“I’d like that.” She pulled her legs up and rested her chin on her knees. “But I can’t live in a small town anymore.”

Lee guided the truck around the corner. This road was bordered by farms and trees, she knew, all the way through until they hit Cloverdale near the state border and the lake.

Annabelle wondered why he hadn't peppered her with the usual questions. Stuff like, "What's a nice girl like you doing out here all alone?", everyone did—eventually. But aside from the one question she practically pushed him into asking, he didn't seem curious about her life at all before their meeting.

She reached over and grabbed a beer. He smiled over at her as she twisted off the top. She hated beer, but at least it was something to do besides stare at the flash of trees and fields going by.

"Why?" he asked, surprising her with the question.

"Why what?"

"Why can't you live in a small town anymore?"

"Because..." she hesitated and he glanced at her, his eyes moving over her hair, her tan, healthy arms. "I guess because everyone knows everyone else's business. I'd rather live where nobody knows me. I want..." she turned her head to rest her cheek against her knees and looked at him. "I want total freedom."

"Think you can get that in the big city, huh?" His smile was cynical as he tilted his beer up, the sun glinting off the glass.

"I don't know." She shrugged. "But I haven't found it here."

"No." He grinned around the bottleneck. "I don't imagine you have."

She looked at him, her feelings jumbled, forming a tight ball at the base of her spine and, not unlike the tingle of his touch, spreading through her.

That voice in her head again: *Do you want...*

"Do you want some gum?" She held the pack out to him. He looked at her trembling hand for a moment and reached out, covering her hand with his, a deliberate act, again—that warm, tingling flood. Annabelle had never felt anything like it before. It intrigued her.

"Thanks." His voice was soft and she pulled away, the pack of gum falling on the seat.

"So..." she paused, her breath coming in short gulps.

"Yeah?" He picked the pack of gum up and slid a stick out with his teeth.

"You're a big city guy, huh?" She turned sideways in her seat, stretching her feet out into his lap.

"Once upon a time..." He didn't even seem to notice her toes settled against his crotch.

"And they all lived happily ever after?" she teased.

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

"They usually don't." She put one knee up and to the side, resting it against the dashboard. The seam of her jean cut-offs was pressing up tight between her legs.

"No." He glanced over toward her as she blew another fading beige bubble. His eyes didn't show any real interest as they slid over her.

She sighed and sat up. "Tell me something, Lee."

"Alright."

She cocked her head at him, frowning. "Are you gay?"

"Excuse me?" He raised an eyebrow in her direction.

“Are you gay?” she repeated.

He chuckled. “Do you usually start your small talk out with such pointed questions?”

She shrugged and crossed her arms over the word “Angel” on her chest. “Well, I figure we don’t have that much time between here and the next small town and it’s best to know things right up front.”

He nodded. “Alright. Not that it’s any of your business, but no.”

“Hm.” She slid a little closer to him, studying his profile.

“Hm? Why hmm?”

“I don’t know.” She sighed. “I just...okay, then tell me something else.”

“Alright,” he agreed.

She leaned in and pressed herself against his side, brushing his hair back from his ear to whisper, “Do you want me?”

He flashed a brief, bright smile, shaking his head. “Do you want me to want you?”

Perplexed, Annabelle sat back again with a sigh. “Did I just get lost in a Cheap Trick song?” They sat quietly for a moment; the only sound the tires on the road beneath them.

He glanced at her and smiled. “I bet most men do want you...”

“Well...yeah.” She picked invisible lint off her chest.

He shrugged. “I’m not most men.”

“So that’s a no?”

“I didn’t say that.” He smiled, looking straight ahead again.

“So that’s a yes?”

"I didn't say that either." His smile seemed to tease her.

She blinked at him and then turned back toward the passenger door with a sigh.

"Never mind."

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings." He patted her thigh lightly.

"You didn't."

"Yes, I did."

"Forget it." She pushed his hand off her leg.

"You're a beautiful woman."

"But—?"

"But nothing." He shrugged. "I just... I like to keep work and pleasure separate."

"Work?" She gave him a puzzled look. "Picking up hitchhikers is work?"

"Well..."

Annabelle rolled her eyes and said under her breath, "I don't get it." The fields passed by quietly and quickly and she watched them, frowning. *This isn't happening. I cannot believe I'm going to ask him this. What am I doing? This isn't the way this is supposed to work!*

"Is there anything I could do to change your mind?"

He shook his head. "Doubtful."

"Are you sure?" Determined now, she turned herself around and stretched out onto her back on the seat with her head near his leg and her feet out the open window.

"Pretty sure." He glanced over at her in this new position.

"Really?" She unsnapped the top button of her shorts, slowly unzipping them to reveal a smooth expanse of belly.

"I... hey..." He frowned, as she wiggled back against him, putting her head in his lap. She slid her hand down the V of shorts, arching and tilting her head back, rubbing her cheek between his thighs. He glanced down at her body writhing on the seat, her head angled back over his thigh.

"Hm... maybe we should pull over." Her hand worked between her legs.

"Listen..." He said the words, but his fingertips traced over her exposed throat.

"I think we should..." She spread her knees, pressing her hips up. "Ohhhh, I definitely think we should pull over somewhere."

"God... maybe..." His voice was suddenly hoarse.

"Is that a maybe?" She nudged him again, feeling his excitement against her cheek.

He nodded, swallowing hard. "Yes."

"That's a yes?" she asked triumphantly.

"Yes." His fingers moved over her collarbone to her shoulder.

"Then come on, let's go somewhere..."

He looked down at her, understanding, as she knew he would, exactly what she meant.

"If you're sure?" He posed the half-question.

The voice inside her head again: *Do you want to...*

The touch of his hands made her tingle. The feeling inside of her was extending itself, flowing warm and thick like the blood through her veins.

"Yes."

He smiled, turning the truck down a dirt road, one with no name, heading toward the lake.

* * * *

The small stretch of sand around them was deserted, a wooded area rising behind them, and not a person or house in any direction. Sailboats on the lake were just dots upon the horizon. The road they had traveled was more of a path surrounded by trees on both sides. It was secluded and quiet, the waves gently lapping the shore as they walked toward the water, silent.

The sand was almost too warm under her bare feet. She stopped at the shoreline, watching the water rush to cover her toes and then recede. She could feel his presence behind her and she trembled. Lee touched her hair, letting his hand rest on her shoulder before slipping it downward to touch her wrist. She turned to face him.

She saw her own reflection in his sunglasses: the tousled hair, the wide eyes, and the parted lips. She felt weak, as if he were drawing all of her strength from her through her wrist, like a magnet.

He leaned in and kissed her, his lips brushing hers as she closed her eyes. His mouth traveled her jaw line on a downward path, reaching her collarbone. Warm tingling spread through her. He made a noise deep in his throat, and she stayed that way, eyes closed, head down.

He tilted her chin up with one hand, taking his sunglasses off with the other.

“Open your eyes, Annabelle.”

Her eyelids felt too heavy to lift. His hand under her chin felt like fire, and it was hot, so hot. She could feel the sun on her face and she could taste the salty sheen of her own sweat as she licked her lips.

“Look at me, Annabelle.”

She opened her eyes.

He was smiling that easy smile, but all of the life in him seemed to have been sucked up into his eyes and they were radiant with the light of a thousand shades of gold. Annabelle stood, transfixed.

“Do you want your freedom?” he asked her. She couldn’t stop staring into his eyes, the warm, swirling beauty of his eyes...

I never told him-my name-I nevertoldhimmyname

His hands stroked her hair and he was sucking her down into his eyes. It was impossible to look away from the warm, delicious relief in them. The voice in her head was strong now.

Do you want to...?

She was floating—her legs felt like water. She couldn’t look away. She couldn’t—

“What are you?” she whispered as he buried his hands in her hair, exposing her vulnerable throat, sweat trickling to disappear beneath her t-shirt.

Do you want to die?

“Your freedom,” he said, his teeth so white, still smiling as he leaned in to her. She was tingling all over wherever his hands touched her. It was so warm.

His mouth found hers, his teeth nibbling at the soft skin, his tongue tracing the outline of her lips. His hands roamed down her back, leaving that tingling trail of heat

wherever he touched her. Annabelle craved more of it, wanted to feel his hands against her bare skin. She pulled her t-shirt up, exposing her breasts in the bright light of the sun, her pink nipples stiff in the breeze. She arched her back, making them stand up proud for him.

His eyes brightened, and she didn't know that was possible, the glow of them turning orange now. He reached out to hold the weight of her breasts in his hands and she sighed, his touch against her bare skin astonishing, in no way a disappointment. It was a low, buzzing bliss spreading through her body and she wondered what it must be like to have him pressed full against her, inside of her.

Eager, she tugged his t-shirt out of his jeans and pulled it off, tossing it aside to join hers in the sand. He was so pale, his nipples dark circles on a milky surface, and Annabelle marveled at the tingling of her fingertips as she ran her hands over him.

"What are you?" she whispered again as she hooked her leg around his, pressing her breasts into his chest. She moaned at the sensation, his hands circling her back and pulling her in tight.

"I told you." His mouth moved over her throat and she gasped when she felt his teeth nibbling her there.

She fumbled with his belt, her body aching to have him, her hunger growing as her hand released his cock. She stroked him and he growled against her neck, his fingers digging hard into her ribs, his teeth biting into the soft flesh of her neck.

"I need you," she murmured, unsnapping and unzipping her shorts. She slid them, along with her panties, down over her hips and kicked them into their pile of clothes. His jeans and shoes joined the pile and he stopped for a moment, looking at

her standing nude before him, her bronze, sun-kissed body like a beacon. Annabelle reached out for him and he cupped her ass in his hands, lifting her as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

He carried her the few steps from the shoreline to the edge of the woods, pressing her bare back against the trunk of a wide maple tree. Annabelle gasped, the sharp bark digging to her flesh as he leaned into her, his mouth on hers, his tongue probing. He moved his mouth to her neck, biting and sucking his way toward the hollow of her throat.

His cock was trapped between them; she could feel the tip of it resting against her belly, throbbing there. She had to have him. “I need you inside of me,” she said, reaching down to guide him.

His cock was like holding tempered steel right out of the fire. Her hand burned with his heat and she opened herself up to him, pressing the tip into her aching hole—the very place where her ceaseless appetite was centered. He moaned as she slid him inside of her, his mouth moving over her collarbone, urgent now, greedy, suckling up toward her ear. Annabelle gasped and writhed as he began moving in her, driving her against the tree.

“Yessssssss,” she hissed, grabbing his hair in her hands, her legs tightening around him, drawing him deeper into her. He grunted against her throat, his mouth exploring the muscle that ran from her shoulder up toward her ear.

“Harder!” she demanded. His flesh was like a white-hot poker inside of her, thrusting into her over and over. The tingling sensation she felt when he touched her

had become a constant vibration between them, a rising hum. She had never experienced anything like it, and she never wanted to let him go.

Annabelle looked down at where his flesh was driving into hers, their bellies slick with sweat as they ground their hips together. She kissed him, licking at his lips, his teeth. She gasped as her tongue raked over something tantalizingly sharp. She could taste her own blood. Lee pushed against her hard, his mouth moving to cover her neck. She felt a sweet sting there, a momentary burst of something. She moaned, squeezing herself around his cock as she saw the trickle of blood running down her breast.

“Look at me, Lee.” Annabelle moved her hips in a slow dance, grinding the heat of him between her legs. It was exquisite torture. She wanted to see his eyes, those strange, mesmerizing eyes. She could hear him swallowing, swallowing her. She wanted to swallow him, too.

He looked at her, his fangs showing now. His mouth was wet with her blood, his eyes the deep, dark orange of a sunset as he shook his head, as if to clear it. She pressed her hand to her neck, to the place where he had bitten her, smiling, her eyes locked with his.

“More,” she murmured, digging her heels into his back and pushing him deeper inside of her. She clamped her muscles tight around the wet fire between her legs and he moaned, his eyes widening.

“What are you?” he whispered as she worked herself on his cock, faster, harder, greedy for him.

“Your freedom.” She arched her back, taking him all the way to the hilt, the sensation between her thighs moving to an impossible, dizzying zenith as she crushed him against her, her muscles locking down on him like a vice.

He screamed as the teeth buried deep inside of her pussy released and sank into his flesh with her shuddering orgasm, wave after wave and row after row of teeth buried into his cock. He sank to his knees and she sank with him, pressing him back into the sand as she rode him still, the juices of her orgasm mixing with his blood between their legs.

The light in his eyes was fading as she watched, her smile dreamy as she stroked his pale flesh with her fingertips.

“Vampire?” She rubbed her neck where he had bitten her.

He nodded, his face frozen in a twisted look of shock.

“I thought they couldn’t come out during the day?” She looked up at the sun, as it was moving directly overhead now.

“It’s a myth.” His voice was fading. “Succubus?”

“Yes,” she smiled. The waves of her pleasure were subsiding, the teeth tucked away deep within her receding, then releasing him.

“I thought... succubus... only come in dreams?” he murmured, his eyes closing.

“That’s a myth.” She leaned over and kissed his lips. He opened his eyes to look at her; the beautiful light there growing dim. “Can vampires bleed to death?” she wondered aloud.

“Guess so.” It was the last thing he said.

“So, I’m guessing the stake in the heart thing is a myth, too?” She stood, his blood running down her legs as she watched the light in his eyes go dark.

* * * *

The black pick-up stopped and the passenger door opened.

“Do you need a ride?”

“Thanks!” Tyler Lewis climbed into the truck. “I thought I was going to be out there forever! You’re a life saver!” He smiled at the woman next to him, seeing his own reflection in her mirrored sunglasses, noting how attractive she was.

The woman smiled at him as he shut the door.

“I know what it’s like, being out there,” she told him as she put the truck into drive and accelerated, leaving only one of an infinite number of small towns behind them.

The End



The Laundry Chute

Friday, August 15, 2003

"I wish it would rain," Nicky Davis said under his breath, squinting up at the sky.

There weren't any substantial clouds to offer much protection and the ones that drifted about were lazy, seemingly careful of crossing the sun's path.

Nicky sat on the edge of the cracked cement pond in his backyard with Sam, Eric and Jesse. They were all wearing cut-offs, their feet dangling in the shallow water, shirts flung aside in a damp pile of color.

"Yeah!" Sam agreed. "A storm, even. The power could get knocked out. That would be boss!"

"Cool!" Eric perked up. "We could tell ghost stories!"

"It's not gonna rain," Jesse told them. "It hasn't rain since the middle of July. Why would it start now?"

"Yeah." He agreed, looking up at the nearly cloudless sky. Their bored silence ensued.

It was August. School started in two weeks and summer had lost its luster. They had a pretty good team for stickball and touch football for a while there, but some kids had drifted away. It was the heat. It made everyone listless. No one wanted to do much. They had a fort out in the woods that ran next to Nicky's house, but it was made out of sheet metal and in ninety degree weather it felt about a hundred and twenty inside.

"How about your basement, Nicky?" Jesse asked.

"I don't know." Nicky looked over at his five-year-old brother, Jeremy, who was poking around the garden with a stick. "I'm supposed to keep an eye on him."

"So take him with us. No sweat."

Nicky thought of how cool the basement would be compared to out here. He could taste his sweat.

"All right, let's go." Nicky got up. "But remember—any sign of my mom and dad and you guys high-tail it out the basement window."

"Cool," Eric agreed.

They gathered up their shirts and started toward the house.

"Come on, Jer!" Nicky called. "We're going in."

Jeremy looked up, holding some sort of bug between his fingers. "But Ma said—"

"Come on!"

Jeremy shrugged, dropped the bug and brushed his hands off, straightening the Detroit Tigers cap on his blonde head and trotting into the house after them.

The kitchen, a mess as usual, was to their right as they crowded into the side door. The basement stairs were in front of them.

“Go ahead, guys.” Nicky flicked the light switch. “Me and Jeremy’ll get some Cokes.”

The three boys made their way down the basement steps while Nick and Jeremy hunted for sodas.

“Here they are!” Jeremy held up two from their mother’s hiding spot in one of the vegetable bins.

“You take those down,” Nicky directed. “I’ll get three more.” He grabbed the three remaining cans, giving only a moment’s thought to the consequences of the empty plastic rings sitting in the bin before following his brother down the stairs.

Sam and Eric were still arguing. Jesse was lounging against the pool table. Coke was passed around and Nicky rolled the can across his forehead before taking a long swig. The basement was unfinished, but it was a lot cooler than outside.

“So, now what?” Sam asked after a few moments of gulping and silence.

“We could play pool,” Eric suggested.

Nicky shook his head. “My dad locked up the cue sticks.” His three older brothers had gotten into a fight and broken two of them.

“Monopoly?” Sam suggested. Everyone groaned.

“Twenty one? Five card stud?” Eric offered.

Nicky shook his head. "No cards. I took my last pack to the fort, remember?
Anyone want to go get 'em?"

No one volunteered.

Eric flipped Jeremy's prized Detroit Tiger's cap off.

"Hey!" Jeremy cried. "Quit!"

"Stupid kid never takes it off," Nicky snorted.

Eric tossed it to Sam, and Jeremy charged after it. Sam tossed it back to Eric just as Jeremy almost reached it.

"How about monkey-in-the-middle?" Eric grinned, holding the cap out of Jeremy's reach as Jeremy jumped up and down for it.

"Gimme it back!" Jeremy cried. "Nicky, I'm gonna tell!"

Nicky rolled his eyes. "Give it back, you guys. The little tattletale will get me in trouble."

Eric tossed the cap back to Sam, anyway.

"You asshole!" Jeremy yelled, using the worst word he could think of, his face on fire as he heard himself say it.

The boys stopped and looked at each other, wide-eyed, and then cracked up.

"Where'd you hear that?" Nicky asked Jeremy.

"You!" He stuck out his tongue and lunged for his hat again.

"Hey!" Jesse reached out and caught the cap as Sam was flinging it back in Eric's direction. He slapped Jeremy's head with it and dropped it to the floor. "Here, ya big baby."

Jeremy stuck out his tongue, his face red from racing back and forth. He picked up his baseball hat, shoving it back on his head and going off to sulk in the corner.

"I got an idea." Jesse was staring toward the workroom at the back of the basement. They all waited. Jesse's ideas were always good, although rare. "How about dive bombing?"

"What?" Eric and Sam echoed one another.

Nicky grinned. He knew what Jesse was talking about. They had done it one afternoon earlier this summer when no one was home.

Their house was big and old and nestled between the woods and Interstate 75, and it had all sorts of strange nooks and crannies that the newer pre-fab houses like the ones Eric and Sam lived in down the road didn't sport. One of its odd features was a huge laundry chute that ran from the second floor bathroom all the way to the basement where his father had rigged a kind of wooden pen to catch all their clothes.

Jesse had come up with the idea that they could jump down it—if there were enough clothes gathered in the box to cushion their fall. The chute pointed straight down and spilled out into the makeshift box onto the cement floor below, keeping the laundry from flooding all over the basement when it landed. With five boys in the house, there were usually so many dirty clothes on laundry day that they piled way up into the chute.

They had both done it twice that day before Dennis, one of Nick's older brothers, had come home from work. Luckily, they hadn't been caught. When Nicky explained to them what "dive-bombing" was, they were all eager to try.

“You guys aren’t going to turn pussy, are you?” Nicky came out of his father’s work room with a flashlight.

“No way, Davis!” They scoffed, following each other up the two flights of stairs to the bathroom. They crowded in the doorway as Nicky flashed the light down the chute.

“Three-quarters full,” he reported.

“Enough,” Jesse said with the voice of authority.

“So, who wants to go first?” Nicky asked. They were quiet now. Two stories was an awful long way.

“Me!” cried Jeremy. “I want to go!”

“You’re too young,” Nicky said.

“I am not!”

“Come on, Jer. Don’t make me hit you.”

“Why don’t you go, Davis?” Sam asked him.

“Sure.” Nicky shrugged. “Hold this.” He handed the flashlight to Jesse and swung his legs into the opening so that he was sitting on the edge, the door opening downward, almost touching the floor.

He had a flash of memory—one of his older brothers hanging him by his ankles over the banister and the delicious rush of fear that came with it. He used to beg them to do it again and again. This was like that, sitting on the edge of that anticipation, facing the real danger of falling but knowing you were gonna be ok—probably.

The chute itself was about five feet square. There was a pipe that ran across the top. Nicky wasn’t sure what it was for, but it was secure. He grabbed the bar and slid in,

dangling there for a moment, his Nikes touching the pile of clothes. They were all peering anxiously into the chute.

“See ya, pansies!” He grinned and let go of the bar.

He was falling, falling...

The sensation that his stomach had somehow been left at the top of the chute came over him. He pulled his knees up to his chest as clothes and sheets surrounded him, slowing him up. Slower, slower...

His mind seemed to be working at a much faster rate than his descent. *What if I hit the floor?* His mind raced. *What if there aren't enough clothes? What if—*

His body slowed and he was in darkness, clothes all around him as he came to a stop. He was nearly to the bottom and he knew he would have to dig through the tightly packed clothes beneath him before the guys could slide the wooden box over and let him out.

His stomach was tight and his heart was quivering somewhere near the back of his throat—but his grin stretched from ear to ear. He leaned his forehead against the cool metal side.

“Nicky?” It was Jeremy’s voice, far away.

“Nicky?” Jesse this time.

“Nicky!?” All of them, a chorus.

“Sissies!” He yelled up, jubilant, looking into the light of the flashlight that someone was shining down the chute. “Somebody come help me out!”

He heard cheers upstairs.

They had a blast for a good hour, although it was a lot of work, packing the clothes back in so the next guy could drop down. It was almost as bad as having to drag your sled back up the hill after sailing down to the bottom.

Jeremy kept pestering them to get a turn, and Nicky kept promising, "Next time." Of course, Jeremy knew what that meant: never! Nicky said he could be "lookout," but that just meant he got to sit on the toilet and watch them all get a turn while he ran one of his Matchbox cars over the windowsill. That was how he saw his parents' truck pull in the driveway, and he stormed down the stairs to the basement, where the boys were pushing stray clothes back into the chute.

"The windows!" Nicky hissed when he heard the pick-up's tires on the gravel drive. "Quick!" The windows were in the back of the house, so the boys could climb out and hop the back fence into the alley.

Nicky prayed that his parents were going to unload the truck full of groceries and would park up by the side door instead of pulling all the way back into the garage.

"Hurry up!" Nicky sent Jeremy to hide the Coke cans somewhere.

Sam, Eric and Jesse climbed up on to the pool table and wiggled out the two windows. Nicky breathed a sigh of relief as he stood on tiptoe to slide the latches shut.

"Nicky! Jeremy!" They both jumped.

"Down here, Dad," Nicky called.

"What are you doing down there?"

"It's cooler down here," Nicky replied. "If you hadn't noticed, it's like a million degrees outside!"

“Don’t be smart!” his father snapped. “Get up here and give us a hand with these groceries!”

“Yeah, okay.” Nicky looked at Jeremy. “Not a word, right?”

Jeremy shook his head. As much as he wanted to tell on them sometimes, the way they teased and picked on him, he had learned—with four older brothers, he knew when it was best to keep his mouth shut. Nicky started up the stairs.

“Coming, kid?” Nicky asked. Jeremy nodded, gazing at the laundry chute. It fascinated him. They called him four more times before he moved.

Sunday, August 17, 2003

Thunder rumbled, followed by a quick flash of lightening. Rain had finally come, and it had shown up in full battle gear. Strong winds whistled outside and rain came down in slashing sheets.

“What a great day for a wedding,” Leila Davis muttered as she shrugged on her raincoat.

“It’s not an outside service,” her husband, Raymond, replied, taking umbrellas out of the closet. “Don’t worry about it. Besides, we need it.”

“Not the day of my niece’s wedding, we don’t.” She shot him a dark look.

“Rain, rain, go away, come again some other day...” The little sing-song voice came from near the kitchen window and it startled her. She glanced into the darkened kitchen.

Jeremy was standing there, the curtain pulled back, looking out into the rain. It was noon, but outside it looked like night. He looked so tiny standing there, his nose pressed against the glass, his body encased in Winnie-the-Pooh pajamas, the kind with feet, his Detroit Tiger’s hat tipped back on his head.

“Come on, Jeremy,” she called. “Away from the window. I just washed it and you’re fogging it all up.”

Jeremy stepped away, letting the curtain fall aside.

“Come here,” she said. He came, his feet shuffling along the linoleum. “How do you feel?” Her hand went to his forehead. “Better?”

“A little.” They could hear voices and the pounding of feet on the stairs. “Is Martha coming?”

Martha was their next-door neighbor. Jeremy figured she was at least a hundred. She had babysat for all the kids at one time or another, from Ray on down. She was old, and fat, and Jeremy didn't like her.

As if on cue, the doorbell rang.

"I don't like her, Mom," Jeremy whispered. "She's mean."

"Shh!" his mother hissed. "That's not nice."

"That's ok, champ." Steve flicked Jeremy's baseball cap off. "We've all had to put up with her. You get to do some time, too."

"Can I stay home, too, Mom?" Nicky pleaded. Anything was better than a wedding—even Martha.

"No, you can't." His father opened the front door for Martha.

"Hey, look at the baby in his footie jammies!" Dennis reached for Jeremy's baseball cap before he could and tossed it behind him to Steve, who held it out of Jeremy's reach as he clamored for it.

"I'm not a baby!" Jeremy yelled, kicking Steve in the shin to make him drop the hat.

"You little—!" Steve grabbed for Jeremy, but their father's voice stopped them both.

"Knock it off! You boys go out to the truck. Your mother and I will be a minute."

"You big baby!" Steve threw his baseball cap across the room as the four boys went out the side door into the rain. Jeremy went to get his hat, hearing his brothers' hoots and catcalls.

"Hi, Martha." Leila greeted the old woman at the door. "Thanks for coming."

"Come on, Li, we've got to run." Ray touched her arm.

"Ok, I'm coming," she insisted, turning back to Martha. "Bedtime is eight o'clock. I'll call to check on him between the service and the reception."

"I'm sure we'll be fine," Martha replied.

"Be good," Ray told his son, twisting the cap that Jeremy had put back on his head so it was facing backwards. "Take care of the house."

"Sure, Dad," he replied, following them to the door. "Bye."

"Bye!" Leila called as the side door swung shut behind them. Martha had already settled herself on the couch with her crocheting. Jeremy went to the kitchen window, pulling the curtain aside.

The truck, with the camper on it so his brothers wouldn't get wet in the back, was pulling out of the driveway. The tail lights made long scarlet streaks on the wet pavement. Lightening flashed.

"Rain, rain, go away, come again some other day," he said under his breath.

He picked up his Matchbox cars from the table and went to the living room. He sat in a chair across from Martha. "See this car? Its hood opens."

"Mm-hmm." She didn't look up from whatever god-awful purple mess she was making.

Not interested.

"I wish I was old enough to drive." No response. Martha was no fun. He got up and went into the kitchen. He wasn't really that sick, anymore. He wished he could have gone with them. Anything was better than here—with Martha.

"What are you doing, Jeremy?" she called.

“Nothing.” He wandered back into the living room. “I’m gonna go to my room now. I’m tired.” It was a lie, but he didn’t want to be around her.

“All right, dear.” She adjusted the glasses on her nose. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Un-hunh. Sure.” Jeremy went upstairs. It was dark and shadows scaled the walls when lightening flashed.

He went into the bathroom and flipped the toilet seat up, unsnapping the bottoms of his pajamas. Baby jammies, he thought, fumbling with the snaps. He urinated.

Lightening flashed again, startling him. He flushed the toilet and pulled his pajamas up. Snapped the snaps. The shadows of branches, like fingers, moved across the ceiling. Rain, rain, go away, he thought.

He paused at the sink to wash his hands. The water came on full blast and he turned it off with a startled cry. Wet now. Great. He peeled his pajamas off, rolling them into a ball as he pulled open the laundry chute.

How far do they fall? How far would I fall?

He looked at the laundry chute, contemplating it.

Was there any laundry in there? He couldn’t remember. When did mom pull all the clothes out? He flipped on the light and tried to look down. No good. Just shadows. And darkness. Couldn’t tell. He flipped it off again.

Could get the flashlight—but it was downstairs, and Martha would want to know why he wanted it. No good. When did mom pull the clothes out? Think!

Then he remembered. The wedding! She kept saying she was never going to get all the laundry done and it was going to have to wait. So there were clothes down there!

"I'm not a baby," Jeremy whispered as he swung his legs so they hung over the edge. His feet dangled for a moment. He was cold. He reached out for the bar and grabbed it with both hands, sliding himself in.

He dangled there, a little boy in Fruit of the Loom briefs and a baseball cap, his heart pounding in his ears.

The anticipation crawled up his insides and a hot, dry excitement burned its way from his stomach to his genitals.

Are you sure?

No, but...

He considered, for a moment, going back. He could. No one would ever know. He heard his brother's voice in his head: "Sissy!"

Uncertain, he looked back into the bathroom. Lightening flashed, followed by a loud clap of thunder that seemed to shake the entire house.

Jeremy was startled and he let go, his hands slipping off the cold steel bar.

Rain, rain, go a—

That was his last thought as he plunged two stories to meet the cold cement floor.

Tuesday, August 1, 2006

The sun slanted brightly through the open kitchen windows and the heat was stifling. The side screen door slammed shut and Renee Houston looked up from where she was peeling potatoes at the kitchen table.

"Hey, hon." Jim greeted her, unlacing his work boots in the landing before coming into the kitchen.

"Hi, babe. How's your day?" She set her potato peeler on the table and wiped her hands on her apron.

"All right. Smells good. What is it?"

"Food." She got up and put the potato peelings into the garbage under the sink

"Very funny." He wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her forehead. "So, how are things here?"

"Well, everything is finally all unpacked, I think." She smiled. "This house is so perfect. I still can't believe we got so much space for this price!

"Yeah, well," Jim frowned. "The history doesn't bother you?"

"Not anymore." She shrugged. "It's starting to feel like home."

"Good." He moved toward the kitchen window. "How's Chad doing?" He stood looking at their six-year-old sitting in the driveway. He had just waved at his dad when Jim pulled into the driveway instead of running to meet him, like he usually did.

"All right." She washed potatoes in the sink. "There aren't any kids around his age, and you know how shy he can be about going and making friends."

"School starts soon." Jim watched as Chad ran his trucks in the gravel drive.

“Oh, and I met our neighbor,” Renee went on. “She’s an old woman, and she lives next door with her granddaughter, Denise. She offered to baby-sit.”

“The old woman?” Jim asked, starting to turn away from the window, thoughts of a shower and a hot meal in his head, when he saw something that made him look back. “Who in the hell is he talking to?”

“Not the old woman, the girl. She just graduated high school.” Renee joined her husband and smiled when she saw Chad sitting at the curb, apparently talking to no one. “That’s his new friend—his imaginary friend.”

“Since when?”

Renee leaned her cheek against his arm. “A few days ago. I think it’s just the move—he’s lonely.”

“Chad doesn’t have an imaginary bone in his body,” Jim remarked. Renee knew he didn’t say it to be cruel—it was just said in the matter-of-fact way that a parent knows their child.

“Maybe city air stifled his creativity.” Renee shrugged. “All I know is he’s got an imaginary friend, now.”

“I don’t like it,” Jim knocked on the glass and motioning to Chad. Chad got up, brushing off his shorts and walking toward the house.

“You worry too much.” Renee moved away to get the potatoes from the sink.

Chat materialized at the screen door. “Bye! I’ll see you after dinner!” The screen door squeaked open and then slammed shut as Chad came into the kitchen.

“Hi.” Chad slipped a Matchbox car into his pocket. “Is dinner ready? Should I wash?”

“Almost.” Jim sat on one of the kitchen chairs so he was closer to his son’s level.
“How about a game of ball after supper?”

Chad wrinkled his nose. “No, thanks.”

Renee frowned at Jim, putting the potatoes into a pot. Chad wasn’t overly fond of any sports, and she had told her husband a thousand times that it was because he pressed too hard.

“Are you sure?” Jim asked. “We could throw the ball around, you, me, and whoever you were talking to out there?”

Chad stood in front of his father, the sun shining on his blonde hair, turning it almost white. His bangs hung over his eyebrows, nearly touching the fair lashes that framed his blue eyes.

“Well... he was gonna show me the woods,” Chad explained. “He’s really neat, Dad.”

“Does he live around here?” Jim played along.

“Not anymore, but he says he used to live here.”

Renee turned from the cupboard to look at them, gripping the dinner plates. She met Jim’s eyes over Chad’s head.

“Does your friend have a name?” Jim asked.

“Yeah.” Chad smiled, showing white, milk teeth, two of which were missing. “His name’s Jeremy.”

Renee dropped the plates and they crashed to the floor and shattered, scattering glass everywhere.

* * * *

“He must have overheard us talking.” Jim reassured her, rolling over in bed to face her.

“He said he had never heard of him before,” Renee replied, her eyes wide. “At least until he ‘met’ Jeremy.” She shivered in the darkness and reached for him. He pulled her close. “When I think of that poor little boy...”

“Well, don’t!” Jim insisted. “The laundry chute is nailed shut.”

“How do you explain the coincidence?” she whispered. “An imaginary friend with the same name?”

“Maybe he heard it from that Martha woman, or her granddaughter,” Jim soothed. “We warned him about it. There’s no danger.”

“I know, but—”

“No,” Jim’s voice was firm. “There was an unfortunate accident once. It’s over. Chad will be fine. He’s bright, and he knows it’s dangerous. He’s the most careful kid I know.”

They were silent.

“I still don’t like it.” Renee rolled over and closed her eyes.

Sleep eluded them both for a few more hours.

Thursday, August 17, 2006

"The number of the restaurant is here," Renee told the young girl standing in the living room. "And the emergency numbers are by the phone. He's already eaten, and bed time is eight-thirty."

"Mom!" Chad protested.

"Eight-thirty," Jim insisted firmly.

"Fine," he pouted.

"That's about it, Denise." Jim smiled at the girl, eyeing her shorts and the half-shirt that exposed a tiny silver belly ring. "There's pop in the fridge and chips if you get hungry. Help yourself. We shouldn't be late." He turned to his wife. "Ready, Renee?"

"Be good, sweetie." Renee leaned down to kiss Chad.

"We'll be fine," Denise assured them as she walked them to the door. "Bye, Mr. and Mrs. Houston!" She shut the door behind them.

"Whew!" She popped the top on a can of diet Coke and headed for the phone.

Chad followed her, watching her dial.

"Bobby?" Her voice turned to a purr and she tucked her short blonde hair behind her ear. "Yeah, they're gone. You wanna come over around eight-thirty?"

Chad pulled a Matchbox car out of his pocket. "See this? The hood opens." He flipped the hinged lid, open and closed. She smiled and nodded, waving him away. "My friend, Jeremy, gave it to me." Chad tugged at her cut-offs to get her attention.

"Bobby, hang on." Denise covered the mouthpiece of the phone with her hand. "Hey, why don't you go find something to do, huh?"

Chad looked toward the kitchen. "Hey, Jeremy's here!" Denise just nodded. She had been told all about Chad's imaginary friend over the phone, and to just play along.

"You know I do," she said in a low voice, carrying the phone to the couch. She signed. "Hold on." Chad was standing in front of her.

"Me and Jeremy are going to go to my room and play."

"Sure." She waved him away again with her hand. "Clean up any messes you make."

"Come on, Jer." Chad motioned to thin air, and Denise shook her head, putting the phone back to her ear.

"Bobby?" She smiled, leaning back on the couch. "Ok, I'll see you soon."

* * * *

"My mom said eight-thirty!" Chad protested, folding his arms over his chest, ready to do battle with this new babysitter.

Denise rolled her eyes, steering him by the shoulders down the hallway to his room. "And she's not here, is she?"

She tossed pajamas on the bed. "Put those on, let's brush your teeth and go night-night, ok?"

"I'm not a baby," Chad scoffed, picking up his pajamas and heading for the bathroom.

Denise waited, fixing her hair in the mirror over his dresser. She heard the toilet flush and the water start to run. Her watch said it was almost eight, and she wanted to get the kid to bed long before Bobby got here.

"This isn't fair," Chad grumbled, coming back into the room.

"Life isn't fair, kid." She turned down his covers and pointed to his bed. He climbed in and let her pull the covers up. "Goodnight."

"I'm gonna tell my mom," he said as she turned out the light and started to close the door.

Denise peered in at him, her eyes narrowing. "You say one word to your mom and I tell her that you and your little imaginary friend were raiding the pantry for cookies tonight. You think I'm deaf?"

Chad pouted. He'd thought she was too busy on the phone to hear them. "Yeah, well... Jeremy says you're an asshole!"

Denise snorted. "Nice." She moved to close the door again.

"Wait!" Chad called. "Mom leaves it open a little."

"Fine!" Denise sighed, leaving the door open a crack. "Goodnight, ok?"

"Yeah. Good night."

Denise went downstairs and got herself another diet Coke, turning on the television for a while. Bobby was right on time, and she let him in the side door, her heart already beating fast. It had started to rain, and his hair was wet, she noticed, as he came in smelling like beer and carrying a six-pack.

"I don't know if we should be drinking." She frowned at him. "You're not even supposed to be here."

“So, then they’ll never know, will they?” Bobby steered her toward the living room, setting the six pack on the table and popping a can out of the ring. “Kid asleep?”

“All tucked in.” Denise let him push her onto the couch. She opened her arms to him, smiling an invitation. She had been thinking about this since the Houstons had asked her to baby-sit, and she was more than ready for him.

He put his beer on the end table and crawled on top of her, kissing her, his hands moving up her shirt. She gasped and wiggled as he rubbed her nipples through her bra. She could feel his cock through his jeans, hard already against her thigh.

His fingers were working at the front of her bra, looking for the clasp. She giggled pushed him away, lifting her shirt. He grinned, straddling her and watching as she unhooked her bra, letting her breasts spring free. She rubbed her hands over nipples, tweaking them and watching his eyes. She loved doing things like that to turn him on.

“Yeah,” he whispered, moving his hips against her belly. “Play with them.”

Denise squeezed her thighs together, feeling how wet she was under her cut-off shorts and panties. It felt like she had been wet all day. She wanted to put her hand down there, but Bobby was in her way.

“I got something for ya.” He undid the buckle of his belt, still smiling as he unsnapped and unzipped his jeans. He pulled his cock free, stroking it and easing himself toward her mouth. “Here.”

She stretched out her tongue, licking at the tip. He tasted salty, a little sweaty. She sucked the tip, wetting him with her mouth. He let her take over, his hands reaching down to rub and squeeze her breasts as she worked him between her lips. She made

little noises in the back of her throat as she sucked him, her pussy aching to be touched. She wiggled her hips, trying to rub the seam of her cut-offs over her mound.

"Let's go upstairs," she whispered, taking him out of her mouth, but still stroking him.

His eyes were bright. "Can I fuck you?"

"Yes." Her answer sent them both scrambling for the stairs.

The Houstons' bedroom was down the hall to the left. Luckily, the kid's room was on the other side of the bathroom. She could see his door still open a crack. She listened, but didn't hear anything. He was asleep.

They went into the Houstons' bedroom. It was dark, and Denise didn't turn on the light. Bobby went to shut the door, but she stopped him. "I gotta be able to hear the kid."

"What about some privacy?"

She shrugged. "It's dark in here."

"Denise—"

"All right, fine, close it."

"We've never done it in a bed," Bobby remarked as Denise stripped off her clothes. He was working his pants down, toeing his shoes off. "Couches, backseat of the car, that one time at the beach..."

"Well, let's take advantage of it, then," she replied, crawling up on the bed on her hands and knees and looking over her shoulder at him. He was naked now, too, and he grabbed her hips, still standing, pulling her back toward him and the edge of the bed

"Oh, I like this," he remarked, his cock in his hand, aiming it toward her. "This is the perfect height."

“For what?” she breathed, arching her back. Her pussy felt like it was dripping fire.

Bobby slipped his cock between her lips and shifted his hips forward, groaning as he entered her. “For this!”

“Oooo!” Denise squealed, feeling him slide deep inside of her. He started moving his hips, his hands pulling her ass for leverage. “Oh, god, yeah.”

She rested her cheek against the comforter, closing her eyes and letting him do all the work. He was throbbing inside of her, the thick length of him making short, even strokes. Bobby reached forward, searching for her breast and found it. Her nipple swayed against his fingers and she moaned at the sensation.

Denise slid her fingers between her legs, rubbing her clit in little circles. She could feel his balls slapping into her as they rocked. He grabbed her hips and pulled her into him harder, making little grunting noises as he did.

“Shh, the kid,” she whispered, but she moaned when he slammed into her again, burying himself in her wetness. Her fingers were moving faster now, tickling her clit toward delicious heights.

“More,” she murmured, rocking her hips to meet him. She could hear his breath coming faster, and she squeezed the muscles between her legs along the length of him, making him gasp. She loved doing things to press him closer and closer to his edge. The sound of him struggling to hold back only made her more excited, her clit swollen and her pussy flowing with need.

“Harder, fuck me harder!” She knew just how to push him, and herself. “Oooh, Bobby, make me come!”

He groaned, his hand slapping her ass. She jumped and yelped at the sound and sensation of it, her pussy beginning to spasm.

“Oh, fuck!” She swore as she came, the sensation spreading out in waves from her pulsating clit through her belly and beyond.

“Pull out,” she gasped, reminding him as he bucked against her, his fingers digging into her flesh.

“Nooo,” he groaned. “God, I’m so fucking close, baby!”

“Pull out,” she insisted, reaching between her legs, feeling him going into her. Her pussy was still aching with her climax.

“Damn, Denise,” he panted, his hips grinding into her. “I want to cum in you so bad.”

“No condom,” she said, pulling herself a little forward and sliding him out of her.

“Fuck!” he swore, grabbing her ass and pulling her back, his cock already beginning to surge with his orgasm. Wave after wave of cum flooded over her ass and down her thighs. He shuddered and thrust against her as if he were still buried in her pussy.

“Damnit, Bobby,” she hissed, crawling off the bed and turning on a light. “You better not have gotten cum all over the comforter.”

Denise grabbed tissues from the box on the night table, wiping herself up the best she could as she inspected the bed. Bobby stood there, his cock still at half-mast, looking dazed as he watched her.

“We should have turned the light on.” His voice was regretful. “I love to watch it go in.”

"You were in kind of a hurry," she reminded him, satisfied that there weren't any stains on the bed. She pulled her panties on, and Bobby reached for his clothes.

"What is that?" Bobby cocked his head toward the door. Denise stopped, holding her breath. Something in the hallway. The kid?

"Chad?" Denise opened the door a crack. He was standing in the hallway, staring at her. "Everything ok?"

"I have to go to the bathroom." He turned the knob and went in, shutting it behind him.

"Oh my god, it was the kid," Denise hissed, hooking her bra.

"Do you think he heard anything?" Bobby asked.

"I don't think so."

Chad's voice was muffled through the walls. "Yeah, a club would be boss!"

"Who is he talking to?" Bobby asked as he zipped his jeans.

Denise listened to the one-sided conversation. "His imaginary friend."

Chad's voice:

"What kind of initiation?..."

Well, I don't know...

I *am* your friend...

Well, okay..."

"Is he talking about some kind of club?" Bobby whispered.

Denise put her finger to her lips. "Can you imagine having a club that you were the only member of?" She giggled.

"Kinda pathetic," Bobby agreed.

She pulled her shirt over her head. "I better get him back to bed."

Chad was still talking: "My dad said it was nailed shut!"

Denise searched the floor for her shorts, but didn't see them.

Chad's voice, louder now: "I can't! It's dangerous!"

Denise looked at Bobby, who was dressed now, and they frowned at each other. Dangerous wasn't a word you wanted to hear from the kid you were supposed to be looking after.

Denise found her shorts kicked under the bed and tugged them on, hearing Chad again: "I *said* I *am* your friend.... well... okay..."

"Chad?" Denise opened the bedroom door all the way, still buttoning her shorts. "Chad, what are you doing, honey?" She stood in the doorway, not hearing anything.

"I don't want to!" Chad's voice sounded on the verge of panic. "No, wait! I don't want to!"

His scream filled the house and Denise fled down the hall, her eyes wide. She heard Bobby coming after her, and she waved him back.

"Chad, are you all right?" She flipped on the bathroom light. The brightness made her blink.

Chad wasn't there.

Two stories below, Chad's body was twisted on the cold cement floor, the Detroit Tiger's cap beside him soaking up his blood.

The End



Silent Night

"Daddy?" The voice invaded his thoughts and Bruce, annoyed, looked up from the television screen. "Mommy always tucked me in. Are you going to tuck me in?"

The child, her dark hair pulled into a makeshift ponytail that stuck out from the side of her head, stood in front of him wearing Care Bear pajamas and carrying a stuffed dog named 'Leroy.'

Damned Xerox copy of her mother. The hair, the eyes, the innocent expression—all covering the cold, calculating mind beneath. Anger heated his chest.

"I'll come in and say good night later, Amanda," he told her gruffly. "I'm busy."

She looked from him to the television. "That was mommy's," she said, pointing to the pink ribbon tied around his wrist.

He jerked his hand away when she touched it. "Go to bed!"

Without a word, she shuffled out of the living room and down the hall to her bedroom.

I'm not missing 'Wheel of Fortune' for her.

From the apartment above came the keening wail of a child. Bruce hit the volume button on the remote to drown out the sound. He hated the new way it all worked, how the letters just lit up. He missed Vanna turning them. *Turn those letters, Vanna, baby. Round and round and round she goes.* He hit the volume again. It was no use. He could still hear it, like the wail of a siren.

Outside, the snow was falling, covering the world in a frigid white blanket. Cars were mounds of snow. Two kids in snowsuits were making a snowman on the front lawn of the apartment building. He hated living in the kids' section. Screaming children at all hours of the day. Tripping over their toys on the stairs

* * * *

He thought of his dad's .45 as he watched the two kids out his window. It was locked away next to the hunting rifle that Justine had reluctantly allowed him to buy himself for Christmas five years ago, just after Amanda was born.

She had never known about the .45, of course. He had snuck it in among the rest of the boxes of stuff after his father died. Justine wouldn't have approved of a gun that had only one use—to kill another human being—and his father's checkered past was something she held in great disdain. One more thing to hate him for.

He cocked his finger and aimed it at the red and white snowsuit below. The pink ribbon tied tightly around his wrist flexed with the motion.

"Boom," he said softly.

He stepped back and looked at his reflection in the glass. When a mess. Unshaven since she left, a week's worth of grime on his skin. He peered closer until his reflection disappeared and his forehead was pressed against the glass, his breath fogging up the window. Better, he thought. Didn't want to see, anyway. Upstairs, the wailing continued.

* * * *

It hurt to think. His brain felt sluggish. He lay in the middle of the living room floor, hands behind his head, and stared up at the ceiling. Sick, he thought

Sick and tired. That's what she said. Sick and tired of your shit. I want out. I'm getting out.

He could hear them walking upstairs. Sounded like a herd of elephants.

Connie told me about you two, she'd said. Connie. Uptight little tease—Justine's best friend, Connie. So he had pinched her ass a few times. Big deal. Bitch Connie. Connie was a tattletale, as his mother used to say. And a liar. He'd never gotten down with her. She was just a tease. Liar, liar, pants on fire.

And it was nothing compared to Justine—what Justine had done to him. She didn't know that he knew—midnight rendezvous, some rank motel in the middle of fucking nowhere, how could he know?

He shouldn't have been there, tucked behind the Coke machine and watching some stranger grab his wife's tits, pressing her hard against the number '117' on the door. He shouldn't have been feeling a sick thud of jealous rage in his head—and he

definitely shouldn't have been feeling his cock swelling in his trousers as he watched the guy shove his wife's skirt up to her waist.

The way she moaned, the way she twisted and spread and groped! Fuck! He wondered if it that really was his wife?

He was supposed to be in Boston, sleeping in his businessman's suite, getting ready for a presentation for a company that didn't even exist in the morning, but instead he was watching a man half his age slip his dick into his wife's pussy and slam her against the door so hard that the Coke machine Bruce was hiding behind rattled against the wall.

They didn't even have the decency to do it behind closed doors. Couldn't wait—she wrapped her slim thighs around him right there under the bare bulb light above her head that illuminated the whole sordid scene. Bruce remembered watching a moth bump its stupid head against that bulb while he listened to her gasp and moan and swear and grunt. It went on forever. Moth bumping, wife humping.

And all the while, his cock betrayed him, throbbing fiercely in his shorts. He remembered the sick feeling of lust rising, and it was like wanting to vomit. It made no sense. Something begged for release, and finally, it came—she came—he heard the tell-tale cry, knew it well enough. And the stud grunted and rutted hard into her until he shot a load up into his own wife's cunt.

They had opened the door, then, Room 117, giggling like kids, whispering together. He saw a flash of a ribbon in her hair as she turned, a pink ribbon tied around a dark, girlish ponytail. He had stood there a long time, watching that fatuous moth

slamming its head against the radiant light of a bulb in the night. Long enough to hear her cry out again like that, at least once. His cock was still aching.

It ached now. He still fucking wanted her.

Bruce glowered at the ceiling. The brat had begun to cry again.

* * * *

Bruce turned the kitchen radio on full blast to compete with the television. He could still hear that awful wail from upstairs. He turned on the garbage disposal. He set two of Justine's heavy Betty Crocker cookbooks on top of the electric can opener so it hummed aimlessly. He took a Swanson's Salisbury

Steak T.V. dinner out of the freezer and popped it, still in its box, into the microwave on high power. The hum of electricity surrounded him, but damn it, he could still hear the kid.

He flipped the blender on. Its blades whirled uselessly, slicing air molecules into little pieces. Bruce thought he heard them screaming.

He opened the fridge that was under-stocked with two heads of lettuce, a grapefruit, a bottle of Heinz, a thing of Philly cream cheese, and two tomatoes—remnants of Justine's latest diet.

He grabbed the two over-ripe tomatoes and tossed them both into the blender, quickly covering it. The blades whirred and chopped, and Bruce sighed in relief. He watched as the tomatoes smeared red on the blender's insides.

* * * *

The little girl lay curled up, clutching her stuffed dog in her sleep, her mouth pouting. The room was decorated in little-girl fashion with pink walls, a pink bedspread,

and pink drapes. Justine had decorated it herself, with Amanda's approval. That had cost him a mint, he remembered. He glanced around the room from the doorway, the hallway light shining into the room, casting shadows.

She's spoiled. We spoiled her. I spoiled her, like I spoiled her mother. And what did I get?

"Daddy, would you?... Daddy, can I have?... Daddy, I want... Honey, I need some... Dear, do you think we could get...?"

Yeah, she was spoiled, all right, with her dolls and her My Little Ponies and her jewelry and her perfume. And did he ever get any thanks? Any appreciation? You never think about anyone but yourself, Justine told him.

Do you want a mirror, darling? Do you want a mirror?

The child twitched in her sleep, sighing and rolling over onto her back.

He twisted the pink ribbon on his wrist, cutting off his circulation, until his hand went numb.

This duplicate, almost an exact replica—this one would leave him, too.

* * * *

The closet was nearly empty. His clothes hung pushed to one side. He remembered how he used to have to fight to get his clothes out with all of hers in there. He lifted the box and carried it to the living room. It was quiet.

He took a pair of scissors out of the end table drawer, looking at the pink ribbon around his wrist. It was faded almost gray. He shoved the blade up under the knot, slicing his skin as he did, and watched the ribbon flutter to the floor.

Then he turned back to the box, ignoring the blood dripping on the carpet, and used a small key to open it and looked inside. There it was, waiting. He smiled at it. Lifting it, touching it, admiring it, he unpacked the rest, including the ammunition and a silencer. It was good to see a friend.

He looked back over his shoulder at the wisp of ribbon on the floor, still spattered in his blood. He picked it up, turning it over in his hands. Then he put it in his mouth, beginning to chew and suck on it as he turned back to the work at hand.

He began to clean the gun.

* * *

"Daddy?" Half-open, her eyes looked sleepily at the shadow lurking over her bed.

"Shh, Mandy," Bruce told her. "Go back to sleep. Daddy's going out for a few minutes."

"When is Mommy coming home?" she asked. A dull, aching heat filled Bruce's chest.

"Soon," he lied.

"Are you coming back?" Her eyes were wider now.

"Don't worry, Mandy," Bruce whispered, tucking the blanket under her chin.

"Daddy will be back for you."

The little girl rolled over and closed her eyes. Bruce hefted the gun in his hand, checked his pockets and walked to the door. The light from the hallway shone on the small bundle under the covers. Upstairs, the child continued to scream. It sounded like it was dying.

"I promise," he whispered and shut the door.

* * * *

"Somebody's at the door, Rick! Can you get it?"

The sound of 'Everybody Loves Raymond' seeped out under the door. Not 'Wheel of Fortune.' Bruce frowned.

"Yeah." A male voice grunted. Bruce, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, heard someone moving toward the door. Bruce was smiling, chewing on a bit of bloody pink ribbon like it was a piece of chewing gum. His palms were sweating. He steadied himself.

"Yeah?" Rick asked, opening the door.

Shoom.

Bruce looked down at the gun in wonder. It hadn't really made a sound.

"Should have been watching 'Wheel of Fortune,'" Bruce said under his breath, leaning over to peer at his neighbor.

"Who is it, honey?" A woman came out of one of the bedrooms carrying a young child. He knew that one, too. She was holding the brat that was always screaming.

"Shh!" Bruce said as he pulled the trigger again.

Shoom.

The child wailed as it hit the floor, its mother sprawled at an awkward angle across its body. Blood began to spread darkly across the carpet. The child had a bloody nose.

Shoom.

Bruce fired again. It wasn't crying anymore.

It struck Bruce as comical, how identical their shocked faces looked in death. He laughed.

He closed the door and stood for a moment in the hallway. He could hear two kids arguing in the apartment across the hall. Maybe the two he had seen playing in the snow. He knocked on their door

* * * *

Silence.

He could hear his heartbeat. He looked down at her sleeping face. She looked very vulnerable.

No sound came from anywhere. This was the first time—the first time he could remember—that he couldn't hear the late night noise of some party, a child's cry, laughter.

Silence.

Her hair, so much like her mother's, fell around her face, accenting the curve of her neck.

"Daddy?" her voice was a whisper and she slowly opened her eyes. "Are you going to tuck me in?"

He tucked the blankets around her small form, and looked up sharply when sirens broke the silence—his blessed silence. He lifted his friend from the floor.

"It's late," he told her, smiling. "Time to go to sleep."

"Okay." She obediently closed her eyes. "Goodnight."

He could see the flashing lights through the window.

His silence had been broken.

He chewed on the wet wad of pink ribbon in his mouth as he watched her. Then he swallowed it.

"Good night, Justine," he whispered.

He could hear them on the stairs.

He turned the gun and put it into his mouth, pulling the trigger.

His silence was complete.



Mercy

In life, she was a dyke with a mullet who drove a pickup and listened to the Indigo Girls and did just what a typical lesbian would, at least that's what Dee always said. In death, Mercy wasn't that much different, although she'd scrapped the mullet for a sandy crew cut which, she had discovered, wouldn't ever grow back. That whole hair and fingernails growing after you're dead thing was apparently just an urban legend. She had learned the hard way. There wasn't a Snopes.com for vampires.

"What the fuck is this crap, Ang?" Mercy shoved the Styrofoam box onto the counter and continued to dig through the fridge. "It smells like raw fish."

"Raw fish." Angie grabbed the box and tossed it into the trash. "Sushi. Sorry, forgot about it."

Mercy made a face, finding what she was looking for at the back. “The stuff you eat is digesting.”

Angie raised her eyebrows, tucking her long Marsha Brady hair behind her ears as Mercy poured herself a mug of red fluid. “Um... pot, kettle?”

“I don’t eat.” Into the microwave went the mug and back went the container into the fridge. “I drink. There’s a difference.”

“I’ll say,” Angie laughed, nudging Mercy with her hip on her way to another cup of coffee. “Please remember, back of the fridge. If Ray finds blood in my refrigerator while he’s looking for a beer, Lucy’s gonna have some ‘splainin’ to do.”

“Fucking Ray.” The microwave beeped and Mercy swore as she grabbed the hot ceramic handle. “Oops, I forgot, you like him this week, right?”

Angie gave her a cool look, taking her black coffee back to the table to sit with her paper in the early morning light coming through the apartment’s wide door wall. She had the blinds partially open, and the balcony gave them a nearly perfect view of the San Fran Bay and the bridge, the very reason Mercy and Dee had chosen the apartment five years before. That was when Mercy could watch a sunrise.

She transferred her steaming mug as quickly as she could to the table, blowing on her fingers the whole way and swearing, “Fuck hot fuck fuck hot!”

“It’s all I ask, Ang.” She sighed, pulling the blinds a little further closed. “I’d rather not turn into a crispy critter in my own kitchen.”

“Sorry,” the blonde murmured over the rim of her cup. “I like the light.”

Mercy snorted and blew the steam off her mug. Blood heated much more quickly than any liquid she knew. “Must be nice.”

“Oh, this came for Dee.” Angie reached into the pile of envelopes in the middle of the table and tossed one across. “The insurance company.”

“Jesus.” Mercy grabbed it and slid her short, stubby finger under the edge. She had always bitten her nails and now they were ragged half-moons that didn’t grow anymore, even though she still chewed on them whenever she was nervous. “She’s been dead two years, you’d think—oh, fuck.”

“Bad news?” Angie hugged her knees to her chest and sipping more coffee, a glimpse of her pink panties showing underneath her t-shirt between the soft, pink insteps of her feet.

Mercy’s eyes skipped up to her face. “Denied her death claim, for the third time. Lack of docu-fucka-mentation. Whatever. I don’t know what more they want from me. You can’t get blood out of a stone.”

Angie snorted, putting her coffee on the table and standing up to stretch. “Listen, Ray is coming over tonight, and I thought...”

“Don’t mind me,” Mercy raised her hand. “I’ll make myself nice and scarce if Captain Fuckhead is gonna be here.”

“Come on,” Angie sighed. “We both have to tolerate each other’s little... idiosyncrasies. Give me a break, would you?”

“Sure,” Mercy agreed. “As long he refrains from giving you one... what was it last time? Just an arm, right? Good thing you human-types still heal pretty well, huh?”

“Zoey’s dying.” Angie said, her voice tight. Mercy’s head snapped up. “It should be tonight, anyway.”

“All right.” Mercy nodded and then slowly shook her head. “The damned pancreas. What do we really need it for, anyway? It takes them all so fast when it starts to go...”

“She wanted to know... will there be any pain?”

Mercy closed her eyes, the memory of her own turning quite fuzzy, still, even going on two years now. “Not that she’ll remember.”

Angie reached over to neaten up her paper with a yawn. “She’s just scared.”

“Aren’t we all?” Mercy stood, shrugging off her jacket and hanging it over the back of the chair. “I’m off to bed. I’ll be gone before Captain F—” Her roommate gave her a sharp look. “—FFFantastic... gets here,” Mercy finished with a grin.

“Thanks.”

Mercy waved it away with her hand, her eyes swimming and her head already thick with sleep. It wasn’t so much sleep as it was a sort of running down, like a watch that slowly stopped ticking, or the slow buzzing of a fly in the cold. Eventually, whatever was left of her body grew still, and she had to stop.

Her bed was made, the room painted black, the curtains the thick, heavy kind they used in hotel rooms. Mercy opened the closet, collapsing onto the twin mattress at the bottom, and slept.

* * * *

So she lied.

She wasn't gone before Angie and Captain Fuckhead were getting it on in the next room. They woke her, the sound of Angie's moans pulling her out from under, like low wails of lament. Maybe that was just her dream. AIDS had taken Dee even quicker than she'd watched pancreatic cancer take some of Angie's hospice clients.

Healthy and fine one day, sick and dying the next. Who really dies like that? It was like some sort of Hollywood-movie-disease, something made up to barrel downhill before the ending credits. Death was fucking painful—there was no way around it. Dee had sobbed and howled, in spite of the morphine the docs kept giving her, in spite of the pump they eventually hooked up that she could use to give herself the meds.

"Kill me!" she begged when she was lucid. "Please, Mary, kill me, please, have some goddamned mercy!"

And Mary, who was months away from becoming a vampire, and even further away from calling herself "Mercy," couldn't do a thing except hold Dee's hand, and just watch and cry. She did a lot of crying.

Angie had been there, she remembered—what a way to meet someone, holding your dying lover's hand and sniveling on the hospice nurse's shoulder. I don't know what I would have done without her, Mercy thought. She was *my* angel of mercy. Not many friends would keep you around after you turned into the undead.

Mercy rolled over on the little mattress, hearing the two of them in the next room. The sounds that she had mistaken for sobs were actually Angie's cries of pleasure. At least Captain Fuckhead was good for something once in a while, Mercy thought morosely, sitting up and pushing aside her clothes on their hangers.

In the back of the closet, there was a hole between the walls they had discovered when they moved in, but had never patched. Dee had joked that some kid must have whacked himself silly watching either his mother or his sister get undressed at night. Mercy had always found it a little creepy, but now it was too much of a temptation.

Angie's dresser was in front of it, and she probably didn't even know it existed, but if Mercy leaned back a little, she could see past the dresser's edge, the angle giving her a full view of Angie's bed. Angie was kneeling on it, her long blonde hair hanging in her face, and Ray was on her from behind. Mercy watched his twisted visage, his lip curled up almost in a snarl, as he squeezed her hips and pulled her into him.

"Fucking little whore!" he growled, his hand coming down on her ass. Angie squealed and then moaned, arching her back for more. "Say it! Tell me, you little bitch!"

Mercy winced as she watched Angie push her hair out of her flushed face, turning to look over her shoulder at him. It was always like this between them, and it made her stomach turn. Well, not literally... but whatever blood happened to be in her veins at the time, whether it was from the butcher's pig or perhaps some willing victim, always came to a heated boil whenever Ray was around. Especially whenever she saw him from this closet vantage point.

"I'm your whore!" she gasped, her hands grasping the covers. "Oh Ray, yes, yes, I'm your little whore, fuck me good!"

"I'll fuck you good!" he spat, his hand coming down again on her ass, making her yelp. "I'll fuck you so good you won't sit for a week!"

"Oh Ray, oh Ray, ohhhh Ray," Angie moaned, over and over. Mercy watched as her full breasts swayed underneath her as she rocked, her nipples pink and hard. She

was enjoying it—somehow. The look of pleasure on Angie’s face was hard to take, with Ray grunting and straining behind her.

“You fucking slut!” he groaned, rocking his hips deep into her. “Get over here and swallow my come!”

Angie did as she was told, turning eagerly on the bed and pumping the wet head against her lips. He bucked his cock into her mouth as he came, filling her mouth with white stuff. Mercy made a face and shuddered as she watched it dribble down Angie’s chin and neck.

“I said, SWALLOW IT!” he roared, grabbing her hair and shoving his shaft down her throat. Angie gagged, trying to say something, but couldn’t with a mouth full of cock.

Gotta get out of here, Mercy thought, her jaw tightening, releasing, tightening again. She scrambled out of the closet, looking at the clock on her night table. It was ten o’clock already. She still had a few hours before she would visit Zoey. She wanted the rest of the house to be asleep before she went to work.

* * * *

The window was open just a crack. Mercy slit the screen with an Exacto, sliding it back into her pocket as she edged the window wide enough to climb through. It smelled like a sick room and she fought the urge to gag. Her senses were keen and the smell of death still elicited that human response.

“Is that you?” The hoarse voice spoke from the bed.

"I'm here," Mercy murmured, pulling a wooden chair up and reaching out. The hand that grasped hers was small and bony, like a trembling bird.

"She said you would come."

"Yes." The moonlight lit the hand she held and a slant of blanket covering what looked like two matchsticks underneath. Angie had been right. She was very close. Mercy didn't even need to see her eyes or look into the face that was resting in shadow. She could smell it on her.

"I waited. Thank you for coming."

"It will be over soon," Mercy whispered, reaching her hand out to touch her brow. It was warm, flushed. Feverish, perhaps. She knew her own hand would feel cool, almost clammy, against human skin.

"I'm afraid..." Zoey admitted, squeezing her bony fingers over Mercy's.

Mercy took a deep breath, leaning in to her victim. It was no pleasure, eating the sick, the weak, the dying. Their blood was like black tar, the life already sucked out of it.

"Hold on to me," Mercy said, helping the young woman put her arms up, slinging them around her neck. "Hold tight, and whatever you do, don't scream."

The woman's head nodded against her shoulder, what was left of her hair just wisps that tickled Mercy's nose. The weight of her was nothing, lighter than air, and Mercy nuzzled her neck softly. The woman moaned. It had been a long time since they had been touched, the sick, the dying.

"I wish—" They were Zoey's last words as a mortal. Mercy's teeth sank deep into the woman's flesh with expert aim, the thick arterial flow flooding her mouth. The rush of blood forced her to swallow the coppery-tasting fluid. She angled the woman's head to

allow the pumping of Zoey's heart to do the work for her, simply swallowing, feeling the little bird hands beating at her breasts until she was too weak to fight anymore.

Thank god there was no screaming, Mercy thought, petting the woman's wispy hair as she felt her heart beginning to slow. Zoey was going to bald, she knew. That damned hair thing. But she would walk again, she would talk again, she would be strong and vital, and there would be no more pain for her. No more pain.

"Swallow it," Mercy whispered. She remembered Ray and Angie and cringed, wiping her bloodied mouth with the back of her hand and puncturing the artery in her wrist with sharp fangs. The pain was incredible, searing hot, and every instinct told her not to do this, that the blood now flowing in her veins was hers, hers, hers. It rushed like a heart beating again through her, and she offered it to Zoey's eager mouth.

It was like feeding a baby, those big eyes open up to her in the moonlight now, the little bald head, the grasping hands and eager sucking. It seemed to go on forever, and Mercy closed her eyes and let it. This was her pain, this was her sacrifice. *I love you, Dee*, she thought, shuddering as Zoey bit her flesh, sucking harder, hungry for more.

"Enough," Mercy managed, the weak, dizzy feeling in her head making the room slightly swimmy. Zoey was all eyes, staring up at her from that round moon face. Her face was streaked with blood, the front of her white gown stained with it. "Do you feel strong?"

Zoey nodded, looking up at her in wonder.

"You'll come home with me," Mercy murmured, using her thumb to wipe the blood from the woman's cheek. "Just for a few days."

The woman accepted Mercy's hand, and she stood on new legs that would never tremble underneath her again.

* * * *

Mercy knew something was wrong before she saw that the door to their apartment was ajar. Zoey was already fading and would need to sleep. As they entered the apartment, Mercy slipped off the long overcoat that she had brought to wrap Zoey up in.

"Ang?" Mercy called, flicking on the kitchen light. Nothing. The woman beside her chose that moment to collapse, and Mercy moved quickly, sliding her shoulder under the body and lifting it, fireman style. "Let's get you to bed, little one."

Once Zoey was tucked safely into Mercy's bed, she shut the door and headed down the hall. She stood outside Angie's room, her hand on the doorknob, listening for the sound of their breathing. Nothing. Had they gone? Closing her eyes, Mercy sensed something. A pulse? Faint... *faint!*?

"Angie!" Mercy swung the door wide and saw her friend lying face up on the bed, her arms dangling over her head, her blonde hair sweeping the carpet. She was naked and covered in blood. "Angie, oh my god, what did he do? Motherfucker! Where is he? Goddamnit!"

The words came in a flood as she leapt onto the blood-soaked bed, the body jarring on the mattress. *The body.* Angie's eyes were dull and lifeless, staring at the

dresser in the corner, her mouth open, her tongue... *Tongues don't loll like that unless you're dead.*

"Angie!" Mercy said, her voice sharp. She grabbed her bloody arms and shook her. Where was all the blood coming from!? Her eyes traveled down Angie's body and saw something at her navel. There was so much blood that had pooled there, she hadn't noticed the dark edge of the knife handle sunk into Angie's belly.

"No, no, no, no, nooooooooo!" Mercy wailed, cradling Angie's head in her lap, trying to pull her into her arms, but the body stuck fast. Mercy stared at the place where the knife had entered the flesh. *It must be all the way through her into the mattress!*

"Come on," Mercy whispered, moving Angie's face in her hands, feeling her throat. If there was a pulse, even a slight pulse, maybe she could...

There was! How that could be, she didn't know and didn't care. Mercy moved to bend and sink her teeth into Angie's neck, but the pump of Zoey's weak heart had been Niagara Falls compared to the trickle she was getting from Angie's throat. Mercy groaned, sucking harder, beating on her friend's chest, willing her heart to beat, beat, beat...

It went on a long time, but it was like trying to suck blood from a stone. All of her friend's precious life had spilled out already, soaking into the mattress. Sobbing, Mercy gave up, sinking to the floor beside the lifeless body, cradling Angie's head in her hands.

"I couldn't save you," she whispered, the tears streaming down her cheeks red with Zoey's blood. The woman, she knew, was sleeping the sleep of the undead and would wake tomorrow night and walk again.

But Angie, sweet Angie... she would never laugh at one of Mercy's stupid jokes, or cry at that awful Harry and Sally crap, or slip her arms around Mercy's waist at the sink and say, "Hey, girlie, how're they hangin'?" A hundred thousand ways Mercy thought she had seen her face, and she had never, ever seen this one—dead, lifeless. Gone.

"Why!?" Mercy wailed, her hands clenched into fists, screaming it at the ceiling. "Why can I save everyone but the women I love?"

The sound of sirens outside startled her. She knew they had to leave. There would be some sort of investigation. The apartment was in Angie's name, and Mercy, of course, was dead. But the police find the body, and Ray... *Ray*...

Mercy's eyes narrowed to slits. The blood in her veins was on fire.

"I promise, he'll pay for what he did," Mercy whispered, touching her trembling, blood-smeared lips to Angie's. They were still warm. *Still warm!* "I love you, baby. Forever."

When she stood and turned toward the door, she was no longer an Angel of Mercy. Now she was a hunter, with a very specific prey. Ray—and all the men in the world like him.



The Gingerbread Man

There wasn't supposed to be any snow that weekend on Interstate 81 between Wichita, Kansas and Lincoln, Nebraska. Lindy had checked the five-day forecast when she carefully printed out her Mapquest directions, and she was sure there had been no mention of snow. Cloudy and cold, that's all they said. That had been almost three hours ago, before she had loaded up Robert's Corvette with a week's worth of clothes and all the gifts, before she had made a quick stop at McDonald's for a 6 a.m. McMuffin. Her stomach growled as she turned the wipers on full-high and they slapped manically back and forth, clearing snow that was quickly replaced by more heavy, white stuff.

Seeing any more than two feet in front of her was an impossibility. The snow was thick and copious, the kind that looked so beautiful when you saw it falling from a

picture window, sitting curled up by a roaring fire and the Christmas tree. According to Mapquest, which she printed out every trip, even though she'd traveled this route countless times this year, it would be two more hours, doing the speed limit, before she could be snuggled with Robert, watching the snow fall, with this long, treacherous drive behind her. Of course, she wasn't doing the speed limit. Lindy checked her speedometer. She was only going twenty-five—on the Interstate! At this rate, it would take her all day to get there!

Keeping her eyes on what little of the road she could see, Lindy groped for her purse on the seat beside her. The McDonald's bag crumpled under her hand and she swiped it onto the floor. Her purse had a buckle on the front and she sighed, working it with one hand as she steered with the other. Lindy, ever cautious, had listened in horror at her New York friend, Amy's, tale of being silently robbed on the subway all because she had a purse with an easy-to-open latch.

She was cursing her caution, now, as she struggled with the buckle, using her thumb to ease the strap a centimeter at a time through the metal square. Once that was done, it was just a matter of pulling back the strap to release the metal tongue...

"Shit!" Lindy swore as the Corvette fishtailed, its light rear-end, even with her luggage and all the gifts in it, wagging back and forth on the road's slick surface like a little dog's tail. Her purse forgotten, she grabbed the steering wheel with both hands and, pumping the brake, attempted to get control again. She could see tail lights in front of her, looming closer, and knew she was going to hit whoever they belonged to.

"No, no, no, no," she whispered under her breath as the car slid sideways. She was heading toward those tail lights, leading with the driver's side door, now, and

staring at the steep embankment. The Corvette was light in the rear and low to the ground and it spun easily around, turning Lindy in a full circle before skidding sideways again and bumping up against the embankment.

Unable to believe her good fortune, she drew a shaky breath, her knuckles white on the wheel, her right leg stiff and her foot shoved so hard down onto the brake pedal it felt as if it should go through the floor. A car crept by her, and she saw the flash of a pale face in the window, a child with big eyes, staring at her as though she were a ghost.

“Okay, I’m okay,” she reassured herself, snatching her purse and unbuckling it quickly, now, grabbing her cell phone and flipping it open. A little aquarium floated in the screen at first, and then changed to a plain, deep blue with the words “No Service” blinking in the window. “Damn... oh damn... come on...”

She pulled the antennae out, pointing it toward the windshield where the wipers were still attempting to clear the heavily falling snow. Still, that blinking: “No Service.” Sighing, she pointed it toward the driver’s side window. Maybe a change of direction? There! A signal had been detected. Delighted, Lindy scrolled through her address book and found it: Robert. She pressed “talk.”

It rang three times before her battery died.

“Goddamnit!” she swore, flipping her phone closed and shoving it back into her purse. She had talked to him last night, late, she remembered with a smile, and had left it on her night table without plugging it in. Had she packed her car-charger? She didn’t think so.

Another car was creeping by her. Lindy took her foot off the brake and rolled forward slightly on the side of the road. In her rear view mirror, she couldn't see any headlights coming toward her at all. Her own eyes, looking back at her, were blue and bright with fear. Tucking her short blonde hair firmly behind her ears, she pulled the Corvette out onto the road, following the tail lights of the car that had just passed. Her eyes searched above for a green sign that would point the way toward an exit. She needed gas anyway, and she had to get to a phone to tell Robert she was going to late—very late, at this rate.

"Thank god." Lindy saw a sign that read: *Munden ¾ Mile.*

The exit ramp was steep and curved dangerously down to the right. Lindy crept forward as slowly as she could manage. She stopped at the stop sign, looking through the white haze for a gas station. There was one to the left and she turned onto the little two-lane road, inching along the slippery pavement. There were no cars anywhere, and it wasn't until she was nearly on top of it that she realized the gas station's lights were out, and there were no cars there, either.

She eased the Corvette up to the front of the building, reading the sign in the window: "Closed for Christmas."

"It's not Christmas yet," she grumbled, trying to see into the distance. Was there a gas station the other way? The car fishtailed again as she pulled out of the parking lot and Lindy swore, turning into the swerve, just like Robert had taught her. The rear end corrected itself with a little shimmy and she breathed a sigh of relief as she headed back the other way, searching for the familiar markings of another gas station.

The road stretched on in the gray afternoon light, the few houses and wide fields on each side blanketed with snow. She carefully re-set the odometer, deciding to go a mile from the highway to see if she could find something, even a little party store with a pay phone. If she weren't in such a hurry to get to Robert's for Christmas, the drive down the little two-lane blacktop might have been enjoyable. The scenery was beautiful, the trees overhanging the road creaking under the weight of the snow. It was the thick, heavy stuff, the kind that muffled the world and covered it like some kept secret.

Lindy kept her eye on the odometer as she crept along, seeing it nearing the mile mark. So far she had only seen a smattering of houses interspersed among the snow-covered fields and nothing in the way of a store or gas station. Should she turn around? She wondered. The snow seemed to be easing up just a little. Maybe she should get back on the highway and drive to the next exit?

Up ahead on the left she saw a house decorated with Christmas lights, the front walk lined thickly with candy canes all the way up to the ornately carved front porch. It was a Victorian style home, something Robert really would have appreciated with his eye for architecture, with all the curls and spires and cupolas that went along with it. Lindy smiled, and thought of how she would relay this whole experience to Robert.

She would tell him how quaint and beautiful her little side trip was when she was tucked up safe and warm in his arms in bed tonight, the anticipation of the announcement of their engagement to his family the next day curled into a tight little ball in her stomach. She glanced down at the ring on her finger glinting in the gray light, even without a hint of sun, lost in the thought about the man who had put it on her finger.

That's why she missed seeing the wolf in the road before it was too late.

It was standing in the middle of the blacktop, teeth bared, hackles raised, its eyes two glittering points, staring straight at her. Lindy screamed, knowing her first impression, that it was a wolf, was mistaken as she turned the wheel to avoid a collision, seeing it briefly out of her driver's side window. It was an enormous husky dog, its fat tail curling high as it ran, disappearing into the ditch on the other side of the road.

She had time to curse Robert's choice of vehicle and her agreement to pick it up from storage and drive it up to him—but just barely. The Corvette spun over the road like a top and she braced herself for impact, turning the wheel uselessly, her foot on the brake doing nothing but locking the tires into place. The car slid sideways, down into the ditch opposite where the dog had disappeared, and came to jerking halt.

Her first thought was Robert was going to kill her if anything had happened to the car. The embankment wasn't steep and in spite of the abrupt stop, she didn't think she had hit anything. The rear-end of the vehicle was angled into the ditch and she checked her rearview mirror, but all she could see was white powder and the waft of exhaust. At least she wasn't buried in the snow.

Lindy took a deep, shaky breath, easing her foot gently off the brake. She had been pressing her foot down so hard it ached from the effort. Nothing happened. Giving the car a little gas, she waited for it to jerk forward, but again, nothing happened.

"Come on, come on, come on." She pressed her foot down on the gas pedal, hearing the sound of the tires spinning in the snow. "Please."

It was no use. Sighing, she reached for her cell phone, flipping it open. It read "Low Battery" in the window still. She flipped through her "contacts" and found the eight-

hundred number for AAA. Surely someone would be working, even on Christmas Eve? If the phone would work for just a few minutes...

"Please." She pressed the "talk" button and waited. *Ring!* She sighed in relief, closing her eyes and leaning her head back against the seat.

"Hello, Triple-A, this is—" That was it. The phone was dead again. She stared at the blinking "Low Battery" until the phone went black again. She had the urge to roll down the window and hurl it into the snow. Instead, she glared at the phone and then tossed it onto the seat beside her, resting her forehead on the steering wheel. Now what? All she wanted was to get home to Robert...

A rapping on her window made her gasp and jerk her head up. She flicked the window lock and pressed the button, waiting as the glass slid down, revealing a man in a long, wool coat, pulling it closed against the snow and wind. He wasn't wearing a hat and his salt and pepper hair was covered in a melting sheen of snow that was replaced by new flakes almost immediately.

"You need some help, miss?" The man bent his tall frame in to peer at her. "I saw you spin out. I live across the road there."

"Oh yes, thank you so much!" Lindy sighed in relief. "If I could just use your phone..."

She rolled up her window as she struggled with the door and the man helped her pull it open through the drift of snow. They were only able to get it halfway and the car was at such an angle he had to grab her arm to keep her from falling as she stepped out. She gave him a grateful smile, glad she had worn her sensible boots. Ever practical, she reached back in to grab the keys and her purse.

“I can’t thank you enough!” She closed the door and locked it. “My cell phone died and I didn’t know what I was going to do.”

“That was some spin-out.” He shook his head, holding her arm as they carefully crossed the icy pavement. “You’re lucky it wasn’t worse.”

“I know!” Lindy let him help her as they walked carefully down the road. “That’s the second time tonight... I should have just stayed home.”

They trudged up the street, both of them hugging their coats around them, heads down to the wind. The snow, which Lindy had been sure was going to ease up, had resumed in full force, and she turned her collar up to it. It wasn’t until they reached the walkway that she recognized the house, the old Victorian all decorated for Christmas.

There were so many lights on the house, it was like a beacon in the gray afternoon. Rows of red and white peppermint candies with lights in their centers lined the huge wraparound porch and each window as well. Fat multi-colored lights rimmed the roof and each ridge and cupola like Jujubes. Candy canes as tall as Lindy lined the walkway, each less than a foot apart, and she smiled up at the sign hanging over the door: “The Gingerbread House.”

“I won’t meet an old witch inside waiting with a hot oven, will I?” she teased as the man helped her up the stairs.

He flashed her a brief smile as he opened the door. “Not unless your name is Gretel?”

“No, I’m Lindy.” She laughed, following him. The house was warm and inviting, but it was the smell she noticed first, the sweetness of baking, something like cake or cookies.

“I’m the Gingerbread Man.” He gave her a wink as he shrugged off his long coat and reached for hers. Lindy gave him a curious smile, handing over her coat and watching him hang them both carefully in the hall closet. “And this is, of course, the Gingerbread House. I’m Val Copeland, baker and entrepreneur, but around here, they do, indeed, call me the Gingerbread Man. Nice to meet you, Lindy.”

She half-smiled as he gave her a stiff little bow, his eyes almost laughing at her unsure response to this new information. “It’s nice to meet you too, *Val*.” She put an emphasis on his name, as if trying to assure him *she* wouldn’t be doing anything so silly as calling him the Gingerbread Man.

“If you wouldn’t mind taking off your boots?” He waved toward the entryway with its parquet floors. “Your knight errant will show you the way to the phone, young damsel in distress.”

“Oh, of course.” She peeled off her black boots, leaving them dripping on the mat by the door, and followed him down the hallway in stocking feet. When they entered the large, warm kitchen, Lindy’s eyes widened, and she stood, staring, in the doorway.

“Come in, come in,” he encouraged, waving her through, but she was too enthralled with the bakery confections that seemed to cover every surface in the room. Gingerbread houses, certainly, but other things, too—cakes and cookies, all decoratively wrapped in colored cellophane and ribbon.

“You really are the Gingerbread Man!” Lindy exclaimed, giving him an amazed look and he chuckled, pulling out one of the chairs at a table covered in sweets.

"I am," he agreed happily, plucking a cordless phone out of its cradle and handing it to her. "It's a reputation I've worked hard to build, and I take a great deal of pride in my work."

Lindy stared around her, awed, wondering how he managed to sell all of this out in the middle of nowhere. "Mail-order business?"

"Yes." He nodded, taking the chair across from hers. "Ebay has been a boon, of course, but really it's specialty catalogs and shops who commission most of my work."

"Amazing." She shook her head, fingering the white icing edge of one of the gingerbread houses with its ornate decoration. "It's really beautiful."

"Thank you." Val reached across the table for a cookie sheet lined with drop cookies of indeterminable type. "But it's the taste that really gets them hooked. Try one."

Lindy smiled politely, holding up her hand. "I couldn't, really..."

"Please," he said kindly, inclining his head toward her. "I insist. A woman as lithe and lovely as yourself couldn't possibly be worried about her waistline."

"You're a charmer!" She laughed, plucking one of the cookies off the tray. "What kind are they?"

Val watched her, his eyes bright. "Take a taste and see if you can tell me."

"Name that cookie?" she teased, taking a delicate bite. They were a dark cookie, almost black, but didn't seem to be made of chocolate, which is what she initially assumed. The taste was divine, the cookie light and melt-in-your-mouth. "Mmmm... ginger something? They're so sweet! But they've got a little kick to them..."

She realized now why they were so small—their richness made it impossible to eat more than one. Although she sat there, licking her lips, and considered another. The

taste was bright in her mouth, still, intoxicating, The honeyed taste lingered on her tongue.

“Good guess!” He offered her another and she took it. “They’re called Ginger Secrets.”

Lindy finished the second cookie, licking her fingers of crumbs. “Ah. I suppose you don’t share the secret? Is it honey?”

He shook his head, giving her an apologetic smile. “No... on both counts.”

“Can I... have another?” She bit her lip. The taste that remained in her mouth seemed to beg for more, in spite of the dark richness.

“Of course!” He held the cookie sheet out and she took one and then quickly grabbed another before he set the tray aside again. “Now, let’s see about calling your auto club, shall we? The only station here in little Munden closes for Christmas Eve, but I believe the one over in Tabor can send over a tow truck with a winch.”

“Oh, yes!” Lindy finished off her fourth cookie, looking longingly at the rest of the dozen as she opened her purse and found the number for AAA in her little address book. She pressed “talk” on the cordless phone she had almost forgotten about in her hand, putting it to her ear. “Uh-oh... is this plugged in?”

“Yes, indeed,” he confirmed, waving over to the handset on the counter that showed the red power light was on. “Is there a problem?”

“Well, I’m not sure?” She pulled the phone away from her ear to look at it. “This button here turns it on?”

“Yes.” Val leaned over and held his hand out for the phone. She gave it to him, watching as he pressed the button as well, several times, on and off. “Hm... well, it

seems as if your knight errant is turning out to be more errant than knight, I'm afraid. I believe the phones are out!"

She looked at him helplessly. "But... it's Christmas Eve... I have to get home... what am I going to do? Do you have a cell phone?"

"I'm afraid not." He shrugged, and he must have seen the crestfallen look on her face. "But I don't imagine it will take them too long to get the phones back up and running. This storm can't last forever. Until then, you are more than welcome to take advantage of my hospitality, such as it is."

Lindy considered his offer. What else was there to do? She was miles away from anything familiar on Christmas Eve in the middle of a blizzard! She couldn't even call Robert to tell him not to worry.

"You're very kind." Lindy sighed, tucking her address book back into her purse and, without even thinking, reached for another cookie. "Have you heard anything on the news about the storm?"

Val stood, moving the tray of cookies and setting it on the table in front of her. "I'll make hot chocolate. That will warm us both right up. The storm seemed to come out of nowhere, didn't it?"

She nodded, taking another cookie and getting up to pace restlessly as she watched Val pour milk into a pan. The kitchen was at the back of the house, and she peeked out the window into the yard. There was a large lake behind the house, probably man-made, its black waters choppy in the storm. This was the first real snow of the year, the first time it had been cold enough, and the lake hadn't frozen over yet. By February, it would probably be a sheet of ice, she thought.

“Robert and his stupid car,” she blurted suddenly, startling them both.

He glanced up as he added real baker’s chocolate to the milk. “Robert?”

“My fiancé,” she explained, going to the phone and checking it again. There was only static on the line. “And that damned Corvette. He moved to Nebraska a few months ago for work, and we’ve been doing the long distance thing.”

Val nodded, stirring the mixture with a wooden spoon and adding a pinch of something to the mix. “Salt is the secret ingredient in cocoa, you know. Go on...”

“These cookies are addictive!” Lindy chewed on another as she sat in the kitchen chair to watch him. He gave her a smile as he poured the steaming hot chocolate into mugs. “Anyway, he left his Corvette in storage down here and asked me to drive it up for him. The stupid thing spun out twice, definitely not a winter-friendly car. I hate it. What does anyone need a vehicle like that for?”

“It does seem foolish to own something so frivolous.” He set a mug of chocolaty sweetness in front of her. “But I’m one to talk, living here with all my bric-a-brac. I suppose we all have our vices. Would you like to retire to the parlor?”

“Sure.” Lindy smiled at the word *parlor*. Who said that anymore? The room was decorated for the holiday, the fire glowing in the hearth giving the room its warm glow. A tall tree stood in the corner and she noted with a smile it was covered in gingerbread and candy ornaments. He certainly seemed to have found a theme and stuck with it!

“So tell me more about your Robert.” He perched on a settee in front of the fire and nodding to the spot next to him.

“If you’ll tell me more about you.” She sank down beside him and blowing steam off the top of her cocoa.

“Oh, nothing much to tell.” He shrugged, his eyes glinting in the firelight. “I was a doctor, once upon a time. Just a little local family practice, but I retired. Now I’m just an old bachelor who likes to bake things and found a way to make a living at it.”

“No family?” Lindy took a sip of the cocoa, murmuring at its rich sweetness. “Friends? It’s Christmas Eve!”

Val set his cocoa on a coaster on the table next to the settee. “No. I never married, and most of my friends have long passed.”

Eyeing him, she frowned. His face was lined, certainly. There were deep creases in the corners of his mouth when he smiled, as though he had smiled a great deal in his life, and although his salt and pepper hair indicated he was of a certain age, he was by no means old.

“But enough about boring old me.” He kindly patted her knee. “How long have you been engaged?”

Lindy took another swallow of hot chocolate. The stuff was like drinking liquid heaven! So rich and thick and sweet it almost made her wince.

“He proposed last summer, actually.” She stared into the fire, remembering. “We were going to make the announcement tomorrow.”

Val’s eyebrows raised and he looked askance at her. “Six months engaged and the family doesn’t know? That seems...”

“Tell me about it.” Lindy frowned into her mug and took another thick swallow. “His mother hates me. And that’s putting it lightly.”

He nodded sympathetically. “In-laws can be a problem for young couples, so I hear. But your beau, certainly, is a grown man, capable of making his own decisions?”

Scowling, Lindy finished off her cocoa, and it burned in her belly. “You’d think so, wouldn’t you? Sometimes I think he’s still her little boy... playing with the toys mama bought him—like that one, stuck out in the snow.”

“Ahh...” He draped his arm over the back of her shoulder and Lindy stiffened for a moment, looking up at him. “Just a bit of comfort, dear.”

She sighed, leaning her head against this stranger’s shoulder and feeling almost instantly more relaxed. The fire was warm and the heat of the chocolate in her belly made her feel even warmer. The snow was falling heavily outside, and she realized she was seeing it as she had imagined earlier, in front of a warm fire in a man’s arms. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be complaining...”

“Nonsense.” He squeezed her shoulder. “You’ve been through quite an ordeal. You poor thing... driving through a blizzard in a Matchbox car, getting stuck in the snow, and now having to rely on the kindness of a stranger...”

Lindy smiled up at him. “You are very kind, Val.”

“My pleasure.” He inclined his head, a modified bow. “Someone needs to be your knight, hm?”

“The Gingerbread Man,” she murmured with a small smile. “Who would have thought?”

“Indeed.” He lifted her chin and their eyes met. Lindy felt as if the world were receding. The anxiety of the drive, the worry about Robert’s precious car, the rush to get there for Christmas, it all seemed to be melting away. “But I know something sweet and precious and worth keeping when I see it...”

“You’re very sweet,” she whispered. His eyes were searching hers for something and she didn’t know what.

“Sweetness is my life.” His lips touched hers, and Lindy marveled at their flavor. When his tongue touched hers, it was like tasting candy. The ever-practical part of her was clamoring for attention somewhere in her mind, but it was fuzzy, as if coming from far away. Something else was taking over her senses, making her clutch and press into him, her mouth searching his.

“I have something for you.” His hand found hers and pressed it against his trousers, where his stiff heat throbbed. “I want you to eat it all up.”

An incredible hunger had grabbed her and wouldn’t let go. She had tasted him and found him too sweet to resist. Sliding down to the floor between his legs, whatever dissenting thoughts that had been needling her were simply gone. She unzipped and freed him, glancing up into his eyes as he stroked fine wisps of her blonde hair from her forehead.

“That’s a good girl,” he breathed, taking himself in hand and easing the head toward her lips. “Lick...”

She leaned in, eager and greedy to taste, licking around the head of his cock like it was ice cream. Oh god, it was better than ice cream! He was smooth and creamy and as sweet as honey, and she couldn’t seem to get enough. He watched as she took him deep into her mouth. She licked and sucked, making blissful noises. She had never tasted anything so delicious!

“Yes,” he gasped as she worked her mouth around and down his shaft and up again. “Eat it all up...”

Lindy swirled her tongue around the velvet head which was leaking something that tasted akin to honey. She wanted more and sucked harder, her eyes wild with hunger. Her fingers gripped his thighs, using just her mouth, not wanting to waste any bit of the taste of him along her tongue. His breath was coming a little faster, his eyes closing slightly, and his cock was leaking a little more of the ambrosia that had set off her craving.

His hips bucked up against her and she took all of him to the back of her throat, his hand pressing against her head to keep her there. "Swallow it," he moaned, thrusting deep. "Swallow it all!" Thick as syrup it flowed against her tongue, making her teeth ache with its sweetness. She swallowed it eagerly, catching the hot flood down the corners of her mouth with her fingers and shoving them in, too, so as not to waste a drop.

"That's my girl." He praised her, stroking her hair, her cheek. "Wasn't that a treat?"

Lindy lifted her eyes to his, her cheek resting against his thigh. She was panting, breathless, and all of the energy seemed to have left her body at once. Perhaps from all the effort she had put forth, she thought.

"Delicious," she whispered, her eyes closing and then opening again. The room was swimming and she closed her eyes to keep it still. "Can I have another?" She felt her body sliding, slipping down between his legs, and his hands caught her under the arms, hauling her upward.

“That could be arranged,” he murmured as her head lolled back against his chest. His mouth pressing to hers was the last thing she remembered before the world faded to darkness.

* * * *

“Hungry,” she whispered the word hoarsely before she even opened her eyes. “Thirsty... please...”

“Yes.” The hand in her hair, the lips pressed to her brow. *Where am I?* “You will be, all the time, now.”

Lindy opened her eyes and remembered.

“What—” The edges were fuzzy and faded, but she remembered. She tried to sit up but found she couldn’t.

“Lie still,” he urged, sitting next to her on the bed. Her hands pulled against the restraints above her head attached to the headboard. “I don’t want to have to keep you drugged...”

“You drugged me.” Her head felt thick and fuzzy, and it explained the heavy feeling in her limbs. “You... who are you?”

“I told you.” He picked up a syringe from the night stand and flicked it with his finger. Lindsey saw the phone there sitting off the hook and understood with dawning horror why the phone downstairs hadn’t worked. “I’m the Gingerbread Man.”

Panicked, Lindsey struggled, thrashing on the bed, crying, "Let me go, let me go!" He sighed and stood, watching her tirade with a calm expression. Gasping and breathless, she finally said hoarsely, "Robert will be looking for me. He'll find me."

"Doubtful." Val leaned in and plunged the needle into her upper arm, pushing the plunger and making her squirm and whimper. "His precious car is already at the bottom of the lake behind the house, and they say the snow won't stop until sometime on Christmas Day."

"What was that?" Lindy stared at the empty needle in his hand. "More drugs?"

"Of sorts." He sat back on the bed, pushing her hair out of her eyes, but she jerked her head away, glaring at him. "What I've given you essentially stops your insulin production. That's why you're so hungry."

Lindy stared at him, her whole body turning cold. "But... why? Please, I'm young, my fiancé... please just let me go! I won't say anything..."

"Pish!" Val waved his hand at her. "This is just business. Call it a... requisition. My supply has been depleted considerably, now the Christmas rush is over."

"Supply?" Lindy tried to wrap her head around it, licking her lips. Her tongue felt like cotton. She was so thirsty!

"Down!" he instructed, and the dog that had jumped onto the bed turned tail and leapt off again. Something flashed in Lindy's memory, and then it came to her. That was the dog that had been standing in the road, the one she had swerved to avoid! "Now, get some rest, dear."

"Supply of what?" she demanded as he stood.

Val gave her a small smile. “Blood, my dear. I suppose it doesn’t hurt for you to know what Ginger’s Secret is, now?”

“Oh my god.” She closed her eyes against it, feeling faint, remembering how dark and incredibly sweet the cookies had been. “You’re sick! Robert will find me—*someone* will find me!”

He continued to smile down at her, shaking his head. “They never found the others, why would they find you?”

The horror of his words refused to sink completely in, but she felt herself slipping, the world slipping, her stomach lurching.

“You’ll be ready just in time for Easter baskets,” he said with a satisfied nod. “And think of all the fun we’ll have until then.”

“This isn’t happening!” Lindy struggled against her restraints, her eyes wide with fear and loathing. “Someone will find the car, someone will find me. They’ll catch you!”

“No, dear, I’m sorry.” He gave her a wicked grin as he eased the door closed. “They can’t catch me... I’m the Gingerbread Man.”



Advent Calendar

CHAPTER ONE: *Day 1*

I asked her what the hell had she left on my kitchen table, and she said it was an advent calendar. Listen, if I didn't have so much wood for this girl that I could personally re-populate the rain forest myself, I would have tossed it out with last night's pizza boxes, believe me. The fucking thing was huge! It covered the whole goddamned kitchen table, but bless her heart, she had cleared the way to leave it there, so now all our neglected Captain Crunch soggies and Mac'n Cheese greenies had made it into the sink, believe it or not. Tyler thought my mom had come to visit or something and cleaned up. *Fat chance.*

"What in the hell is that thing?" he asked, putting a case in the fridge. It wasn't very festive, I'll admit, but that was Betsy's artistic style alright. Just a huge white piece of cardboard with twenty-five black doors that had numbers written in white letters on the front of them.

"Gift from Betsy." I shrugged.

"Jesus, you still got that one hangin' on?" He took a swig out of the milk carton, grimaced, glanced at the date and put it back in the fridge.

"Have you seen her?" I raised my eyebrows.

"Yeah." He snorted. "I've seen her—and her damned Tampax in the bathroom and her make-up and shit all over the counter. She might as well be our extra roommate, right? What are you gonna do—marry this chick?"

"No." I bristled. I knew he was right. I didn't date girls like Betsy, and if I did, I didn't date them very long. I don't know why she had me so hooked, but she did, and I was wiggling like a damned worm and I knew it. She was a pusher—one of those girls that took over your space an inch at a time, and before you knew it, you were watching "Terms of Endearment" and going to meet her parents. *To hell with that.* I wasn't gonna do it. She was, admittedly, a very, very fine piece of ass, and we had some good times together, but that was as far as it went.

"Well, get it the hell out of here, man, we got gaming tonight!" He reminded me. *Shit.* At least she'd already cleared the table. I lugged it to my room, propping it against the far wall. Christ, it was nearly as tall as the dresser!

"You open one door every day until Christmas." She'd smiled that lopsided Betsy smile over her shoulder at me while she pulled on the panties I had thoroughly stuffed

into her mouth not twenty minutes before to keep old man Waters upstairs from banging on the floor. They were still wet across the ass from her saliva. My cock jumped, even after the three hour and two spurt workout he'd just had.

Advent calendar? Like I cared how many days 'til Christmas? "Advent is about rebirth," she told me. "Advent calendars are countdowns to a new beginning." Beginning of what, I wondered? It occurred to me that maybe she'd put something hot under there. I studied it more carefully. The doors were big enough—there could be a pair of panties or something folded behind each one. I smiled. *Nowwww we're talking. Bad, bad, Betsy!* I squatted in front of the enormous rectangle, lifting the lower corner of door number one to peer underneath, just to see if I could see anything, but I couldn't. I never was very good at impulse control. In that moment, I had a flash of memory—me trying to peek under the tiny little flaps on my mom's advent calendar when I was a kid. Funny how I always hoped it would be a picture of something really magical, but it was just a star or a snowman or some such shit. Not even space rangers or rockets or anything. Why the hell you'd have those on a Christmas calendar was beyond my seven-year-old comprehension, obviously, but angels and Christmas trees just weren't cool.

"Fuck it." I grinned a little sheepishly. I could open it whenever I wanted. In fact, I could open every goddamned door today if I wanted, right? Besides, it was December first. The door was rectangular, like the calendar itself, and tabbed, you know, those slip tab A into slot B kind. I popped it open, noting that the white, scripted "1" was in Betsy's handwriting, with the same eerie sense of anticipation and subsequent disappointment I'd experienced as a kid—only this time it wasn't a candy cane or a snowflake, but just a creamy blank white space. Nothing. *What the hell?*

I leaned in, squinting. Maybe it was like one of those "Magic Eye" or holographic things or something and you had to look at it from a different angle? But no matter which way I turned, I couldn't see anything, and there sure weren't any panties stuffed inside! The one thing I noticed was a slight lingering odor, and I could only smell that when I leaned in really close—something like oranges or cloves. Weird.

"Funny, Betz." I grudgingly went to take a shower before my five hour shift. Building all the ride-on stuff at Toys R Us this time of year was brutal with every little kid moaning for a new bike for Christmas they couldn't ride until spring anyway. My soapy hand found its way to my stiffening cock. He had a damned mind of his own. No rest for the weary! The minute I saw Betsy's scrunchie thingie hanging over the hot water faucet and recalled her the day before yesterday, pulling it off her wrist to put her hair up and back and out of the way while I pounded her from behind, my cock instantly responded to the memory. Damn, but she had a fine ass. I could see it filling my hands as I grabbed her hips, the way the creamy flesh parted when I put my thumb—just so—to show me the winking pucker of her asshole. The thought of sliding into *that* brought my dick to full mast, and my hand moved more quickly.

Jerking with soap was always tricky. You had to move fast, before the sting overcame the added sudsy pleasure. I put my foot up on the edge, leaned back and went to work. I wasn't sure if coming was even possible after our marathon afternoon, but the sensation was too stubborn to ignore, or I was too stubborn to ignore it. I pictured Betsy's pussy, watching her spread open those baby-bald lips from behind with two fingers, urging me on, "Fuck, Jay! Don't tease me! Put it in!" I could never watch myself fuck her for more than a few minutes during sex or it would send me immediately

over, but I watched it at my leisure now, the slippery, wet movement of my hand inferior but sufficient, mimicking the impossibly hot moisture of her incredible hole. *Jesus, god, there's nothing like it!*

I grunted, couldn't help it, my balls drawing up with that inevitable tingling tightening that meant I was close. I got myself an image to come to almost immediately: Betsy spreading her cheeks slightly for me, one finger reaching to gently stroke the dark crinkled mouth of her ass—she did it just to tease me. She wouldn't let me have it, but she knew just the suggestion would send me over, and it had, and it did. I gritted my teeth, hips bucking, cum baptizing the tub faucet and dripping toward the drain. I leaned against the tiles, panting, feeling suddenly weak and exhausted. I could use about a ten hour nap. Not much cum, I noted. *She's sucking me dry.* I stood under the hot shower for a few more minutes before starting to suds up my hair. Maybe it was the shampoo, although I thought it was supposed to be coconut, because I could suddenly smell the powerful odor of oranges and cloves.

CHAPTER TWO: *Day 5*

"So, seriously, what's the joke?" I asked.

She was hanging her head off the end of my bed, watching the tail end of *A Charlie Brown Christmas Special* upside down.

"Don't you love the way they talk? *Wah, wahhh wahhhhh*. Isn't that totally how you used to hear grown-ups?" She lolled her head off the corner and put her bare feet up on the wall, crossing them at the ankles.

"I still hear grown-ups that way," I snorted, pulling my t-shirt on. "Come on, Betz, give."

"Oh, this wasn't enough for you?" She teased me, opening her thighs and pointing between them. Her pussy lips were still a little swollen and they glistened. I sat next to her, my hand inevitably drawn to the wetness, rubbing the moist and slightly sticky skin with my thumb. *God, she's intoxicating.*

"Everything isn't about sex, you know?" I tried to sound serious, although my fingers betrayed me and slid through her slit as my cock began to throb against my thigh.

She laughed—god, I loved her laugh—it tinkled, like ice crystals forming in midair. Rolling off the bed, she grabbed for the remote and started to flip channels. "Do you have CNN? I have to see if they're broadcasting any other signs of the apocalypse."

"Ha." I said. "Ha." She grinned up at me, sprawled naked on my floor, her hair like dark chocolate streams covering the generous swell of her breasts. "Well, if you're not gonna tell me what it's all about, I'm not opening any more of those stupid doors." I grabbed a new pair of briefs out of my top drawer, shoving the advent calendar aside to

do it. It toppled toward the wall and balanced there, its first five black doors hanging askew showing five decidedly blank white spaces.

Every morning I felt like a fool, opening a new door in the hopes that this time, something would appear. I had noticed a different odor each day—first the oranges and cloves, then cinnamon, then something I couldn't identify at all, then something that smelled faintly like pumpkin pie. I joked with her on the phone that she had invented the world's first "Scratch 'N Sniff" advent calendar. She just laughed. There was a different smell today, like those red and white pinwheel peppermint candies my grandmother used to keep in her pocket to keep us quiet in church, but it didn't linger long. I was getting really tired of whatever game Betsy was playing.

"Nice ass," she commented softly. I didn't reply, tugging my jeans on. God, she pissed me off sometimes.

"Is that all I am to you?" I tossed her jeans off my bed and into her lap. Her eyes were bright, dancing, as she looked up at me, incredulous. I stopped, my jaw as slack as hers. "What the fuck?" I said softly, out loud, rubbing my chin thoughtfully. *What the hell am I saying? What the hell do I care?*

"I'm gonna go home." She started to get dressed. I couldn't see her face as she bent to slide her panties on. I felt bad all of a sudden and then I was pissed that I felt bad. This wasn't good at all. I watched her slide her jeans on, her back to me, her panties caught slightly in the crack of her ass. My cock jerked reactively, just seeing her bent over and sliding denim up her shapely thighs. I sat on my bed, uncertain.

"You don't have to keep opening them if you don't want to." She kissed my cheek and smiled softly before opening my bedroom door. She must have been chewing gum because she smelled like peppermint.

"There's no point!" I called after her. "It's not funny!" I heard her laugh and gritted my teeth. This wasn't gonna fly. I was done. *I don't care how much she gets my dick hard, no girl is worth this kind of hassle and game-playing.*

CHAPTER THREE: *Day 8*

My head came up fast, and I woke up to find Jay Leno and his butt-chin wagging on the screen. I looked at him, dazed, as if to ask, "*Did you see that, man?*" Betsy had been going down on me right under the table at a McDonalds, in an impossible dream-squat, topless in a short leather skirt pushed up to her waist, her legs spread wide and her ass so low her pussy was almost kissing the greasy, dirty floor. I knew it was greasy because when my Nikes dug in for purchase they simply slid out from under me like they were on rails. She was mewling, sucking me like a baby, and I'd looked across the room to see a little kid with ketchup in his hair sitting in a high chair, banging fries on his tray and laughing. It was surreal. I didn't know if I was aroused or disturbed, but apparently my dick had made up his mind and was throbbing against the mattress.

"Dude, you gotta quit!" I tried to reason with him, putting my head back down on the pillow. It was wet from my drool, and I flipped it over.

Call her. Feh! Call her, yeah, right, that's just what I *wasn't* going to do! Tyler and I had spent the whole day playing NFL on the X-Box, just like old times. I flipped off the TV and got up to take a leak. I had to coax my cock a little more towards soft before I could let go. All the damned beer we drank tonight. *Budweiser in, Budweiser out.* My head could feel it, too, a slight fuzz, good hours ago, unpleasant now.

Call her. My cock twitched to life again as I found myself looking at a tube of Betsy's something-or-other sitting on the counter. I picked it up. "Cinnamon Swirl." Sniffed. *Yeah, that's the stuff.* It actually stung a little on the tip of my cock before her saliva mixed it up enough to mellow it out. Kinda hot, that. I opened it, noting the glossy

ginger color, remembering the shine on her lips, the contrasting pink of her tongue as she licked my shaft.

"Damn." I adjusted, and insisted to no one in particular: "I am not making a midnight booty call to Betsy!"

Back in my room, I glanced at the clock. Just after midnight. I was determined to crash and sleep until at least noon. I was about to flop out on the bed when I noticed the calendar. It was still against the wall where I'd tossed it yesterday and, at first, I didn't register what wrong—but then it hit me. The door to day eight was open.

"Not fucking possible." I went and stood it up. Still nothing behind it. Just blank white space and, I thought, maybe, the faint odor of evergreen—but that could have been a carryover from the awful "pine smell" shit Tyler was spraying on the artificial tree he and his girlfriend had set up. I blinked. Several times. *What the hell?* We'd only smoked a little! Was I crazy, just being paranoid?

"Tyler!" I didn't like the alarm in my own voice. "Hey, Tyler!" I dragged the calendar after me down the hallway. Tyler's light was still on but his door was closed. I knocked. "Hey, man! Wake up! Lemme in!"

He staggered the door open, and I could see a lump in his bed roll over. "Jay?" He was rubbing his eyes. "What the hell?"

"Did you open day eight?" Suddenly I was sure that it was Betsy in his bed. I strained to see, and sure enough, there was a tousled length of dark hair on the pillow, the creamy skin of an arm. I was immediately seething.

"Are you *on* something?" Tyler looked bewildered.

"Is that Betsy?" I stepped past him and swung the door wide. Her head lifted off the pillow and she looked at me through half-closed eyes. *Not Betsy. Oh, shit.* For a moment I stood outside of myself and realized what this looked like— Tyler's crazy roommate standing in the doorway in his underwear with a raging hard-on, carrying a three-by-five advent calendar from hell and ranting about the door to day eight.

"Dude, I think you're sleepwalking! You need to go back to bed." Tyler turned me around and propelled me back down the hallway.

"Sorry," I apologized meekly. He closed my door, shaking his head.

I put the calendar back next to my dresser and sat on the bed staring at it for a long time. I didn't know how long. *Am I crazy?* Had I opened it myself and forgotten? Was Tyler lying? Had Betsy been here? All of these possibilities seemed implausible. I didn't want to listen to the voice in my head. It was scaring the fuck out of me.

It didn't open itself, did it?

Did it? I didn't know and decided that I didn't care, but I was going to throw it out. First thing in the morning, the stupid calendar and Betsy's phone number, out with the rest of the damned trash.

CHAPTER FOUR: *Day 9*

My life will be a cheeseburger paradise if I can just get Tyler to stop making that bimbo-blonde giggle. It was like nails on a chalkboard for me every time she flipped her hair over her shoulder and tittered. Her tits, however, were a great distraction. I'd missed two bullseyes just watching her dancing out there, sidling up to the other girls. *Now, there's a fantasy.* One of those girls just happened to be Betsy, who I was definitely ignoring. She'd seen me and I'd been prepared to rebuff her, but she hadn't approached me. Which was fine with me. I hadn't called her and didn't intend to. If I could avoid a scene, it was even better.

Watching the blonde and Betsy on the dance floor was something, though. My second bullseye had missed by inches because of the sight of their tits pressed close, their arms in the air as they writhed together and—holy fuck, were they kissing?! That's when I lost it. I had to stop just looking peripherally and turn my head a little more to be sure, and my premature release of the dart caught up with me. No bullseye—and another couple moved into my line of vision on the dance floor and I couldn't see them anymore either, damnit. The blonde came over after that and kept trying to drag me or Tyler out with her, but I was soundly kicking his ass at electronic darts, in spite of my misses, and I wasn't going anywhere until this game was over.

"You're up," I said to Tyler, grabbing my Heineken just before the blonde put it to her lips. "Hey, hey! Cooties." I grinned at her, and she stuck her tongue out. Oh, what a sight—a pink, pointed tease.

"Hey, if I remember right, you guys live around the corner, don't you?" *Yeah, that's subtle, sweetheart.* Was it really going to be this easy? Not that it was ever really

hard. All you had to do was lower your standards, which I'd carelessly done with this chick one very drunk night near the beginning of the term. The memory of my puking in our sink afterward overwhelmed whatever vague recollection I had of fucking her, but she hadn't let me alone since. Well, if she was in for seconds, why not? I just nodded, draining the rest of my beer. It was my turn. Ten more points and I had this game wrapped up. The trick was, it had to be ten.

Exactly ten.

I aimed carefully. The blonde watched me from a bar stool, swinging a black heel off her toe. The truth was she'd been after me for months, but since Betsy I hadn't had much interest in other girls. Now things were different. Damn, but her tits were incredible—a mountain of full, fleshy spillage over a too-tight black laced-up thing. I decided that if I made this shot, I was going to take her back to our apartment and fuck her until Mr. Waters upstairs had a coronary or called the police, whichever came first. It was the perfect way to celebrate watching that dumb ass calendar swallowed up by the garbage truck this morning. *No more Betsy, no more games, back to business as usual.*

I let the dart go, and the board lit up in celebration. *Ten. I win.* I collected my prize, and wished the whole walk home that I'd listened to Tyler and taken the car, since I didn't even get the benefit of looking at her hard nipples in the cold with her jacket all zipped up and her arms crossed in front of her chest like that. They sprang free in the apartment, though—no pretenses or cold drinks, guess we'd had enough of those. She dropped her coat near the door and pressed herself against me right there. Her lips were as cold as mine, but inside her mouth was warm and her tiny tongue probed

against my teeth. She squealed when my cold hands abandoned the laces on her top and just pushed it down, bra and all, spilling her breasts into them.

God, she smells incredible! Whatever the hell perfume she was wearing was intoxicating, and I dipped my nose into the swell of her cleavage where it was stronger. "You smell great," I murmured against her neck. She giggled, and I winced. *Note to self—don't make her giggle!*

"Pheromones..." The feel of her breath in my ear made my cock jump.

"What?" I tilted my head to look at her.

"Never heard of pheromones? Just chemicals we give off...love scents. It's like an aphrodisiac. Careful, you could fall in love with me," she teased.

"You've got a love scent, alright," I agreed, kissing her, harder, digging for that tiny tongue again and finding it.

She moaned against my mouth, responding to my thumbs rubbing over her hard nipples. They were pale pink and puffy. She had a true blonde's coloring, and I judged that Miss Clairol only gave her natural hues a shine, although I wouldn't know that for sure until I had her panties down. Her hand went for my crotch, but I grabbed her wrist, twisting her arm behind her and kissing her toward my room. Whether it was the beer or the cold, my dick wasn't responding quite fully yet, and nothing killed things quicker than a girl who thought you couldn't get it up for her. No matter what you said, they made it all about them.

Her knees nearly buckled as I tongue-kissed her with both her hands behind her back, but she caught the shuffling backwards rhythm until I had her pressed against my bedroom door. I stopped there to enjoy the exposure of her breasts, the way her skirt

was starting to ride up her thighs as she tried to press a knee up between my legs. *Girls always forget about the testicles.* I turned slightly, shifting so that my leg was pressed up towards the heat of her crotch, which is what she really wanted anyway, from the sound of her gasping as she rode it like one of the mechanical horses at the Toys R Us entrance, her skirt getting damper by the minute. *Damn, this girl is hot!*

I turned the doorknob, making sure I had her by the small of the back so we wouldn't spill onto the floor. We stumbled anyway, all the way to the bed, the height of the mattress forcing her to sit. She fumbled at my belt buckle in the dimness, and I pressed her away, unbuckling and starting to slip my belt out the loops.

"Mmmm, it smells good in here!"

I cocked my head, my belt hanging. I did smell something. It was weird how you got used to your own smells, and you never noticed it until someone else said something. "Vanilla!" She identified it—*yep, that's it alright.* I wondered if Tyler's girlfriend had decided to force him into cookie-making or something this afternoon. The blonde's hand was tugging on my belt again, and I let her slip it the rest of the way out while I unsnapped and unzipped.

She leaned back on her elbows, watching me, her breasts flattening around the sides a little the way the larger ones do. She propped her stocking feet up on the bed—*where the hell are her shoes?*—and opened her thighs. In the light from the hallway, I could see the tops of her thigh-high stockings and, to my surprise, blonde fuzz. No panties in sight.

"You are a very bad girl." I smiled.

"They're in your jacket pocket," she purred, opening her thighs wider. "I took them off in the bathroom and thought, if you didn't take me home, at least I'd leave you a reminder." I realized I was still wearing my jacket. I reached in and felt dampness. Sure enough, there was a black pair of panties. I lifted them to my nose. She smelled incredible, strong, the way girls do when they still have pussy hair.

I had a sudden memory of Betsy's black panties shoved into her mouth, and my cock twitched. *Goddamnit, man, you've got a half naked woman in front of you. Isn't that enough?* I tried again to reason with him. Apparently not, because it was Betsy's ass I was picturing when I turned the blonde over and pushed her skirt up. It was Betsy's bald pussy I was missing when I starting eating her from behind like that, spreading her lips wide so that all I had in my mouth was smooth flesh. And it was the memory of Betsy that made my cock so uncomfortably stiff in my jeans that I had to slide them off.

She moaned and arched her back, spreading her lips for me herself now. I reached underneath her for those massive tits, swaying beneath her as she rocked, fastening my fingers onto her nipples and rolling them. She gasped and cried out, calling "Yes, ohhhhhhh I love that!" *So I noticed.* Her pussy was weeping with juice and saliva and the tops of her stockings were getting soaked with it. My tongue had been lapping long and strong enough now that I was getting that numb-jawed feeling, the one past the ache, where I knew however long she took to come, it didn't matter, because I'd been transformed into the Energizer bunny.

Her breath came fast and harsh, and then she did something that surprised me—she called out my name as she came, "Ohhhh Jay, Jay, Jay!" My tongue not letting up on her clit, my nose in line with her pussy, her asshole eyelevel, I watched, fascinated,

as that puckered hole contracted and released as she spasmed. She was still whispering my name as she sprawled out onto the bed, and I knelt, watching her quivering ebb. *Fuck, I can't even remember her name! I think it starts with an "E." Eva? Eve? Erin?*

"Your turn." She reached back for me. I rolled onto my back and let her get to work. She peeled off her skirt, leaving the stockings, but tossing her shirt and bra. She knelt between my legs, and started off slow, kissing and licking and nibbling, which was all well and good, but at the moment I needed more stimulation than that. I grabbed her hair and pressed her down onto me. From the sound she made in her throat, that was ok with her. She took the hint, and I had to admit, she was very good. I hated it when girls confused handjobs with blowjobs, mixing the two. She was all mouth. Her hands on my thighs, steadying herself like Betsy always did, made me groan and thrust.

"Deeper," I directed her, part of me just wanting to see if she would, and she did, until I was sure I could feel her tonsils. *Ahhhh, so fucking willing!* I pulled her hips around so I could finger her hole, sliding in first just one, then two, matching her eager rhythm. The wet squelching sounds of her made my cock swell to bursting, and I grabbed her head, slowing her.

"Climb on," I told her. I didn't want to take her from behind because that was my favorite position with Betsy, and I was determined not to think about Betsy. Plus I wanted to watch those fabulous tits bounce as she rode me.

"Ok." She straddled my hips, groping for me in the dark. I held it steady for her, waiting patiently while she got situated, poising herself directly over my cock and slowly beginning her descent. She was incredibly wet—all that tonguing made sure of that—

and I think she really liked the blowjob action, too, because she felt even more slippery now somehow. There wasn't a lot of friction— she was like melted butter—but that was good. It would take me awhile to come and we could both enjoy a longer ride.

But she was a rocker, moving forward and backward on me, which I hadn't expected and made me groan. I knew she was rubbing her clit against the base of my cock and that was all that was behind the action, but god! The sensation of being buried to the hilt in that heated little cavern and having the sensitive head of my dick being rubbed against the deepest part of her walls had me crazy with lust a lot faster than I ever expected.

I had wanted to spend time watching her, playing with her heavy tits, fingering her hard pebbly nipples, but it wasn't in the cards. Her hips rolled and rolled, and I literally had to close my eyes to concentrate hard on not coming. *Fuck, but that feels good!* The minute she started making noises, I had to shift gears again, dig deeper, and resist. Then her fingers found my nipples, and my eyes flew open to see her leaning over me, her breasts swaying. *Oh fuck!* It was all over, then. Thank god, from the sound of her, she was close again, too. I grabbed her hips and thrust deep, grunting and pressing her up so hard she squealed, my cum filling the darkness.

I admit, it was pleasurable. Coming is always pretty enjoyable, right? Kind of like pizza—even when it's bad, it's still pretty good. But when she rolled off me and started talking about Christmas shopping tomorrow with her girlfriends, something felt really wrong. At first, I just felt deflated. Hollow, empty. Then, I was restless, coming out of my own skin. And I could really smell that vanilla now. *Where the hell is that coming from?* When she got up to pee, I was grateful, switching on the light and assembling our

clothes into two separate piles. I quickly pulled on my underwear and jeans, zipping as I heard the toilet flush. I wanted to be dressed to send her the right "time to go home" message.

"Holy mother of god," I breathed, fairly appropriately, sinking onto the bed as she came into the room. There against the opposite wall was the advent calendar, looking no worse for the wear than it had before I chucked it into the trash this morning. *No way. No motherfucking way! This isn't happening!* I looked helplessly up at her, and she stood there, clueless. The sight of her standing in just a pair of black thigh highs in the doorway should have forced my cock to respond at least a little, but there was nothing, not even a twinge.

"Well, I guess I'm going home." She'd obviously gotten the message I'd intended to send about a million years ago before the darkness had been flooded with light. We didn't speak as she dressed. I was too stunned. She was too pissed. I ignored her silent tears and just let her go out into the cold, probably back to the bar as it neared closing time, or who knew where. She was walking, wherever it was.

That's when I realized that another door was open. Door number ten, showing creamy white underneath. *Call her.* Where in the hell was that idea coming from? It was the very last thing I ever intended to do again! I moaned, cradling my head in my hands. *I'm crazy...or she's crazy...or that fucking calendar is possessed!* There was no logical explanation. I approached it carefully, searching out the perimeter. What was I looking for? Sharp edges? Blue flames? I snorted, but like a little kid with some scary book cover, I turned it around facing the wall and immediately felt better.

I laid awake a long time, the light on, pondering what to do. Finally, exhaustedly slipping in and out of sleep, I decided to just leave the calendar where it was and ignore the damned thing. Just pretend it and Betsy never existed in the first place. *Easier said than done, pal.* Where the hell was this voice in my head I was constantly arguing with coming from? I rolled over, ignoring the ache in my crotch when the memory of Betsy's warm body pressed against mine right here in this bed cropped up. I'd proven pretty thoroughly tonight that I could still have meaningless sex with some nameless chick, right? Betsy was just another piece of ass, albeit a good one. There were plenty of those around who were less pushy, and less...the only word I could conjure was "dangerous."

CHAPTER FIVE: *Day 15*

I couldn't stand it anymore. I hadn't gone to work in two days. I even considered calling the university clinic, although what in the hell I'd tell them was beyond me. "*The thing is, it's like this... my dick won't go soft!*" came to mind— but did such a strange and embarrassing problem even have a remedy? I didn't know. It sure as hell had never happened to me before. And that wasn't even exactly the problem, was it?

It would go soft—it just refused to stay soft, and when it was hard, it was so hard it *hurt*. I even wondered if that Eve or Erin or whatever her name was had slipped me some Viagra without me knowing it somehow, but that would have worn off. Nothing I did seemed to alleviate the ache for very long. I couldn't count how many times I'd tried. My sheets were literally getting stiff with cum, and I'd been rolling around, dazed and in so much pain, I didn't even care. I wanted to ask Tyler, but I didn't exactly know how to broach the subject, so I just told him I was sick and stayed in my room.

I could come, and when I did, I had a brief respite, but then my cock would get hard again, without any prompting at all, within minutes. *Minutes!* I'd tried everything...like jerking four times in an hour. That session was hell! By the fourth time, both my hand and my dick were raw, in spite of the baby oil. I finally had to watch Tera Patrick (who reminded me a little of Betsy from the right angle) take it in the ass on DVD to push me over and the little bit of cum that leaked from the tip could barely have been called a load. And my damned cock started to swell again, anyway, five short minutes later! I'd even tried just ignoring it. That was the worst. My cock started to hurt, and while that was uncomfortable, when my damned balls started to ache, it became unbearable. When guys talked about blue balls in the locker room, they weren't kidding.

Three times that morning I'd taken a hot bath, hoping to improve the situation. It worked for the first few minutes, the heat taking my mind off of it, but that was all. Three times afterward, I'd had my cell phone in my hand, that voice urging, *call her*. I might have made the symbolic gesture of tossing her number, but it was still here in my phone. I toyed with the idea, but what would I say? I couldn't imagine. Somehow I knew this all had something to do with that bizarre calendar sitting in the corner.

I hadn't looked at it again. It was propped wrong-side up against the wall, but I knew the damned days were still opening all by themselves. Of course they were, why wouldn't they? But I really knew from the smell. Yesterday, Tyler's girlfriend had bust into the room, sure I was hiding some gingerbread in here. If I hadn't been forced to turn face down on the hard-on from hell at the time, I would have thought it was the funniest thing I'd ever heard. There was no gingerbread, no apple pie, just an aromatic homemade advent calendar that was merrily counting down the days until Christmas all by itself. *What in the hell is that thing?*

My cell vibrated in my robe pocket, sending a painful jolt directly to my crotch. I groaned, pulling it out and flipping it open. *Betsy*. I'd expected a call like this days ago, actually, but here it was. I clicked, "Talk."

"Hello?" God, I sounded awful. She noticed.

"Jay? Are you okay?" Her voice was soothing, like cool aloe on a burn.

"Sure, great," I lied. "You?"

"Something's wrong," she insisted, sounding concerned. "Are you sick?"

"Well..." I cleared my throat, looking down at the tented sheet. "Sort of."

"I'm coming over. Don't move." The line went dead. Move? I didn't want to breathe too hard. My head was swimming. I wondered if it was true what they said about not enough blood getting to the brain when a guy had an erection. I felt dizzy and a little nauseous.

"Hey, man, Betsy's here! Do you want her to come in?" Tyler was knocking on the door. I think I'd fallen asleep. I mumbled something affirmative, and Betsy breezed in still carrying the outside chill.

"It's snowing." She shrugged off her jacket. When she saw me, the look of compassion on her face was almost unendurable. I think I whimpered. "Oh Jay, you poor thing! Why didn't you call me?" She rushed over and slid her hands immediately under the covers.

Her fingers were freezing and I can't tell you how amazing they felt on the tower of fire between my legs. I groaned out loud. Her hand moved over my shaft, and a pleasure that bordered immediately on pain shot up my spine. "Keep breathing," she whispered. I'd forgotten how. "Come on, Jay, help me," she urged. Her hand was warming up on my flesh, but the sensation was like nothing I'd experienced on my own.

"Ok, this is what you really need." She stood and began to undress. Scarf unwound, sweater over her head. Her hair stood out a little with static and I smiled. Her plain white bra unhooked in the front and quickly spilled her heavy cleavage. Jeans wiggled off, panties gone, she came and straddled me wearing wool socks, all seriousness. The skin of her thighs was still cool from the denim. When she slid me into her, her flesh resisted slightly, no anticipatory welcoming wetness, but it was the best thing I'd felt in days—possibly the best thing I'd ever felt.

"Look at me," she whispered when I closed my eyes at the sensation. I struggled them open, watching her rise and fall on me like a cool breaking wave, again and again. Whatever she was doing was working. My cock was responding to her, and she was responding to it. I could feel her growing wetter, her own eyes fluttering closed and then attempting to focus on mine again. She leaned forward, her lips cool and her breath warm. She eased up on the slick length of me, the cool air moving over my shaft, keeping just the tip pressing into the opening of her pussy. She was murmuring something, I couldn't tell what, against my mouth, squeezing me rhythmically all the while until I thought I would go crazy or die.

"Betsy, please!" I begged her, and I felt more than saw her smile. She sat up and slid quickly down onto me, doing the tight little circles that I loved so much, raising her arms above her head like she was dancing on my cock—and she was.

"Fill me, lover," she whispered, her dark eyes on mine, and I did. There couldn't have been much left in me, but whatever there was, it was hers. Her fingers trailed over my forehead, my cheek, my chest, my belly, like she was raining soothing medicine down over me.

Looking up at her through half-closed eyes, I smiled and croaked, "Witch." She smiled back, squeezing her pussy around me and laughed, low and throaty, when I jumped. I waited as she settled in beside me, her usual place, head tucked under my chin. I was dreading the inevitable rise of my cock again, but it didn't come. I would have stayed awake wondering, letting my mind race about it all, but exhaustion won out. I slept peacefully with Betsy curled into the crook of my arm like a soft, black cat.

CHAPTER SIX: *Day 20*

It was driving me crazy! I'd been smelling them all day—those candies that the old guy on TV always keeps in his pocket for his grandkid, those Werther's ones, butter rum or whatever they were. I'd actually checked my damned pockets while I was taking my history final (*who the hell knew the five major causes of the second world war, I mean really, could we narrow it down some more?*) because the smell was so strong, I was sure there were some in there.

I forgot about it when Betsy finally answered her cell. I just kept hitting redial on the walk home from class. She agreed to meet after she was off work at the book store. I couldn't get enough of her. Smelling those candies had made me hungry, and I grabbed four slices of bologna and two slices of cheese out of the fridge. Line of mustard down the middle, fold, gone in three bites. *Yum.*

The smell hit me as soon as I opened the door. *Werther's again!* Wow, it was strong! It seemed like the smells got stronger with every passing day. I hadn't noticed it this morning before I left, but day twenty was open. She was right. I didn't have to open them. They just opened all by themselves. I stripped down to my jeans and flipped on the TV. QVC. *Flip.* Animal Planet. *Flip.* Discovery Channel. *Hey, dung beetles! Cool! Flip.* TNT. *Reruns of Dark Angel. Now we're talking!* Jessica Alba was hot—those full lips and dark eyes—and her genuine smile was so like Betsy's.

I liked watching her mouth move. *Whew, she's got a hot little body.* Had to love goth girls, all dressed in black. My cock, no longer my mortal enemy, was pressing against the seam, asking for release. I unzipped, relieving a little pressure. *Better.* I hadn't intended to jerk off, but when I muted the TV and just watched her, she reminded

me even more of Betsy, and the more I imagined Betsy, the harder I got. Vicious circle. I eased my cock out of my underwear, nudging my jeans down a little. *A few strokes to warm him up before Betsy gets here won't hurt.*

Somehow I got lost in a fantasy of Betsy bent over our living room couch in some dark goth-girl outfit. I was fucking her standing up, bending at my knees to get some good, deep thrust action. The best part was the black or purple lipstick she was wearing. I'd never seen her wear it, but my imagination seemed to know just what she'd look like in it, and my cock really seemed to respond to it. I had to squeeze tight at the tip a few times to slow myself down. Damn, why was it so hard to stop once you got started?

The fantasy shifted, and now she was sucking me with that dark-rimmed mouth—oh fuck, that was too hot. I heard myself whispering, "Yeah, baby, that's fucking good, suck it," thrusting up in my hand/her mouth, watching her dark lipstick smear down my shaft. Hand in her hair, fucking her throat now, "Take it, Betsy, take it you little cockwhore!" Lost in the fantasy, my voice grew louder.

"Cockwhore, am I?" Betsy's voice from the doorway made me jump and, I am ashamed to say, I'm pretty sure I screamed like a girl, instinctively grabbing for something to cover myself, my heart hammering.

"Jesus!" I was panting, both from my wank and from the scare. "Could you knock?"

"Was I sucking you?" she murmured. It was the first time I noticed that she had her hand stuck down her under her skirt. My erection, beginning to wane, returned with a vengeance when I saw her hand moving between her legs.

"Yeah," I admitted, grinning sheepishly. "How long have you been there?"

"Long enough." She came over to the bed, pulling her skirt up to her waist. Red panties, and I could see a damp spot on them, right where her fingers were moving underneath. "Keep going," she encouraged, nodding toward my stiffening cock. I did, grabbing and stroking, watching her hand move faster in her panties. She pulled her turtleneck up above her breasts, and pulled down one bra cup so she could tweak her nipple.

"I want to see your pussy."

She smiled, pushing her panties down, the crotch catching between her lips as she tugged. I was jerking with my left, but my right hand went immediately for her pussy, my fingers finding her hole and pressing up into her. She sighed, still concentrating on her clit, her other hand, palm flat, rubbing against her nipple. My fingers slipping in and out of her reminded my cock what he was missing. Pre-cum was making it a slicker, sticky affair.

"Take your clothes off."

She did, quickly pulling off her shirt, her bra. She hesitated a moment at her skirt and panties. She gave me a mischievous little smile and turned around, bending over and lifting her skirt, giving me full view of her smooth little clamshell. She was glistening wet. She must have been watching me for a while. She slid her panties the rest of the way off, and spread her legs further, opening her pussy with her fingers, showing me.

My hand was like lightning on my dick now, nothing but a slippery, slapping blur. "Don't stop," she whispered. "I love watching you do that." I groaned, seeing her finger herself and lick her lips as she watched me over her shoulder. She was fucking herself

with three fingers now, and she slowly backed toward the bed. As soon as she was in reach, my hand was on her, roaming over her smooth, round ass, spreading her wetness over her thighs.

"Hold still." She slipped her fingers out of her pussy and moved to sit on the bed. Or, at least, that's what I thought she was doing. But as she backed up and positioned herself directly over me, I realized what she meant to do, and I held my cock steady, breathless. I was still stretched out on the bed, and she was hovering over me at a direct perpendicular, lifting her skirt and bending like she was about to take a pee. She sighed when she felt the tip of my cock touch her lips, and she sat fully down onto me, glancing over her shoulder to look into my eyes. Her skirt, a sleek, black, shiny thing, brushed against my belly and thighs. She wiggled on me and I groaned, feeling my cock shift inside of her.

"You have to help me a little." She leaned up slightly, balancing herself with her hands on the edge of the bed. I nodded, turning toward her as she slid up my shaft and back down again. The position alone was enough to push me more than halfway there. Couple that with the fact that I'd already been jerking for half an hour before she showed up, and I knew I wasn't going to last very long. I was going to try to hold out long enough. We caught a quick rhythm, her fucking back on me like that as fast as she could. I lifted her skirt to her waist, holding it there, watching her ass slam into me and her thighs work. The muscles were long and tight, and they flexed like she was running as she rode me. She was working hard, her body starting to accumulate a fine sheen of sweat. I could feel it on her ass and the backs of her thighs as she fucked me.

The best part was watching her face in the mirror over the dresser. Her eyes were closed, her expression a cross between pleasure and determination as she vaulted up and down on my cock. I slid my hand up her back, grabbing a handful of that long, dark hair, and pulling her head back slightly. She gasped and growled as I used the leverage to thrust up harder into her, feeling myself nearing my breaking point. Her head back, her throat exposed like that, her mouth slightly open, she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. She whispered something unintelligible, almost like chanting, and the breathy sound and cadence of it coupled with the heat and squeeze of her on my cock was more than enough. That was the image I came to—Betsy completely abandoned and writhing against my crotch, murmuring over and over something I couldn't even understand. I don't think I'd ever come so hard, and with every wave, just as I thought it was over, her pussy would squeeze me, pulling me deeper, and I would give her more of me. It went on and on, as if I could give her all of me.

When she curled up beside me and feathered kisses on my lips, I swore she tasted like Werther's candy. I found myself asking her, impossibly, "Do you want to come to my family's for Christmas?" and she smiled dreamily and said, "Maybe. We'll see."

CHAPTER SEVEN: *Day 25*

There was nothing but lame ass Hallmark shit on TV. I was tempted to go play the X-Box but most of our games weren't much fun without two players and Tyler had left yesterday to spend the week with his family. I stopped flipping channels to check my watch. Betsy was supposed to pick me up. Dinner and presents at my mom's started at two. *Oh great, a Very Fucking Brady Christmas.* Perfect holiday fare. Ok, so Marsha was hot, but she was blonde, and I wasn't into blondes anymore.

My cell vibrated in my pocket, sending a jolt straight to my balls. I grinned. It had to be Betsy. I flipped it open without looking and said, "Hey sexy, you coming?"

"Oh... uh... Jay?"

"Yeah...?" I sat up, not recognizing the voice. *Oh shit, did I just call my Aunt Sylvia sexy?*

"Hi, Jay. I was just calling to wish you a Merry Christmas." I couldn't place the voice, but it wasn't Aunt Sylvia. This girl was young.

"Well, thanks..." My mind was racing. "You, too."

"You don't know who this is, do you?" she asked. *Fuck.* Was I going to have to admit it? Wow, she sounded really disappointed. I felt bad, but I didn't say anything. "It's Evie. You know, from the bar." *The blonde. That night, oh my god, she left crying and I let her walk home in the cold.*

"Yeah... listen... hey... about that night... I wasn't... did you... make it home ok?" *Christ, that was pathetic.* I cringed.

"Oh, it was fine. My girlfriend was still at the bar, remember?"

Betsy? I remembered them dancing together.

"Anyway, I just wanted to call and say Merry Christmas."

"Well, thanks." I muted the TV, watching Jan talk to Cindy—who couldn't possibly be the same chick, but she was pretty hot, so who cared? "So what are you up to today?"

"Oh, nothing, really. My family isn't in state, and I couldn't afford to fly home. I'm just hanging around in the dorms." God, she sounded sad.

"That sucks."

"Yeah, well... I'm used to it. So what about you?"

"Oh, my mom always has dinner for me and my brother." I didn't want to tell her I was taking Betsy. Why add insult to injury?

"Jay?" Her voice was so small.

"Yeah?"

"That night..." she began. I cringed. *Oh, great...here it comes.* "It was really something. I like you... I wanted to you to know that. I really like you a lot."

I sat there, stunned. Ok. Not what I was expecting at all. Funny, but I liked her, too, now, all of a sudden—a girl all alone on Christmas day.

"Well... I like you, too." I hit the power button on the remote and watched the TV go black. I glanced at the calendar underneath. I could still smell the cranberries. I'd been smelling them all night long.

"You do?" Wow, she sounded happy. Really happy. I felt suddenly guilty for no reason whatsoever.

"Yeah." I glanced at the calendar again, and noticed it looked askew. As if it had moved, or been moved. No, not exactly. The right side of it looked...*what the hell?*

Weird! I approached it carefully, giving it a wide berth. Evie was talking about something—ordering pizza on Christmas. I was tempted to ask her to my mom's. I leaned against my dresser, and realized that the side of the calendar was open. Or *opening*.

"Listen, I wanted to tell you something else, Jay... it's very important..."

"Hey, Evie, can you hold on a minute?" I set the phone on the dresser and knelt near the calendar although I could still hear her talking about something. There was a separation between the cardboard back, and the doors on the front. It should have been white underneath, considering it was white behind the black doors, but it wasn't. It was black. I flicked the edge with my finger, and it moved a little toward me, like it was on hinges.

My heart was beating fast, but my curiosity got the best of me. No wonder it had to be so damned big—the whole thing was a door! I couldn't resist seeing what was behind it. Maybe this was my payoff. This was what I'd been waiting for as doors popped open, counting down to today. I swung the calendar door open quickly and stepped back. Nothing. Just blackness. It just looked like cardboard. *So much for Narnia.*

"Jay?" I heard Evie's voice on my cell. I grabbed for the phone, laughing out loud a little nervously, but I stopped when I saw something. It was a glimmer at first, in the middle of the calendar, like some muted light from the inside. I reached my finger out for it, hesitated, and then touched it. It was warm. *Whoa!* My throat felt suddenly very dry. I looked around the room, as if to ask someone if they were seeing what I was seeing.

"Jay?" Evie's voice again, louder. The light grew brighter, moving from a dull gray in the center toward the edges, like the way old TVs used to fade out when you turned them off, only backwards, in gradual shades. I sat transfixed, like I was seeing a painting revealed a layer at a time. I realized, suddenly, that I knew that image, and knew it well.

"Betsy." My voice was hoarse. She was in the distance. I could see her plain as could be now, standing at the end of...a hallway? I reached my hand just slightly into, no fucking shit, *into* the door, and felt the cool surface of brick or cement. I leaned my head in a little. Sure enough. I could see where the mortar had been laid. It was a wall. Both sides. I couldn't see a floor, but I was sure there was one, because Betsy was standing on it way down there in the hallway. She was holding a candle, her hand cupped around the flame to keep it from flickering. She was smiling at me, beckoning me, and my cock jumped when I realized that she was wearing nothing at all. *Fuck Narnia, this is Nirvana!*

I couldn't walk through the door, but I could crawl, and I ducked my head under and edged through, my heart pounding, my eyes fixed on Betsy in the distance. She was urgent, calling me, although I couldn't quite hear her.

"Jay?" Wow, Evie's voice sounded very far away now. I was crawling on a cement floor, my head near the ceiling. It was dark in here, although there was a slight glow when I looked back into my room. The sensation made my stomach flip, looking backward, seeing my bed, my dresser, the phone still open on it. Ahead of me I could see Betsy, standing still, and I could hear her very clearly now, calling me to come to her, the flickering light of the candle warmly illuminating her breasts.

I hesitated, not liking how gray things were growing behind me. But Betsy was calling, compelling me onward. I could almost stand now. The further away from the door I got, the taller the ceiling seemed to get. Perspective, I realized. Betsy loomed larger now. I judged that I was about halfway to her.

"Jay?" I could barely hear Evie. My room looked about the size of a television screen from where I was standing, like I was watching a movie of my room. My jaw dropped when my bedroom door opened, and Betsy was standing there. *What the fuck?*

She came toward the calendar, the door I'd crawled through, grabbing my phone off the dresser as she went, and bent down and looked inside. It was cold in here, and suddenly it felt colder. Now I could hear Evie more clearly. "Jay, please! Listen to me! *Whatever you do, don't go through the door!*"

It was as if it were all happening in some weird slow motion time-lapse. Betsy was talking on the phone, now, as I called to her, and I saw her smile. She waved at me, and it was just my knee-jerk reaction to wave back, totally confused. I was listening to her talk but my brain wasn't really registering what she was saying.

"Evie? It's Betz. It's all over... Oh, don't cry, sweetie, this is what you wanted, remember?... I know, but I told you about love spells and guys like him... I warned you, Evie! Guys like Jay just don't know how to treat a woman, and he deserves everything he's getting after what he did to you... Yes, but at least you and I can start fresh. A new beginning... I'll be over in 10 minutes... Shh, it's all gonna be ok... Love you."

This can't be happening. My nut sack shriveled and my balls felt like they were two tight little stones as I scrambled toward the only light left—the light coming in from my suddenly far-off but aching familiar bedroom.

Then, I had an abrupt, chilling thought.

If that's Betsy... then who...?

I turned around in the darkness, and heard the door slam behind me.

The End



Pumpkin Eater

Prologue

Even as a kid, she hated spiders. “Charlotte’s Web” never fooled her. It was an urban legend, what they said about swallowing spiders in your sleep, but the thought seemed so horrifying—that last taboo. Who could put something like that in their mouth? Sometimes you never know what you’ll do. Her father used to chase her around the house with them, convinced he could cure her of the phobia, chortling, “Here, eat it! It’s a good source of protein!” Turns out he was right.

A girl can’t live on pumpkin alone.

Chapter One

“Two more days, pumpkin...”

They were stacking them close to the road and the hand-painted sign that read: “Punkins Here!” All these years and it was the same misspelled sign.

“We’ll have a full moon to work by, too.”

The childish anticipation on his face gave her hope. She might get a bath tonight.

“Cage!” His tone changed suddenly.

She clutched the collar around her throat and the jolt that went through her made her lose her footing on the old wagon they used to bring the pumpkins in from the patch. She stumbled, moving to catch herself, an exposed nail leaving a long gash in the tender flesh of her wrist.

The blood welled up on her arm, and she sat, still stunned, as the cruiser kicked up dust on the road heading toward them. There were no lights or sirens. It was probably just passing. The inclination to scream and wave her arms had been squashed out of her long ago and all she could think of was getting to the safety of her cage inside the house.

“Now!”

Another shock hit, and then another, his hand buried deep in his pocket while she scrambled to stand, the buzzing in her head and neck making her nearly blind with pain.

In her haste, clawing at the thick collar tucked under the high turtleneck she wore, her feet tangled in her long skirt and she went down again, sprawling on the lawn behind a line of pumpkins. Her body jerked as he continued to hit the button in a panic,

more like a man waiting impatiently for an elevator than someone with what amounted to a trigger in their hand wielding 10,000 volts at a pop.

Still, she didn't make a sound. The car was slowing and she heard the tires crunch to a the back row.

"Hide!" he hissed, giving her another small shock for good measure, and she scrabbled her way around the big wagon wheel to cower underneath in the shadows.

"Well, hullo there officer, what can I do you for?"

"Hey there." The cop eyed the pumpkins on the lawn, glancing over at the heavysset man who was shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun off the cruiser. "Noticed you had some nice big ones this year."

"Bigger the better," the man laughed, slapping his distended, overall-covered belly with one hand. "That's what my mama used to say."

"Hi, I'm Will." The officer extended his hand. "You are—?"

"Belcher." The heavy man reluctantly slipped his hand from his pocket to shake the cop's. "Call me Belch. Nice to meetcha."

"They really do seem to get bigger every year." Will nudged a pumpkin with his toe. "My son says he wants the biggest one I can find."

She crouched lower and hunkered back, watching the officer tip his hat and scratch his head as he studied the selection of pumpkins on the lawn. His large hands were careful as he hefted one of the orange globes to inspect it.

"You want big? Come on out to the back, then!" Belch jerked his head toward the house. "I'm fixin' to break the world's record soon—biggest pumpkin ever."

“Yeah?” Will smiled, leaning one of the pumpkins to the side to look at its bottom. The sun glinted off his badge as he stood and she noted his thick, heavy belt, the holster and radio visible, one on each side. “Guess everyone wants their fifteen minutes, right?”

“World’s largest was fifteen hundred and two pounds. Some guy in Rhode Island broke the record just this year.” Belch watched the cop walking up the front row of pumpkins, his hand back in his pocket. When his eyes met hers for a moment as he glanced briefly towards the wagon, he noted she was still safely tucked away in the shadows. “Last year, my biggest was fourteen ten. I’m gettin’ there.”

“I don’t think that would fit in the trunk!” Will laughed and she liked the way his eyes crinkled at the corners. It reminded her, that expression, of some forgotten kindness in the world.

“No, sir.” Belch pointed to an enormous hollowed-out pumpkin on its side near the tree. “Can fit a coupla yow’ins in there at least. Kids who come, they like to get their pitcher taken in it.”

“Great gimmick.” Will smiled. “And now I know it definitely wouldn’t fit in the trunk! So how much for the big ones in the back row there?”

“Eight dollars.” Belch edged between the wagon wheel and the row of the largest pumpkins. “Ten for these here. These are the biggest I have left.”

“Well, they’re no half ton beauties, right?” Will winked, reaching back for his wallet. “But I guess my son will have to make do.”

“Sure ‘nuff.” Belch plucked the ten from the cop’s hand and took a step back. “Take your pick.”

Staring through the wooden spokes of the wagon wheel, she watched as the cop—*Will*—squatted down, tipping each pumpkin back to look at its face. Belch had given him a little more room, but lingered near the wagon, and she saw his hand working in his pocket and just knew he was fingering that little button.

“Gotta find one with a good stem,” Will murmured.

Belch nodded in agreement, rocking back on his heels. “Stem’s mighty important.”

From this angle, she could see the strong line of the man’s jaw, how crisp and clean his uniform shirt looked in the dappled sunlight. Reaching down, she touched the tattered black skirt she wore, the stained dark turtleneck, and shrank further beneath the wagon. The sound of tires on the dirt road made her jerk her head up as another cop car pulled in behind the first.

“Hey, Will!” A young man, younger than Will, leaned to call out his squad car window.

Will gave him a friendly wave. “Hey, Mike.”

“You still haven’t gotten a pumpkin, yet?”

“Howdy there, officer.” Belch’s face showed none of his inner turmoil, but she saw his hand working faster in his pocket, and she touched her throat, tensing and waiting for the collar to go off.

“This is Belch.” Will introduced him. “He’s trying to grow the world’s biggest pumpkin in his backyard.”

“Uh huh.” Mike looked the heavy-set man up and down and then dismissed him, turning his attention back to the older cop. “So, you got your son for Halloween then?”

Will sighed, standing and turning toward the car. "Just because it so happens to fall on my weekend. You don't know my ex."

She saw a cloud cross his face and her heart lurched in her chest. Everything in her protested at the thought of the man with the kind eyes in pain. Belch's attention had shifted to the new cop, and while he was distracted, she reached her hand out for one of the pumpkins Will had been looking at, rolling it slowly under the wagon.

"You mean Bitchzilla?" Mike grinned.

"I had one of them once," Belch snorted.

Will smirked. "I guess her reputation precedes her?"

In the dim light under the wagon, she rubbed her finger across the long wound on her wrist, the blood there tacky. Mixing it with her saliva, she worked fast to make the four-letter word on the shiny underside of the pumpkin.

"She's something else," Will was saying. "Halloween's Friday. We're gonna have to carve our pumpkin before we go trick-or-treating. Guess what he wanted to be?"

The question was directed at Belch, who shrugged and shook his head in response. Under the wagon, she blew gently on the pumpkin and then, satisfied, turned it over, placing it near the man's leg. Belch rocked on his heels, looking back and forth between the two officers.

"A cop!" Will and Mike said it both and once, grinning. Belch just nodded and smiled, as if he were in on their joke.

"Well, I'm outta here." Mike waved. "Happy hunting! See ya back at the station."

Belch looked visibly relieved as the cruiser pulled away, leaving a cloud of dust hanging over the road in a dusty haze behind it.

"This is a good one." Belch lifted a large pumpkin from the pile and held it out to Will.

"Little flat on one side," Will noted with a shrug, turning back to the selection.

The officer squatted down where he stood, not two feet from where she was crouched. She held her breath as he tilted a pumpkin back and forth—the one she just had in her hands.

"This is a good one," he decided, smoothing his hand over the ridged orange surface.

Belch rocked and fiddled. "Yep, sure is."

The officer hefted it in his hands and she watched as he smiled down at the pumpkin's face. *He's thinking of his son.* His expression was soft, his eyes crinkled in the corners again.

"Well... hello there."

She froze, her hand going to her throat. Behind the cop, Belch's face was twisted into an expression caught between anger and terror. Will leaned in closer to peer at the girl under the wagon. Her dark hair was thick and long, covering a great deal of her face as she dipped her head, hiding her eyes.

"What's your name?"

She shrank further back under the wagon, seeing Belch tramping up behind the officer.

"She don't talk."

I have a name.

She struggled to remember it. Belch only ever called her “girl,” and sometimes “girlie” when he was feeling magnanimous. It had been years since anyone had spoken her name out loud.

Elizabeth... *Beth. I was Beth.*

Will frowned, seeing how she cringed away when he reached a hand out toward her. He couldn't see her very well in the shade of the wagon, but her face and hands were filthy, her feet bare, and he thought her thick hair might actually be matted. She looked tiny to him, and he couldn't tell how old she might be.

He saw her staring at the pumpkin in his hands. “Do you like pumpkins? This is a nice one, isn't it?”

“She's simple,” Belch explained, rocking and fiddling again.

Will's jaw tightened at the man's phrase. “Developmentally disabled?”

“Yeah,” Belch agreed. “Not used to people much.”

Will stood, looking at the big man with a frown. “I didn't know there was anyone else at this residence?”

“My niece,” Belch lied, nodding his head. “She don't come out a lot.”

“How old is she?” Will asked, glancing at his watch. It was ten o'clock on a Wednesday morning. She was young, or small boned—or emaciated? “Does she go to school?”

“Lordy, no!” Belch laughed. “Girlie turns twenty-five come November.”

Beth (*I have a name*) turned her face up toward him. Was it true? Was she really so old?

Will frowned again, looking at the petite form huddled under the wagon. "Well... thank you for the pumpkin, Belch... Belcher... what was your last name again? Want to make sure I can look that world's record up in Guinness!"

The heavy man's lips pursed. "Buckland. Belcher Buckland."

"Good luck with that great big pumpkin!" Will juggled his own and Beth watched as he opened his cruiser door and set it beside him to ride shotgun.

"Fuckity fuck fuck," Belch whispered under his breath, still smiling and waving as the cop car pulled away.

She saw the officer glance back at her and she raised her hand, but she knew he couldn't possibly see her anymore in her hiding place. Sucking at her wound, the coppery taste of blood in her mouth, she waited for Belch's reaction.

It didn't surprise her at all when the collar went off, jolting her so hard she hit her head against the underside of the wagon. She didn't remember anything else after that.

Chapter Two

"Will Walker, you are a million miles away today."

He started when the young waitress slid into the booth across from him with a coffee carafe in one hand and waving a check slip in the other. She slid the paper across the Formica surface, her eyes meeting his over what was left of his meatloaf sandwich.

"You know, I've asked you three times if you wanted any dessert." Propping her chin in her hand, she shook her head at him and smiled.

"I'm sorry, Carrie," he apologized, offering her a smile of his own. "Guess I'm just spinning yarns today."

"Halloween." She nodded knowingly. "Perfect day for that."

Will glanced over at the counter, looking for Dora, the woman whose name was etched on the glass of the front door, but didn't see her.

"Carrie, you know the old Buckland farm out on Cherry Hill Road?" He took a sip of his cooling coffee and grimaced.

"Sure." She tipped the carafe up and filled his cup when he set it down.

"Thanks." He searched the container of packets sitting on the table for Sweet'n'Low. "Why doesn't anyone carry the pink stuff?"

"Here." She craned behind her and grabbed another clear plastic dish full of packets. Will couldn't help noticing how nicely her uniform stretched over her figure as she twisted to reach, her blouse pulling out of the waistband of her skirt just slightly, showing a small expanse of flesh.

“Doc said I had to cut out the sweet stuff,” Will sighed, tearing open a pink packet. “They say Nutrasweet is the devil and this Splenda stuff hasn’t been out long enough to know anything—that leaves the pink stuff.”

“But all the mice died,” she said. “Isn’t that the deal with saccharine?”

He snorted. “You’d die, too, if they fed you the equivalent of three sacks of sugar a day.” Will tipped another cream in and watched the color change.

“So what is it you’re spinning yarns about?” Carrie nudged him under the table with her knee and he enjoyed the contact, giving her another smile.

“The Buckland place...” Will tested his coffee and found it satisfactory. “You know Belcher Buckland?”

Her eyes widened. “You mean old Peter-Peter-Pumpkin-Eater?”

Will raised an eyebrow. “Is that what they call him?”

She flushed. “Well, we did when we were kids. I think they still do.”

“How come?”

“He’s an odd duck,” she went on. “He’s been selling those pumpkins since I was a little girl. We used to go stand at the edge of his field and watch him, out in the dark with some miner’s hat on, digging for pumpkin seeds.”

He nodded, remembering the man’s mannerisms, the way he fiddled with something in his pocket the whole time Will was there. “Do you know if he has any family living out there with him?”

Carrie shrugged. “My mama said his wife up and left him. Not that I blame her. He never remarried, as far as I know. They never had any kids.”

Will took another sip of his coffee. “Thought so.”

"Why do you ask?"

"No reason." He shrugged. "Just curious."

"Come on, Sheriff." Carrie rolled her eyes again. "I wasn't born yesterday."

"No?" He winked. "Hey, you wanna bring me a slice of Dora's homemade pumpkin pie?"

She nudged him under the table again. "I thought you said Doc told you no more sweet stuff!"

"He did." Will grinned, nudging her back this time and enjoying the surprised, pleased look on her face. "But it's Halloween, doesn't that count as a special occasion? Besides, I promised Jordy I wouldn't steal any of his candy this year, so I better get my sweet fix now."

Carrie stood, picking up the check. "You taking him out trick or treating tonight?"

"Not around here," Will admitted with a sheepish smile.

"Oh, I don't blame you," she agreed. "We used to go into Richmond to trick-or-treat. The houses here are spaced so far apart, we could never get enough goodies."

"Yeah, I'm taking him to my sister's over in Fairview."

She let out a low whistle. "That's a hike!"

"Just an hour." He shrugged. "His cousin, Brent, is about his age. They like to go out together."

"With Dad tagging along?" She picked up the coffee carafe.

He winked. "At a respectable distance, of course."

"Of course." She smiled. "Pumpkin pie, then?"

"Please." He nodded. "Thanks."

By the time he was finished with his dessert, Carrie had disappeared into the back. He left her a hefty tip and paid the check.

Across the street at the station, Mike was on the phone with his girlfriend. Will knew the drill. *You hang up first. No, you.*

“Did you run him?” Will tapped his long fingers on the top of Mike’s computer. They’d just gone online two years ago.

Mike cupped his hand over the receiver. “It’s on your desk. He’s clean. No priors.”

Will sank into his chair and looked through the printout. Belcher Buckland had been born in that farm house on Cherry Hill Road fifty-four years ago and had never left Dukkerville. His mother and father were deceased. One record of a marriage to a Sarah Buckland, née Davis, but no record of a divorce. Mike was right—no prior arrests, nothing out of the ordinary.

“Come on, Katie, I’m working,” Mike whispered into the phone. “He’s right here!”

Will sighed, rubbing his fingers against his forehead. He was picking Jordy up from school at three, and he still had a ton of paperwork left to finish about a tractor vs. motorcycle accident last week.

“The school girl outfit, definitely.”

Will leaned back, glancing at Mike tipping back in his chair and shook his head with a smile. Halloween was going to be quite a night for his young deputy, if Katie McFee was going to wear a plaid skirt and knee socks.

“No siblings,” Will mumbled, sitting up suddenly and flipping back through the papers on his desk. Belch Buckland was an only child. “He couldn’t have a niece.”

Every time he closed his eyes, he could see her thin, pale face, the way her dark eyes followed him through the maze of pumpkins. So maybe his wife had siblings, he thought, sifting through the papers again. Spinning yarns, he decided, slapping the papers into his box. I'm just spinning yarns.

Still, he'd have Mike run her, just in case. He tented his fingers under his chin and stared out the window across the street at the diner, lost in thought, until it was time to go pick Jordy up from school.

Chapter Three

Elizabeth Foster.

Beth whispered her own name to the tile walls while she scrubbed her hair as clean as she could with a bar of Ivory soap. She prolonged the bath as long as possible, her body weightless and floating in the water, and for the first time in years, she cared who she was. It didn't matter how dirty she was going to get later—right now, she felt impossibly clean and new.

“Come on, girlie!” He knocked impatiently at the door, his voice filled with anticipation.

Sighing, she stood, catching a glance of herself in the mirror, all brittle angles and sharp edges, as she reached for one of the stiff, faded towels. He dried them outside on the clothesline, and the water was so hard it made the terrycloth feel like sandpaper over her skin.

She touched her neck gently, sore from his zealousness and panic. She had waited all of yesterday with a knot in her belly, jumping at every announcement of tires on the gravel drive, listening for the sound of sirens. Cars came and went with last minute pumpkin buyers, but he hadn't returned. Whatever fleeting hope she'd had of being rescued had gone.

“Come on, girl!” He was pounding now. In spite of the old corrugated, aluminum pole barn roofing he had nailed over any possible escape route in the house, including the bathroom window, the closed door made him nervous.

Beth took the old, tattered house dress from the counter, lifting it to her nose for a moment to smell the faint trace of clean left in it after sitting in the drawer for months. In

spite of the slight mustiness, she felt positively new when she slipped it over her head, the material swirling around her emaciated frame.

Looking at her hazy reflection in the clouded mirror, she touched the faded, curling picture tucked in the corner, the woman in the photo wearing a similar dress, sitting at a picnic table with her chin resting in her hand. There was a twisted silver ring on her finger and her long dark hair fell like a waterfall around her pale face.

That's not me. The thought was exhilarating. She flipped the edge up with her thumb, reading the faded writing on the back, "Sarah—Briarwood." *I'm not Sarah.*

When she opened the door, he was standing there with her collar in his hands, waiting to snap it back on. She accepted it with a bent head, feeling the thick metal band click together and she waited while he fumbled with the lock. The house smelled like cooked meat and her stomach clenched, knowing none of it was for her. He had generously given her an extra helping of mush—Wheateena and scraps—for her daily meal that morning in a bowl on the floor.

"Almost dark," he said with gleeful anticipation, turning and going out into the kitchen, his hand moving absently in his overalls pocket.

She followed him, the smell of food making her dizzy with hunger. Searching the counter for any remains, she found nothing. The dishes were loaded into the dishwasher, and the table was spread with newspapers, one of his *Rouge Vif d'Estampes*, what laymen called the "Cinderella Pumpkin," opened on the table, its insides waiting to be removed.

"Help me." He sank a large hand down into the red-orange fruit and extracting a large, ropy mass of seeds and pulp.

She obediently began sorting, her tiny fingers working both quickly and deftly, separating the slippery seeds from the soft, gelatinous muck. He continued to empty the pumpkin onto the table with his big hands, humming to himself.

The smell of the pumpkin made her stomach growl. She wanted to stuff a plump, juicy piece into her mouth, and her hands trembled with the effort she had to exert to stay them.

“Almost dark,” he said again, his voice tight with excitement. He peered out the small peephole he had left in the aluminum covering the kitchen window that looked out over the backyard and the pumpkin patch. “Next year, we’ll break the record, girlie.”

Beth sucked her fingers, licking the slightly bitter taste of the fruit off them while he was distracted, quickly going back to sorting when he turned her way again.

“I wish Grandpa Romani could see it.” He began his own slow, methodical sorting. Belch held a seed, watching it glisten in the light. “Pumpkin seeds are good medicine, he always said.”

The brief taste of pumpkin made her mouth water and she snuck another taste, a little more flesh this time, sucking it silently as she worked and listened to him ramble. “You know, the farmers wouldn’t go out into their fields on Halloween night,” he went on, his fingers spreading the slick seeds on the newspaper. “Grandpa and the other gypsies would just go break open the pumpkins and take their seeds...”

She swallowed the pumpkin flesh, her stomach clamoring for more. He was lost in thought, telling himself a story, and she slipped a larger piece off the table with one hand while she sorted with the other, waiting for the opportunity to sneak it up toward her mouth.

“Good medicine,” he nodded. “Gonna make the biggest pumpkin in the whole world.”

She slipped the peach-colored flesh into her mouth. It was like a bittersweet balm and she sucked gratefully, but the hand that grabbed her wrist was strong and thick with gummy orange pulp as his eyes turned to meet hers.

“Hungry?” He squeezed her wrist so hard she could feel the bones grinding together. She swallowed quickly without chewing, dropping her eyes to the floor and bracing herself for her punishment.

“You know better than to steal food!” He sounded exasperated, starting to reach into his pocket and then looking down at his sticky hand with a sigh. He rubbed the gooey fluid between his fingers thoughtfully, lifting his face to hers.

“You like this?” He rubbed his fingers over her mouth, smearing her lips with viscid orange wetness. “You want some of that?”

She winced when his meaty fingers shoved their way past her teeth, wiggling against her tongue, but her stomach convulsed, asking for more.

“Here.” He dipped his fingers deep into the flesh of the pumpkin and bringing his gooey hand back to her mouth. “Suck it off.”

Eagerly, she sucked at his fingers like they were fat sausages, her tongue working between them, looking for every last bit of bittersweet pumpkin juice. He watched her, the look of disgust on his face changing as she licked at his palm and sucked his broad thumb deep into her mouth.

“You really like that, huh?” He reached to unfasten his overalls. She didn’t pay any attention as they dropped to the floor, clasping his hand in both of hers, her tongue working over the pads of each finger.

“Want some more?” He yanked on his shorts and let him pool at his feet. His belly was distended, almost pendulous, and hung down far enough to cover his genitals. He sat down in the chair, leaning back and reaching his hand around his paunch to grasp his hard cock with his sticky palm.

Beth’s mouth followed his fingers, still licking and sucking at them as he stroked up and down his shaft. He had to strain his neck to see her, looking around his fatty bulk to watch her tongue lapping at his flesh. When he moved to dip fingers deep into the pit of the pumpkin’s belly, her hungry eyes followed his hand from his cock to the pumpkin and back again.

“Suck it off.” He smeared his hard little shaft with the juicy insides and he groaned when she fastened her lips over the head, sucking the short, fat length of his cock deep into her mouth.

Beth was hungry, so very hungry, and she kneaded his doughy belly out of the way with her hands so she could snake her tongue further down to where sinewy bits of pumpkin meat were trapped in the dark thatch of hair between his legs. She swallowed them eagerly, moving back up to the head of his cock where he was slathering himself with more pumpkin guts.

“Oh yeah!” He groaned as she began to work him furiously with her tongue, her hands leaving tacky prints on his thighs as she steadied herself.

Belch's head went back, his face twisting with pleasure, and he sank his hand into the reddish head of the pumpkin on the table, his fingers squeezing through the pulpy flesh as her greedy mouth tried to swallow him whole. Seeds squirted through his meaty fingers as he squashed the goo in his fist.

"Biggest pumpkin in the world," he whispered, thrusting up to meet her mouth. "Biggest fucking pumpkin ever..."

His motion was so furious now she struggled to keep herself steady. Shifting position, Beth jumped when her collar went off, sending a quick jolt of electricity buzzing through her head, and she moved back a little, startled. Belch just groaned at the sensation, his eyes still closed, working his cock in out of her orange-smeared lips.

Confused but unable to extract herself, she saw both of his hands in plain sight, one up under his shirt, tugging at one of the tiny brown nipples topping his teats, and the other wrapped around the base of his cock. With a dawning realization, Beth searched the space between her legs, finding the shorts and overalls pooled around his feet.

It's in his pocket.

Without thinking, she found the small, rectangular box and slipped it into her housecoat as Belch worked himself deeper into her throat. His hand was buried in the pumpkin shell, mashing the insides between his fingers over and over, the wet sound of it filling the room as he whispered to himself about giant pumpkins.

Trembling, her heart pounding, she worked him toward the finish, wanting time to digest what had happened and decide what she was going to do with the unexpected treasure in her pocket. Shoving his hand out of the way, she worked both fist and mouth

up and down his shaft, latched on so tight her cheeks were hollow as she tried to suck him dry.

“Hungry little bitch,” he moaned. Beth had a moment to lament her clean hair as he grabbed it in his clammy fist, shoving her head down onto his shaft, her nose buried in the soft dough of his swinging belly as he fucked her throat. “Swallow it all!”

She had no intention of doing anything else, coming up for air before sinking back down one last time, the soft velvet heat of her throat urging his cum up from his sticky balls. He blasted her soft palate with his heat, waves of acrid white fluid coating her tongue, and she made hungry noises as she swallowed it all, licking her fingers and his softening cock until he shoved her away with a grunt.

“Damn,” he swore, panting as he glanced toward the window. “Dark already. Come on, girl, we have seeds to harvest.”

She stood, her legs still shaking, and wiped at her orange-slick mouth with the back of her hand. He didn’t bother cleaning off his genitals before he pulled up his overalls up and fastened them over his t-shirt.

“Heigh-ho.” He grabbed a miner’s hat off the table. “Let’s go.”

Chapter Four

“Why can’t I go by myself?”

“I told you why.” Will sighed and pulled the pickup into his sister’s driveway, cutting the engine. There were trick-or-treaters out in force already and it wasn’t even quite dusk.

“Brent and I can go together,” Jordy went on, the whiny edge to his voice making Will cringe. “Aunt Donna said we could go by ourselves—if *you* said it was okay.”

“But I didn’t say it was okay.” Will grabbed the pumpkin sitting on the seat between them, watching as some kid dressed as Sponge-Bob waddled by with a ninja.

Glancing at his watch, he wondered if they were even going to have time for the pumpkin carving. “In fact, I clearly remember saying it was very much *not* okay.”

“But Dad—”

Will shut the driver’s side door, and balanced the pumpkin against his side with one hand. Jordy followed out the passenger side, still talking, all the way into the house, through the side door and into the kitchen.

“Hey, sis.” Will leaned in to kiss the top of her head where she was kneeling in front of her son, a needle and thread in her mouth.

“Hey, Uncle Will, I’m Captain Jack Sparrow!”

“I can see that.” He pursed his lips. “All you need is the mascara.”

“Will!” Donna admonished, threading the needle through the hem of her son’s tunic. “Jordy, did you eat dinner? There’s spaghetti on the stove.”

“We stopped at McDonald’s.” Will set the pumpkin down on the kitchen table. “Put us a little behind.”

"There, all done." She stood and adjusted her son's eye patch. "I guess you are running late, you didn't even have a chance to change out of your uniform?"

"You got any newspaper?" Will glanced into the living room. "I promised Jordy we'd carve this bad boy... and I wore my uniform because he asked me to."

"We match," Jordy said proudly, puffing his chest out and pointing to his shiny plastic badge.

Donna was digging through a blue bin in the corner. "Here's some newspaper. We carved ours days ago."

"Thanks." He began to spread it out on the table. "Jordy, you wanna do the guts?"

"Yeah!"

"Here." His sister handed him a strange-shaped serrated knife with a red plastic end.

Will frowned. "What's this?"

"A pumpkin knife," she said. "Kid-safe."

"Can I do it, Dad?"

"I don't know..."

"It's perfectly safe, Will." Donna spooned spaghetti sauce into a Tupperware container. "Brent did just fine with it."

The doorbell rang and they all heard a chorus of "Trick or Treat!"

"I'll get it." She headed toward the door. Brent followed, probably to snag some candy, Will thought, and smiled.

"I'm not a baby, anymore, Dad," Jordy insisted, holding his hand out for the knife. Will handed it over, taking a step back. "Thanks!"

Will watched his son with interest, letting him figure out where to insert the knife, how to manage the weight and size of the pumpkin as he worked it around the in the flesh. He thought to remind him to press it in on an angle, so the lid wouldn't just fall straight through, but then decided not to. He wanted to do it by himself.

"See!" Jordy looked up in triumph. "I told you I could—"

It's always the cockiness that gets you, Will thought, as the pumpkin slipped out of his son's grip and rolled across the table, the red top of the knife still stuck in.

"Got it!" Will caught the heavy fruit as it slipped off the edge. "You're doing great, Jordan."

"You should have seen that little butterfly." Donna came back into the kitchen, Brent following with a mouth full of Snickers. "What a doll!"

Will stood with the weight of the pumpkin in his hands, her voice receding, suddenly very far away.

help

The letters were rust-colored and smeary, spread on the shiny orange surface in a hurry, he imagined. He stared at the word and saw her thin, waxy face, her great big eyes staring at him from underneath the wagon.

"Dad?" Jordy sensed something—his voice had that concerned tone that kids of divorced parents seem to learn like most kids learn to walk.

“Donna, I have to go.” Will set the pumpkin on the table and turned to look at his sister’s puzzled face. “Can you take the boys out?”

“What?” She shook her head. “What about the trick or treaters? I—what do you mean, you have to go?”

“It’s important.” He looked over at his son. “Jordy, I want you to take a flashlight, and I want you both to be very careful.”

His son’s eyes lit up as he realized what this meant. “Thanks, Dad!”

Will closed his eyes for a moment as his son’s arms flew around his waist, his smooth cheek resting against his chest, and he hugged Jordy with one arm, taking his sister’s hand and squeezing it with the other.

“I have to go,” he insisted again, and she saw on his face that he did. His last words to Jordy as he went out the side door were, “Remember, son, be careful!”

Chapter Five

“Heigh ho, the seeds’ll grow, big fat pumpkins in a row...” Belch sang with what couldn’t be called anything else but impish glee.

She watched his miner’s hat bobbing in the dark as he set up the screens in rows on the ground next to one of the giant pumpkins. Shivering in bare feet and house dress, Beth looked across the patch, the land stretching as far as she could see in either direction. The nearest farm could be gleaned only by a few faint squares of light in the distance.

The pumpkins reflected the moonlight, seeming to glow among the rows. Most of the smaller ones had been harvested weeks ago, but a dozen or more of the giants at the back of the patch spread impossibly fat and wide, their corpulent hulls like the broad backs of beached white whales.

“Here we go!” he roared, firing up the chainsaw, the sound cutting through the night, and she took a step back as the blades tore into the pumpkin, bits of flesh and gore landing wetly on the ground at her feet as he sawed through the stem-end. This pumpkin was lying on its side and the vines had been cut weeks ago in preparation for tonight, allowing the seeds to mature inside.

“This is our heavy-hitter!” Belch shut off the chainsaw and tossed it aside, grabbing the edge of the pumpkin lid and pulling hard. She could hear the thick, sinewy ropes of flesh inside tearing away as he worked the top of the pumpkin off and then rolled it aside, like a rock from a tomb.

“We had too many blowouts this year,” he panted, already tired from his effort, pointing to another elephantine giant less than ten feet away, its side split open, seeds and pulp spilling out onto the ground. It had literally outgrown its own skin and exploded.

“In you go, girlie.” He handed her a shovel and waved her past.

She pulled her dress up past her knees, sinking to the soft ground and poking her head inside the pungent mammoth. Her own headlamp illuminated the strands of sinew hanging from the top like stalactites, but she was going after the rich mash of pulp and seeds pooled at the bottom of the pumpkin like liquid gold. Her knees sank into the fleshy mess as she made her way into the cavernous opening, the warmth inside always a surprise, like she was crawling into the belly of some beast.

“Ready,” he called as she maneuvered around, scooping the mass of seeds and goo out toward the opening with her short, fat shovel. Outside, Belch had positioned a big white tub and she scraped the bottom of the pumpkin as she went, urging everything toward the waiting container.

“Thatta girl,” he encouraged, fingering the seedy mass as she propelled it out of the opening. “Look at these beauties!”

The smell of the pumpkin was making her stomach growl again, and she licked her fingers as she worked, maddeningly surrounded on all sides by a source of food. Using her shovel, she scraped the roof of the pumpkin above her head, seeds raining down around her. Scooping them up, she shoveled them out into the tub, catching a whiff of night air, cool in her lungs after breathing in the thick, humid odor of pumpkin.

“We got ‘em!” Belch gave a satisfied sigh as she stuck her head back out, gasping for breath.

That's when she slipped. Her hands on the pumpkin's wet edge simply slid out from under her and went deep into the tub set at the opening. She tumbled headfirst into the seeds, taking the tub over as her momentum carried her onto the soft dirt, spilling the thick orange goo wetly over her torso as she sprawled, dazed, staring up at the moon.

"NOOOO!" He screamed, his miner's light illuminating the white outpouring of seeds in the dirt.

She braced herself for the jolt, closing her eyes and waiting, and then she remembered, groping the pocket of the house dress.

Gone.

She sat up, her hands slipping in the thick mess around her, searching the ground with her light.

"You little—" He reached into his pocket, his face set like stone, and she watched as his expression changed to confusion and then dawning realization.

That's when she saw it, nestled up next to the lip of the upended tub. And she saw he saw it, too.

"NOOOOO!" Her voice was thick and hoarse from being so long silent, and she lunged for the small rectangle on the ground, grasping it in her slippery fingers and rolling away from him as he belly-flopped toward her, arms outstretched.

He landed hard enough she could actually hear the wind being knocked out of him, his voice a reedy whisper as he swore. Beneath him, the prized seeds sunk deep into the dirt.

Then she was running.

The ground was soft under her feet, and she could hear him moving behind her already, bellowing. She threw her headlamp to the ground as she ran, cursing the full moon as her shadow played catch-up beside her. There was only one place to go.

“Get back here!”

She chanced a glance over her shoulder, seeing him standing with his legs planted wide, his fist raised in the air as if he were imagining her dangling from it. At least he wasn’t running toward her. She might have enough time.

Ducking behind one of the giant pumpkins, she switched to the back side of the row, her side aching already, and she wasn’t even halfway there.

“Elizabeth Foster,” she panted, resting her cheek on the huge, ribbed side of the pumpkin. “Elizabeth Foster, 472 Westdale Road...”

“You can’t run from me!”

The sound of his voice, closer, got her moving again, but this time she stayed low, using the pumpkins’ mountainous bodies to hide her as she slipped from one to the next. Hers was the last one in the row, just four away now.

“Damnit!” Belch yelled, wheezing somewhere behind her. Too close.

Her heart hammered in her chest as she scrambled toward the next hulking bulge, but her bare foot caught on a vine and she tripped, landing square on one of the smaller pumpkins, hearing a sickening crack and feeling it split open beneath her. *Rotten*. The putrid smell that rose around her made her gag and, panting, she rolled away and rested her cheek against the dirt, listening for him but hearing nothing.

Three pumpkins away now.

She scrambled, trying to get to her feet, her hand slipping on the smashed face of the pumpkin beside her, sliding through its thick insides, looking for purchase. The smell of the rank pumpkin rose around her and she fought the urge to vomit, grasping something thick at the bottom of the shell just to keep her balance.

Standing in the moonlight, she saw the thing in her hand, the twisted silver ring encircling one of the rotted fingers, the jagged edge of bone and decaying flesh, and almost screamed. *Sarah?* Instead, she let it fall, and ran, whispering her own name to the wind as she flew past each pumpkin mound until she found her own.

Rotten, that's what he said. Early on, they noticed the outside starting to crack with red veined lines, spreading thickly across the ridges. His biggest that year, his real contender, it was a thick, swollen, two thousand pound mass of betrayal. Stay away from that one, he said bitterly.

But she followed a spider inside that day—hungry, so hungry—and had discovered the hollowed out center of the universe, a momentary hiding spot, a place to whisper her secret hopes. This one was hers.

There was a small hole near the bottom of the massive fruit on each side and she wiggled her way in, curling herself into a ball against the soft insides that were impossibly smooth and clean. Tucked inside the hollowed-out hull, the sound of the outside world was muffled. She could smell the slow decay of the pumpkin around her, and on each side near the bottom was a circle of light where there was what amounted to a small, jagged door, made bigger with her hands. Her eyes moved from one to the other, waiting for him to appear.

In the distance, she heard the sound of the chainsaw and her heart leapt in her chest. She didn't know how she knew, but she knew—he was splitting them all open, spilling their flesh and guts into the moonlight. The sound of his screams rose over the ripping of the saw, growing closer.

“Elizabeth Foster.” She rocked in the darkness. “Elizabeth Foster, 472 Westdale Road...”

Outside, the angry roar of the chainsaw drowned his words. Covering her head, she cowered, waiting.

“Where are you?” His panted words were muffled, the thunder of the chainsaw gone. “Don't leave me... don't leave me...”

Horrified, she heard him sobbing. She grasped the rectangle still clenched in her hand, her finger moving over the edge of the button, and touched her collar. At the low entrance, she could see a flash of light, his headlamp, in the darkness.

“Don't leave me!” he screamed. “Don't—”

The silence beat in her chest and then a light appeared at the opening, his round moon face shoved into the hole.

“Get out here, Sarah!” His face twisted as he struggled to press his way inside.

Huddling further back, she turned her face from him, her whole body trembling.

“What did you do to my pumpkin!?” he demanded. Then he was gone, and she was in darkness again. When the chainsaw started up once more, she screamed and covered her ears.

“Hells fucking bells!” Belch swore loudly as the saw sputtered and died in his hands. She heard him pulling the cord, but nothing happened.

When the light appeared again, she was rocking against the pumpkin's shell, whispering, "Elizabeth Foster, 472 Westdale Road..." over and over again.

"Get out here!" He wiggled against the pumpkin's flesh, his shoulders slipping through the entrance.

She shook her head, still whispering, refusing to look at him as he squirmed bit by bit through the narrow hole.

"THAT'S NOT YOUR NAME!"

One of his arms freed, he reached for her. Howling, she pulled her bare foot, still slick with pumpkin juice, out of his hand. He was struggling hard now, his thick, soft middle catching on the hard edge of the pumpkin's shell as he twisted and bellowed his way through.

She watched in terror as he used his arms to press himself up, arching and widening the hole as he went. The look of triumph on his face set her in motion and she dove to the other side of the pumpkin, headfirst out the small hole there. Even as thin as she was, this entrance was tight, and she had to squeeze through a bit at a time.

"NOOOOO!" His hands captured both of her calves as she freed her shoulders and arms and clawed through the dirt. His grip was like iron and she weighed nothing to him as he began to pull her back through the hole.

She kicked and screamed, her legs slick, making it hard for him to keep a good hold. They struggled together, inch by inch, as she made her way into the pumpkin patch in the moonlight.

Panting, exhausted, when she looked back over her shoulder and saw him, his head and shoulders were out of the hole, his miner's hat gone, stuck inside the pumpkin, giving it a strange, eerie glow from inside.

"You're not going anywhere." His hands still gripped her ankles. "You're never going anywhere again!"

A thick scream rose from her throat and she kicked back hard, her slippery flesh surprising him, blood spurting from his nose as her foot made contact across the bridge. He screamed, then, too, covering his face with his hands.

"You little bitch!" The muffled words reached her as she crouched among the vines, gasping for breath, and she saw the blood seeping through his hands.

"My name is Elizabeth Foster," she whispered. "And I'm going home."

She stood then, and ran.

Chapter Six

After spending almost an hour in the truck on his way back, Will nearly ran her down in the road. She sat huddled in the middle of it, her wild eyes wide, rocking and whispering something over and over.

“Are you okay?” He unsnapped his holster guard before squatting down beside her. She flailed, and he grasped her arms, something thick and tacky on her skin. In the light of the truck’s headlights, he couldn’t tell if it was blood. She smelled ripe and pungent, like... *pumpkin pie*? “Are you hurt?”

“Elizabeth Foster, 472 Westdale Road...” She looked up at him, and he saw the dark eyes he remembered lost in the pale sliver of her face.

“Is that your name?” He put his arm around her. She didn’t resist, and sank against him as he helped her stand. “Do you remember me from the other day? I bought your pumpkin.”

“Will.” Her eyes lit up in recognition.

“That’s right,” he nodded. “I saw what you wrote.”

“Help,” she murmured. “The spider ate the pumpkin. I ate the spider.”

Will frowned, remembering what he said about her being “simple” as he led her toward his truck. “Where is the man you live with?”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” she wailed, slipping down and curling into a ball on the floor of the front seat as he shut the door.

“Did he hurt you?” Will got into the driver’s side and put the truck in gear, heading back up the road.

“Heigh-ho,” she whispered. “The seeds will grow.”

Will studied the girl in the dimness. "I'm going to take you back home."

"Home!?" She scrambled onto the seat as the truck rolled to a stop, seeing the farmhouse, the sign out front, *Punkins Here!* "This isn't my home!"

"Where is he?" Will searched the perimeter of the house with his eyes. "Is he in there? Did you run away?"

"It ate him." She shook her head.

Will sighed, reaching for his radio to call Mike and remembering he was in the truck, not the cruiser. *So much for backup.*

"Listen, I'm going to go in there—"

"No!" She clung to him, her hands sticky on his neck. "Please, no!"

"Where is he?" Will asked again. "You have to tell me."

"Out back," she whispered. "In the pumpkin patch."

"Alright," Will extracted her arms from around him. He looked at her and saw the panic in her eyes. "You're not going to listen to me if I tell you to wait here for me are you?"

She shook her head wildly.

Will sighed. "Okay. You stay with me, though. Alright? Right behind me. Can you do that?"

She nodded, staring at him with those wide, dark eyes.

"You promise?"

Again, a nod.

Will climbed out of the truck and she clambered after him, her thin frame pressed into his broad back.

“Well, you seem to be able to follow directions, anyway,” he murmured, feeling her hands gripping his belt from behind. “Maybe not quite so close?”

He could feel her trembling. “I won’t let anything hurt you.”

Her grip loosened slightly as they moved toward the house. Will drew his gun as well as his flashlight and crossed his wrists, academy style, as they edged around the corner. The girl was shaking against him, from cold or fear, he couldn’t tell which.

“Elizabeth,” he murmured, glancing back. “Talk to me. You’re okay, I promise. You’re going to be ok. Can you tell me who Belch is?”

“No one.” She followed his footsteps slowly forward. “Everyone. I wanted a pumpkin.”

“I don’t understand.” Will swept his flashlight over the house. It was dark. “Tell me what happened to you.”

“My daddy and me.... we used to come here...”

Will’s heart lurched in his chest. “To get pumpkins?”

She nodded against his back. “Wanted to surprise him... driving home for Halloween... just wanted a pumpkin...”

Her hands gripping his belt and her sob stopped him. “Daddy! Where’s my daddy?”

“It’s okay,” Will said with dawning horror, turning to put his arm around her shoulder. That’s when he saw the collar. “What is this?”

Looking up at him, she reached into the pocket of the housecoat and handed him what looked like a small remote control. “Yours. You keep.”

He stared at it, then at her. “Oh my god.”

"Can I go home?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Yes." He swallowed past something thick in his throat. "Elizabeth, I'm going to take this off you."

His hands felt around the metal collar on her neck, finding the lock at the back. She held her hair out of the way as he looked at it with his flashlight.

"I need bolt cutters." His voice shook as he looked at the reddened, scarred skin showing underneath.

She dropped her hands to her side and Will turned the remote over, flipping the back open and knocking the nine volt battery out into his hand. He ripped the wires free and tried to give the remote back to her, but she refused.

"I doesn't work now," he explained, touching his finger to the button. "See?"

She winced, gripping her collar and collapsing against the side of the house as if she had been jolted. The surprise widened her eyes when she looked up at him. "Help?"

"It can't hurt you anymore..." He held his hand out and brought her to standing. "He can't hurt you anymore."

Slipping the remote into his pocket, he asked, "Where was the last place you saw him?"

"In." Her hands gripped his waist.

"In where?" Will frowned, edging around the corner of the house, his gun pointed straight ahead. He remembered telling Jordy to be careful. *It's always the cockiness that get you.* He hesitated, shining his flashlight through the twisted row of vines with an occasional splash of orange.

"In the pumpkin."

Will stopped as he finally took a step around the house, staring at a something blazing at the far edge of the field. "What is that?"

"The pumpkin."

Will took off toward the light, the girl sticking close to his side as they ran through the rows toward the luminous glow. He stopped so short she ran into his back and he grabbed her arm as she stepped around him, pulling her away from the sight.

"What happened here?" He stood staring at the gigantic pumpkin, a light coming through its thinned skin, as if it were glowing from inside. Halfway out of what looked like a gory, bloodied mouth, Belch lay face-up, bisected and crushed under the pumpkin's impossible weight, his arms thrown over his head, his dead eyes still wide with terror.

"The pumpkin." She knelt in the dark soil and reached out to touch his plump, twitching hand. "It ate him."

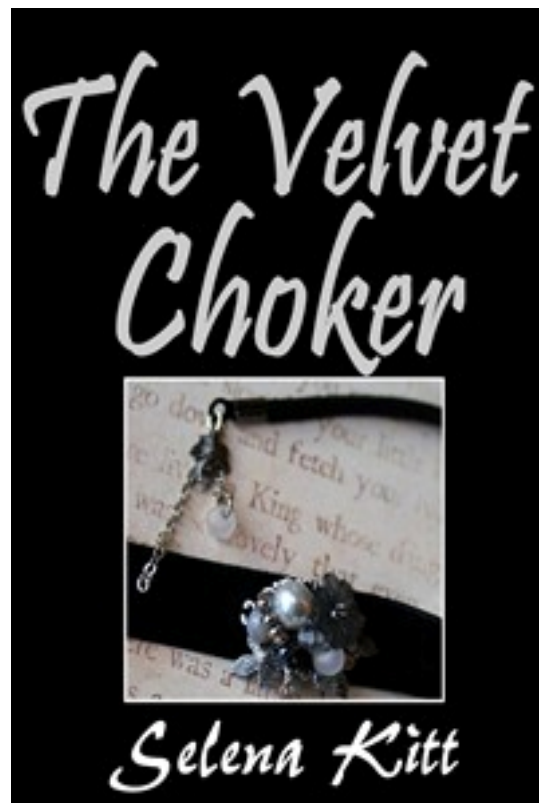
Author's Note:

There is a belief in gypsy folklore that includes pumpkins that can turn vampiric. Legends vary about the cause of such a phenomenon—perhaps the fruit was left outside during a full moon, or kept too long off the vine. One of the signs a pumpkin is about to "turn" is the appearance of "blood" on its skin (in actuality, probably some sort of red creeping fungus.) While this superstition was believed in gypsy culture, most weren't too afraid of pumpkins—"because they don't have teeth."

Of course, back then, they didn't grow pumpkins of the giant variety that we see today...

In October 2008, Steve Connolly grew a pumpkin weighing 1,878 pounds and measuring 16 feet around, beating the Guinness world record of 1,689 pounds.

The End



The Velvet Choker

PART ONE

They told her it was a huge old house, standing at the very apex of two dead end roads which met in a “v” at the front door, and that’s where she found herself, pulling at a dulled oversize brass knocker after looking for but finding no doorbell. The agency had given her all the specifics, but it was the other girls, the ones who’d refused this assignment, who told her the rest.

Staring up at the house now, she decided there was nothing remarkable about it, except for its size. *This much house, this many rooms, and he wants only one girl!?* She frowned at the door.

“Hello, I’m Lydia.” She held out her hand and smiled at the man who appeared, the rheumy blue of his eyes sunk deep into his skull, making dark shadows underneath.

“Good.” It came out “goot,” and she recognized the accent immediately. Hugo Kauffman was German, a neighbor to her native Austria, and she warmed to him immediately, in spite of the fact he ignored her outstretched hand as he waved her in.

“You are the fourth girl they have sent over in as many months.” His voice continued to surprise her with its strong, resonant tone as he led her through the house. She was already estimating how much time it would take to clean and she strained her neck to peer into each open door as they passed.

“This is a very large house,” she remarked as his gnarled hand gripped the banister and he started up a wide spiral staircase. He moved swiftly for a man of his age, showing little hesitation in his gait.

“I have a small staff of servants.” He didn’t look back at her as they climbed. “A woman who cooks my meals and cleans the living areas, bathrooms and such. I have a driver and a small crew who comes in once a month to do a deeper cleaning.”

Lydia’s expression twisted, puzzled, as they neared the top of the stairs, where Mr. Kauffman stopped and turned toward her. He waited for her to make the last step up, so they were standing face to face. His eyes moved over her, taking in the navy pants and a pink shirt with the company logo embroidered over her right breast.

“I am a bit old-fashioned,” he warned, his eyes lingering on her tennis shoes. “I would require you wear a uniform. There are several in the servants’ quarters. I’m sure you could find something to fit you.”

She shrugged. "That's fine." It didn't matter to her what she wore to clean, as long as she got paid. "But I'm confused...if you already have someone to clean—?"

"Yes." He nodded, turning to the right. "This way."

She gasped as the door swung open, revealing an enormous room whose floor to ceiling windows glowed golden in the early morning light. The heavy rose-colored curtains were drawn aside, the sun streaming brightly on the blush-colored settee, the cherry wood writing desk, and the candelabra wall sconces on either side of a fireplace as high as she stood tall. The chandelier swinging from the ceiling threw prisms over the walls, and she noticed the wallpaper looked as shiny as satin and had a longing to touch it.

"This is the room you will need to clean." He moved forward and made a sweeping motion with his hand. She turned to her right and saw the tall four poster bed and for the first time realized this was a bedroom. "Once a day, dusting all the surfaces and vacuuming; changing the linens once a week; the heavy work, curtains and windows, once a month."

She nodded, listening, as she moved into the room, trying to take it all in at once. The portrait over the mantle was of a nude woman, her hair curling in honey-colored tendrils over her full breasts. Lydia glanced at the settee and realized it was the very same one.

"But your staff—?" She looked toward the bed again, its four posters draped with material.

"They will not come in here." He watched her move past the bed, her fingers touching the wood, heading for the tall pedestal in the corner.

Lydia's eyes were drawn to the dark cherry wood box on top. There was nothing unusual or ornate about it—in fact, it was so plain it seemed out of place amidst the lavish decoration of the room. It was just a large rectangular box, the wood shined up so brightly she could see her reflection in the top as she peered over to inspect it.

"You must not open it." His voice startled her and she whirled to see him standing directly behind her. "In any case, it is locked. But I do require it be polished. Daily."

"I can see that," she breathed, her heart still pounding. She frowned at the smooth surface of the box, not seeing a keyhole or latch—she couldn't even see the seam where it opened.

"Whose room is this?" she asked, unable to help herself. The woman in the portrait watched them both as he led her away from the box on the pedestal.

"It is the boudoir," he said simply, waving her toward the door. "Do you believe you can fulfill the duties I've outlined, Lydia?"

"Yes," she agreed, watching as he closed the door behind them. "I'm sure I can."

His eyes did another sweep of her outfit and he gave her a brief nod. "Very well. Let's find Mrs. Bauer and get you out of those clothes."

* * * *

"This one has lasted longer than the others, at any rate." Ana Bauer went about polishing silver with military precision. She admired her reversed reflection in a spoon before adding it back to the box.

“Not bad to look at, either.” Jonas took another bite of his apple and tipped back further in his chair.

Mrs. Bauer sighed, working the edge of a butter knife. “I suppose. He seems to really like this one.”

“Don’t blame him.” Jonas rocked precariously close to the china cabinet.

“Don’t you have a car to wash or something?” she snapped, flipping the silver box closed with a thud and frowning at her ample reflection in the cabinet glass as she passed him.

He grinned. “Raining.”

“I don’t know what he pays you for,” she huffed, nudging him on a back-tip with her not-insubstantial hip, forcing him to catch himself. The look of surprise on his face was reward enough and she smiled as she tucked the silver box back into the drawer.

“Don’t be like that, Ana.” Jonas slid a hand across the soft cotton material stretched over her roomy behind, giving her a quick squeeze. She flushed, waving his hand away, but looked pleased until she turned to see the young girl standing in the doorway.

“Have you finished?” the older woman asked, frowning at the way the blonde’s curls escaped her cap, at how what should have been the shapeless black maid’s dress seemed to mold to the girl’s slender frame, her pristine apron accentuating the curve of her tiny waist.

Lydia nodded, holding up her tub of cleaning supplies. “I did the windows today.”

“They needed it,” Mrs. Bauer remarked. “Put your things away, then.”

The girl moved around them towards the kitchen and paused at the swinging door, glancing over her shoulder. She saw the driver's eyes on her, the way he looked at the hem of her skirt at the slender calves below.

"I was wondering..." Lydia cleared her throat. She knew better than to ask Mrs. Bauer questions, but her curiosity compelled her. "The room...the one off the boudoir. The door is locked. Should I clean in there as well?"

"No." Hugo Kauffman's voice was unmistakable. Since she had been working for him, it seemed no matter where he was in the house, she could hear him when he spoke. This time, he was standing in the door of the dining room, resting his weight on the head of a carved, wooden cane.

"That is Mr. Kauffman's private room," Mrs. Bauer said, her spine straightening.

"Sir." Jonas' chair legs had repositioned themselves against the floor not a moment too soon, and he stood, the apple going behind his back as he clasped his hands there.

"Lydia, would you like a ride home?" Mr. Kauffman offered, giving a nod in Jonas' direction. "It is raining cats and dogs, as my old mutter used to say."

"No, thank you." She glanced toward the tall dining room window where they could see the rain coming down through the sheer white curtains and then over to Jonas, who smiled and inclined his head towards her. "I brought my umbrella. I'm fine to walk."

Mr. Kauffman raised a craggy eyebrow in her direction and then looked back at Jonas. "I have this man in my employ, my dear. You may as well use his services."

“No, really.” She edged toward the door, her eyes shifting to Mrs. Bauer, whose frown had never left her face. “I like the rain.”

“She likes the rain.” Kauffman pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes for a moment as he looked back and forth between his driver and his maid. “Who can argue with that?”

“Thank you, though,” Lydia said with a small smile. “It was kind of you to offer.”

The girl turned and pushed the door to the kitchen open, eager to be rid of her cleaning supplies and out of the “uniform” required for the job. It usually only took her an hour to do a thorough cleaning of the room, but today, with the windows, it had been two, and she wanted to get home to her books. It was only another month before her citizenship exam.

“Lydia?” Mr. Kauffman’s voice stopped her. “Would you mind giving me your opinion on something?”

She suppressed a sigh, turning to look at him. “Yes?”

“Downstairs, in my work room,” he said. “It will only take a moment.”

“Yes,” she agreed, not sure how to say no. “Let me put this away.”

With her cleaning supplies stowed in the cabinet until Monday, she pressed her hands nervously down her apron, smoothing the stiff material before she swung the kitchen door open again. Only Mr. Kauffman was standing there now. Mrs. Bauer and the driver had disappeared into one of the vast corners of the house, she imagined.

“Thank you, my dear.” He turned, clearly expecting her to follow. She did, walking slightly behind him, down the hallway and to the door that opened underneath the wide staircase. “You are doing me a great service.”

"I've never been downstairs," she murmured, holding the hand rail as they descended. The darkness of the stairwell gave way to an open space filled with boxes and various odds and ends making a pathway down the center.

"I am a bit of a pack rat, I'm afraid," he explained with a sheepish smile, reaching into his trouser pocket and pulling out a key. "This is a master key. This is the only one. It opens every room in the house."

Lydia watched, curious, as he unlocked a door to their left and swung it wide. The heat wave hit her first and she gasped, blinking and taking a step back.

"Yes, I apologize," he said, waving her in. "I am used to the temperature, I suppose."

Inside the room was a large brick construction that looked to Lydia like a chimney with a small fire burning inside at its base. The room was large, the cinderblock walls giving it an unfinished look, and everywhere she turned there were tall, strange metal machines.

"What is this place?" she asked, her eyes drawn to a table along the wall. "Are those... *diamonds*?"

"Yes," he agreed, picking a small bag off the table and using something that looked like a spatula to sweep them in with one expert motion. "This is what I do. I make jewelry."

"By hand?" Lydia moved toward the table, unable to help her curiosity. There was a diamond necklace spread out on the surface, the work clearly both intricate and delicate. "I've never seen so many diamonds in one place!"

“Yes,” he affirmed, picking up the necklace and tenting it over his fingers. “These have a weight of 21.63 carats.”

“It’s beautiful.” She swallowed, her eyes following the necklace’s sparkle in the light of the forge fire. “How...how much would something like this cost?”

“Without the final gem here.” He pointed to the large empty pronged setting at the bottom of the necklace. “It is already over a hundred thousand dollars.”

Lydia gasped, her hand going to her throat. “What goes here, then?”

“That, my dear, is what I would like your opinion on...” He put the necklace back and spilled the contents of another small gem bag onto the table. “I have a beauty, here, another diamond I could put as the centerpiece, or perhaps either the ruby or the sapphire...”

“The sapphire,” Lydia said immediately, her eyes wide as she stared at the display on the table.

“Yes?” He frowned, using thin tongs to pick up the sapphire and put it into place, gently bending the prongs to hold it there. “Perhaps.”

“I’ve never seen anything so beautiful,” she said, transfixed on the necklace.

“Would you mind trying it on?” He held it up, his eyes on hers, and saw her swallow.

Her mouth opened with a slight tremble. “I couldn’t...”

“Yes, you can,” he assured her. “Turn around.”

Lydia presented her back to him and he lifted the necklace over her head, his fingers brushing the fine hairs on the back of her neck as he fastened the clasp. The

weight of it shocked her, and she couldn't help fingering the sapphire dangling low between her breasts over the black cotton uniform.

"Here." He guided her by the elbow toward the table where a mirror was mounted on the wall. "What do you think?"

"I think it's magnificent," she whispered, her fingers moving over the cool surface of the necklace.

"It matches your eyes," he murmured, meeting them in the mirror. "The sapphire is perfect."

Lydia reached back and unclasped it, laying it gently on the surface of the table. "Thank you for letting me try it on."

"Your opinion is worth more than the necklace," he told her with a nod.

Smiling, she smoothed her apron, shaking her head. "You just wanted an excuse to keep me here until the rain stopped."

He laughed, the sound loud in the basement room, echoing off the walls. "You are magnificent, Lydia."

"No," she said, shaking her head again. "So this is what you do down here all day, then?"

"Puttering now, really." He swept the gems back into the bag as she watched. "Finding ways to spend the time."

"An expensive hobby?"

"Perhaps," he agreed. "I am too old for skiing and too pompous for stamp collecting."

She laughed. "Skiing here in America? There are no *berge*! Only *hügel*, all so *klein*! The skiing in Austria—"

"Yes." He waved her out of the room and locked it behind them. The key went into his trouser pocket. "I skied the Alps when I was young."

"I miss it," she admitted with a sigh.

"Why did you come here to America?"

She smiled, her eyes sad. "Why does anyone come to America? Land of the free, home of the brave..."

"Are you alone here?"

"My mother insisted we come, after my father died," she explained. "But then she got sick..."

"I'm sorry..."

Lydia's eyes fell to the floor. "Now she is gone..."

"Ah...so you *are* alone."

"Yes."

"Still..." he went on, climbing the steep stairs. "A pretty young girl like you must have a suitor or two?"

She flushed, glad for the darkness of the stairwell. "No. I have been too busy with work and school, and now studying for my citizenship exam."

"Tut!" He turned at the top of the stairs, holding out a hand as she came up the last few. "A young girl like yourself should be thinking of little else but love..."

"So do you sell this jewelry of yours?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Rarely," he admitted, shrugging. "I like to keep things. I like to look at them."

"It would be nice to have...nice things," she said softly, looking at the fine gold chain around his neck. "You always wear that...?"

He nodded. "A keepsake."

"Mr. Kauffman?" They both looked up as Ana Bauer bustled by. "A package came for you. I put it in your office."

"Thank you, Ana," he said with a nod.

Lydia moved past Mrs. Bauer toward the hall closet to retrieve her coat and umbrella, ignoring the dark look on the woman's face.

"Oh, Lydia," he said, as if he were speaking an afterthought. "The jewelry box in the boudoir needs to be polished."

Mrs. Bauer turned up her nose and sniffed, giving Lydia a smug smile as Mr. Kauffman made his way down the hall toward his office, leaning heavily on his cane.

"I'll do it in on Monday," Lydia promised, but she was sure that neither of them heard her.

She passed his office on the way out, the door open just a crack, and his voice drifted out. "You won't need your umbrella. It's stopped raining."

"Yes." She smiled at the door. "Thank you."

"Don't forget the jewelry box," he reminded as she slipped her coat on.

"I won't," she promised, pulling open the heavy front door, already thinking about the studying she had to do at home and where she was going to throw together for dinner.

* * * *

After months of cleaning the boudoir, Lydia had established a routine. She had been cleaning homes since her mother's death, and it had always been a kind of meditation for her. There was nothing exciting or new about dusting or vacuuming, just a mindless precision, letting her mind float free.

She entered the same semi-trance every day as she made her way methodically around the room, shining the vases and the face of the antique clock on the fireplace, beating and fluffing the pillows on the settee and Edwardian chairs. The chandelier was due to be hand-cleaned soon, but she wouldn't do that today.

She arranged fresh flowers in two vases on the cherry wood tables at the beginning of every week, and while she had to clean the writing desk, the blotter with the stationary laid out on the top were not to be moved—they sat as if someone were coming soon to write a letter with the old-fashioned quill.

Mrs. Bauer and the rest of the staff still refused to go near it and Lydia didn't understand. It was a beautiful room, and although she wouldn't have admitted it, she often liked to pretend it was hers. She had never felt that way about any other place before, including the little room she let. Nothing had ever felt like home here, not like this. She had even once dared to climb into the four poster bed, drawing the sheer curtains around her like a dream.

She didn't ask questions anymore. No one would tell her who the woman in the portrait was, or why the staff refused to enter the room, but Mr. Kauffman paid well, and she'd never experienced anything strange or untoward. Not until she started losing time.

The first time it happened, she was polishing the jewelry box. Lydia had a habit of humming while she worked, songs her mother had sung to her as a child, mostly, and she was admiring her reflection in the dark shine of the wood when she heard the echo.

Frowning, she stopped her humming to listen, but it was gone. She went on, her voice soft, her mouth forming German words, and then she heard it again. It was the same tune, sung as if it were on a slight time-delay, just a little behind her own.

Glancing around the room, she was certain there was no one there, and anyway, the sound seemed to be coming from in front of her—from the jewelry box. She rubbed the dark surface with her cloth, round and round, seeing her own frown reflected back at her. Then she heard it again, only this time, Lydia wasn't singing at all. The soft, gentle hum mirrored her own, and she stood entranced.

It was Mrs. Bauer who found her. She would only knock and call for her, and Lydia liked that the older woman wouldn't enter the room, no matter how long it took her to answer. When Lydia glanced at her watch, she saw it had been an hour since she began cleaning the jewelry box, and she ran for the door, flushed and panting and making excuses to the housekeeper.

She thought she must have dozed off, or just zoned out in her cleaning semi-trance state. She reasoned with herself, reassured herself it was nothing. Until the next time it happened. And the next. She was losing time every day now it seemed, spending longer and longer standing in front of the jewelry box.

In all the time she had spent polishing it, she had never seen how it might open—no seam appeared on the smooth surface—until one day, it did. Lydia rubbed the cloth

around the sharp corners, sliding over the slick front from edge to edge, and for the first time, she saw a line in the wood where a seam was meant to be.

Peering closer, she realized the craftsmanship must be superb, to hide such a seam. Glancing behind her, she grasped the edges of the box, unmindful of her fingerprints on the shiny surface, and gently lifted. She was sure it would stick shut, that it was locked in some hidden way, but the lid swung open unhinged toward the back wall and seemed to float there, revealing a large mirror on the inside surface.

Close it, her mind screamed. Close it now!

Remembering the weight of the exquisite necklace at her throat, the one Mr. Kauffman had made her try on, she peered inside, wondering what amazing piece of jewelry must rest there. The box was lined with black velvet, and at first, she saw nothing, no sparkle, no shine. She couldn't believe it was empty!

Frowning, she reached for the lid to close it back up, when she heard that soft hum again. Her breath caught and she looked back in, seeing nothing. She reached inside, then, her fingers trailing along the velvet edges until they touched something metal at the bottom. She grasped it, but it felt like nothing, like air in her hands, and it wasn't until she had it in the light that she realized why.

It was a velvet choker, a cameo nestled in its center with two crescents on either side. The woman's profile was beautiful, distinct, and even in this rough fashion, seemed familiar. Lydia turned and brought it further into the light, her eyes lifting to the painting hanging over the mantle. She was sure, almost sure—was it? The very same woman?

There were silk ties at each end, and she considered putting in on, like she had with the heavy diamond necklace in Kauffman's workroom. But she had been invited then. Now she was trespassing, and she knew from the fast hammering of her heart that just holding it in her hands could get her fired. Would it be worth it?

The choker was nothing compared to the impressive weight of the diamonds she had modeled for the master of the house. It was easy, no clasps even, just a simple tie. Turning to glance into the mirror, she held the necklace up to her bare throat, a black, linear sash cutting a sudden, shocking path across her neck. She hadn't noticed the rope-like designs that radiated out and around from the centerpiece, black beads separating them, and one sole bead dangling from the center. She delighted in the way it sparkled and moved as she turned her head from side to side. It was truly lovely.

"Try it on."

Lydia screamed and the necklace fell to her feet in a soft, wispy flutter, both of her hands going to her neck, as if she were protecting it. Kauffman stood in the doorway leaning heavily on his cane, his gaze sweeping upward from the dropped trinket to meet her eyes.

"I'm sorry!" she apologized, her cheeks flushed with shame and embarrassment. "I know I wasn't supposed to...I didn't mean...I just..."

"Hush." He came to her so quickly it shocked her, not using his cane at all, swooping the choker up and balling it in his palm. The black ends dangled out of his closed fist like dark tentacles and she backed away when he took a step in her direction, opening his hand to show her.

"It's lovely work, isn't it?"

Lydia nodded, wide-eyed, her breathing harsh in her own ears. “Sir, please, I’m sorry—”

“Try it on.”

She shook her head, feeling her knees trembling as they touched the back of the bed—he had backed her up that far. “No.” Her whisper was hoarse, thick. “No, I don’t want to.”

“But you *did* want to.” He wagged a finger at her, his rheumy eyes gleaming. “Just a moment ago, it was right here at your delicate throat. You were moments away from tying up these loose ends, weren’t you, my dear?”

“No,” she lied, swallowing and shaking her head as if that could cement her denial. “I was putting it back. I shouldn’t have—”

“No.” His voice turned angry as he held the choker up, pulling it taut in front of her eyes. “You shouldn’t have. But you did. You *did*.”

Lydia fought tears, blinking hard, trying to keep her composure. She was ashamed at being caught, embarrassed that he’d seen her modeling the necklace in the mirror, showing off, and she had a real dread of being fired for her transgression—but the fear beating in her chest had nothing to do with any of that. The feeling clawing its way up from her stomach to her throat, choking her words, was of Kauffman himself, the way his eyes moved from her to the necklace. He looked hungry for something she didn’t understand.

“Mr. Kauffman,” she started, trying to keep her voice from shaking, and almost succeeding. “I know what I did was wrong. Please forgive me. It won’t happen again.”

“No?” He rubbed the velvet between his fingers, his eyes narrowing. “Somehow I doubt that.”

She blinked in surprise, offended by his accusation, although moments before she’d had the forbidden object at her throat. “I won’t do it again—I promise you, I won’t! It’s obviously something very special to you...something that belonged...to her?”

Lydia glanced at the painting and the nude woman’s eyes pleaded. They seemed to say, *Save me. Save them.* Save who? Lydia wondered. There’s no one to save, except myself and there are no secrets I want to know. As curious as she had been about what was inside the box, who the woman in the portrait was, she decided then and there that she wasn’t going to put her job in jeopardy because of it. No matter how tempting it seemed.

“It is my best work.” Kauffman sighed, and there was both a pride and a longing in it. “And yes, *she* was the last to wear it.”

Both of their eyes moved to the painting, the woman there still, lifeless, and yet shining in the bright sunshine all the same, her eyes telling tales Lydia could only imagine of nights in this boudoir with a lover—perhaps a young Kauffman himself? Shaking her head to clear it, Lydia grounded herself by squeezing her hands into fists, making her nails dig hard, *hard* into her palms. The pain was good. It brought her to her senses—and she was nothing if not a sensible girl.

“Please, just give me another chance.” She turned her gaze to the old man, eyes pleading with him. “Don’t fire me for this. Please don’t.”

“Then...” His thin lips spread into a little smile as he held up the choker, an offering. “Put it on.”

“No...” She backed away, suddenly horrified by the prospect. Modeling the forbidden piece alone, secretly, was different, but putting it on in front of him? It was too humiliating to bear. “Please, no...”

“If you want to stay, you will put it on!” He held the ribbon above her head as he maneuvered behind her, pushing her away from the bed and toward the mirror. “I want to see it on you.”

“No...” She shook her head as he lowered the necklace. He was moving slowly, and she felt caught in a trance as she watched the ribbon descend. She would have let him put it on her right then. She’d even begun to lift her hair out of the way so he could tie the ends into a neat bow, when she clearly heard the words, “*Save them.*”

Neither of them moved or spoke, but she knew he’d heard it too. She caught a glimpse of surprise in his eyes as the necklace stopped in mid-air. Lydia didn’t think, she just reacted, slipping past him and running toward the door.

“Lydia!” The booming sound of his voice stopped her as she passed the threshold and she hesitated, one foot in the room, one foot out. “Lydia, the jewelry box needs polishing.” His voice had moved back to smoothness almost instantly. “*You will be back tomorrow.*”

It wasn’t a question. The foot outside of the door itched, aching to go. But part of her remained, and she whispered, “Yes,” just loud enough for him to hear, before disappearing down the hall.

* * * *

Lydia hadn’t returned for a week. She called in sick to all of her cleaning jobs, not just the Kauffman place. She wasn’t really sick, not at first, but she stayed in bed, the

curtains drawn, tucked under the covers as if she were. Admitting what she was really feeling would have been too impossible to entertain, the fear dug in her belly like a hook, but the longer she stayed away, the more she really *did* begin to feel sick.

She wasn't feverish, but she felt chilled as if she were. Her body hurt, her bones ached as if longing for something, and she wondered for a day or so if she had self-fulfilled her own prophecy of illness and caught the flu—but there was no congestion, no headache, no sore throat or stomachache, none of the tell-tale signs. Just an overall, dull body ache for...something.

At first, she expected the phone to ring with a call, either from Kauffman himself (or most likely from Mrs. Bauer) or perhaps the company for which she worked, making it an even cleaner break, telling her she was fired. When that didn't happen, she just continued to pick up the phone every morning to call and say, "I'm sorry, I can't come in, I'm still sick," before collapsing, shivering, into her bed again. It wasn't until the dream she had in the early morning hours of the new week that she finally knew what she needed to do.

"Save them..."

The whispered words drew Lydia into the boudoir. They seemed to come from two places at once, from the portrait hanging on the wall and the seamless box in the corner, and she looked between them, waiting to hear the voice again.

"Save them..."

The box had the stronger pull, and even in the dream, she ached, something constricting in her throat like the closing of the aperture of a camera as she approached the shiny, mahogany object, her trembling hand outstretched. Barely breathing, she

opened the box, and like dream imitating life imitating dream, she removed the black choker from inside and stood in front of the mirror with it held against her neck.

She looked terrible. There were deep hollows beneath her eyes, her hair lank with a week's build-up of grease, her cheeks splotched with the few bits of food she'd managed to get down during the week—tomato soup, a grilled cheese sandwich. Sick food. She felt ill, even now in her own dream, in a dream world where things should shift, her self-perception steadied on the memory of itself. Instead, she saw herself as she was, forehead slick with sweat, eyes dull, mouth slack, the black ribbon of necklace cutting a swath across her thin, pale throat.

Slowly, she brought the ends of the choker together at the back of her neck, encircling the delicate expanse, not tying it, just admiring the stunning contrast between her pale skin and the dark fabric. For a long time, she was transfixed on the necklace itself, the way the cameo in the center glinted in the light, and she gasped when she looked up into the mirror again, seeing herself transformed.

It was still her face, her eyes open wide in astonishment, but her hair was washed and styled, piled up on top of her head in fat, blonde curls, her cheeks flushed with blood, her eyes bright with light. And while she had been clothed in an old, stained t-shirt when she first entered the room, now she was nude, the smell of her skin rising like dozens of roses all around her.

What's happening to me? She wanted to ask someone, even her own reflection in the mirror, but the words wouldn't form. She tried again, her lips making the correct pattern, her tongue moving, but no sound came from her throat.

I'm beautiful, she said, or rather, didn't say but mouthed to her mirror dream self, a stunning realization that held a great deal of power in her mind. Not only beautiful, she thought, lifting her chin to admire the choker at her throat, but well. That all-over ache she had felt even in her dream had completely disappeared.

The necklace, she realized, reaching to tie the ends behind her throat. She needed the...

The phone jarred her out of sleep hard enough to jerk her out of bed and onto the floor as she reached for it. Work, inquiring about her cleaning jobs. Would she need someone to fill in for her, perhaps on a more permanent basis? Her supervisor this time, not one of the girls, and she knew it was now or never. Lydia swallowed, touching her throat, sure that no words would come out when she spoke.

"I'm better," she croaked, her voice hoarse from misuse but intact. "I'm coming in." The words, *I'm better*, weren't entirely true, she thought, still caught in that liminal space between waking and dream as she put the phone down and shakily got up off the floor to take her first shower in a week—but they would be. Soon.

* * * *

"Hey, there she is!"

Lydia nearly dropped her caddy full of supplies as she whirled around in the supply closet to face the man in the doorway. He filled it completely, his eyes roaming over her uniform as they always did, lingering on her hemline.

"We thought you musta died or something." Jonas dropped a wink at her that she knew he must think was charming, leaning his shoulder against the door frame and

blocking the way out completely. “What happened?”

“I was...sick.” She shifted the caddy from one hand to the other.

“Better now, though?”

She nodded, taking what she hoped was an invisible deep breath, and headed toward the door, saying brightly, “Back to work I go!”

“Aw, what’s the hurry?” he asked, not moving from the exit. “There’s no fire, and that damned creepy room sitting up there can wait, don’t you think?”

At one time, Lydia would have laughed and agreed with him. She might have casually even suggested a cup of coffee in the kitchen and probed him further about what he knew about the “creepy room” upstairs, flattering him enough to keep him at bay. But not today. Today she didn’t just have to clean the boudoir, she needed to be in it, to enter the space no one else dared to go, to touch those things which had become so familiar. She needed it like she needed air to breathe.

“Please,” she murmured, looking up at him with pleading eyes. “I need to go.”

Her tone was her downfall, she knew it instantly, but there was no time to change her tact, and she didn’t even know if she could anymore. She had always been wary of him, but her self-assurance had made it clear to him—and all men, really—that she wasn’t going to be messed with. Something had happened to her, though, and now she felt like giving up, and her pleading tone gave him all the permission he needed.

“No, baby, I’m pretty sure I got just what you *need*.” Jonas grabbed her around the waist, quickly shutting and locking the door behind him as he used his body to turn her, pressing her toward the wall. His kiss was hard, the weight of him crushing the air

out of her lungs as he groped her through her uniform. She struggled, but he was strong, and she was incredibly thin and weak.

His hand slipped down the V of her uniform blouse and into her bra, fondling her breast. He slid another hand up her skirt, impatient with her panties—she wore stockings, not hose—shoving them aside to roughly probe through the nest of blonde hair between her legs, searching for heat. He groaned against her mouth when he found what he was looking for, shoving his fingers up inside as he began to grind his erection against her thigh.

She sought to catch her breath as he took a break from kissing her mouth to pull her top open and bra down, popping the first two buttons on her blouse and letting her breasts spill free so he could suckle them while he worked the zipper on his pants. He must have heard her draw breath, because a big hand covered her mouth the moment she opened it, muffling the scream she issued.

“Don’t,” he warned, grabbing her by the hair and shoving her to the floor. It was cold tile, and Mrs. Bauer kept it as clean and shiny and slick as the dining room table. The wind was immediately knocked out of her as she landed, and then he was on her, crushing the air from her lungs again, hand over her mouth once more as she twisted and bucked underneath him. He struggled between her legs with one hand, with her panties, his hard cock, and she didn’t care in that moment that this man was going to take her virginity in some stranger’s cleaning closet, she really didn’t care, she just wanted it to be over so she could go...

The desperate need to be somewhere else, anywhere else (*no, not anywhere...you know where you need to go*) rose up in her like a fire and she bit his

hand hard as he attempted to aim his hard cock between her thighs. And she screamed then, she managed to find her breath and scream.

“Help me! Please! Someone! Anyone! Rape! Rape!” The last word was strangled with his hands—both of them now—at her throat.

“Shut up!” he hissed, squeezing, the light above his head making his face just a shadow as he choked her.

She groaned as he slammed her head against the tile, but her heart rose as she heard Mrs. Bauer’s voice outside the door.

“Who’s in there?”

“Help!” Lydia squeaked as her airway constricted, seeing bright stars in a sudden darkness, although her eyes were still wide open.

“What’s going on here?” Mr. Kauffman, now, the sound of a key in the lock, and Jonas was up, quickly straightening and zipping as the door opened.

Lydia gasped, trying to sit, her breasts still exposed, her skirt pulled up, her panties askew, trying to focus on the two figures standing in the doorway, the old man and the housekeeper. The latter glared at her exposed on the tile floor, and the former’s eyes were both concerned and full of—Lydia wouldn’t recognize the look until later—lust.

“Just a little slap and tickle,” Jonas said with a grin as he tucked his shirt into his pants. He shrugged at the glaring Mrs. Bauer. “What can I say? I couldn’t keep her off me!”

“Out!” Kauffman’s voice thundered and Lydia cringed on the floor, moving quickly to cover herself. The thought of being fired wasn’t so bad, not anymore. She’d been

terrified at the idea of having to look for another job, but now it was just the thought of being separated from this house, from the boudoir, from the *necklace*...even now, it was all she could think about.

“Jonas, you’re fired.” The old man lifted his cane and poked the younger one in the gut. “Get out of my sight.”

Jonas looked like he wanted to fight, but he didn’t. Instead, he strode silently out into the kitchen and they all heard the door close behind him.

“Please,” Lydia pleaded, crying now, scrambling to stand and pick up her cleaning caddy. “I just want to go clean the boudoir. I just want to do my job. Please.”

“Ah, Lydia, perhaps we need to call—” Kauffman started.

“No!” She straightened, her jaw set. “I’m going to the boudoir and that’s final!”

Kauffman gave a stiff nod and stepped aside as she passed. Lydia didn’t turn as she neared Mrs. Bauer, who had moved out of the closet doorway and further into the kitchen. The woman hissed at her, too low for Kauffman to hear, “Tramp!”

She didn’t care. She didn’t care about anything. She just needed to get to the boudoir—to *the necklace*—and she knew, she just knew, that everything would be fine again.

Just standing in front of the jewelry box made her feel better—the tightness in her chest relaxed, the ache in her bones disappeared. Even the sharp new pain of her throat where Jonas had throttled her, and the throbbing lump on the back of her head from where he’d smashed it against the floor slowly dissipated as she polished the wood with her cloth, shining it so brightly the sun gleamed off its surface and hurt her newly light-sensitive eyes.

She heard the sound of him coming up the stairs—the cane coupled with each footstep was unmistakable—but it didn't stop her. Reaching into the box, she lifted the choker, turning to look at herself in the mirror over the dresser. Just like her dream, she looked terrible, the dark circles showing under her eyes, her hair pulled back into a severe ponytail, showing the already forming bruises at her throat.

If she just put it on...

"Put it on." His encouragement startled her, but she didn't turn from her reflection, transfixed, just as she had been in her dream. The ties felt warm, almost alive in her fingers, as if they wanted to be joined, and today she had no objection. Her head swam, and she wasn't sure it was from the lack of oxygen she'd experienced during the assault or the intoxication she felt with the necklace in her hands. She didn't understand it, she just knew she wanted it. She wanted it more than she'd ever wanted anything.

"It's beautiful. You're beautiful." Kauffman was beside her, but she barely noticed. She felt his breath against her neck as he lifted her ponytail, his wrinkled old fingers moving over her bruised throat, her collarbone, tracing the dark line of the choker. "It was meant for you, Lydia. It's been waiting. Do you feel it?"

She did. The soft fabric encircled her slender throat, looking as if it belonged there, but more than that, it *felt* right. She hadn't felt anything was right in the world since her mother had died, but for the first time there was no more pain, emotional or otherwise, and she knew it was the necklace. It made no sense, no logical sense whatsoever, but her body overrode her brain, whispering the truth with every nerve impulse, every sizzling snap of a synapse.

“All you need to do is choose.” The old man’s voice was a hoarse whisper in her ear, one hand squeezing her shoulder, the other still holding her hair out of the way.

“Put it on.”

Did she have a choice? It truly felt as if the ends of the ribbon were tying themselves as her fingers moved, crossing them, knotting them once...

“Oh yes.” Kauffman’s eyes moved over her reflection in the mirror, and she saw with wonder that she was already being transformed—the dark circles beneath her eyes beginning to fade, the bruises at her throat as well. “So perfect, so precious.”

Her fingers automatically made a fat loop, crossing the other ribbon over, pressing it through to make a second loop. When she pulled it taut, glancing into the mirror, the transformation was complete. She was as she had been in her dream, and when she looked down to see herself nude, she was neither surprised or ashamed.

“You will be my treasure.” His hand touched the blonde curls on her head, the other moving to the ones between her thighs, forcing her to spread them with stiff, arthritic fingers.

Lydia, so transfixed by the change in herself, absorbed in the absence of painful emotion, hardly noticed his touch, and she certainly didn’t pay attention to how tight the band around her neck was growing. Not at first.

“Forever,” Kauffman’s fingers moved inside her, pressing deep. “I’ll keep you forever.”

She gasped as the velvet grip on her throat constricted, but no sound came out, no sound at all. Panicked, she reached behind for the ties to yank herself free, and found nothing at all but the smooth, velvet surface of the choker at the base of her neck.

There were no ties. Her wide eyes met Kauffman's and his thin lips stretched into a knowing smile, moving in front of her, lifting the softness of her breast in his other hand as he continued the motion between her legs.

Shaking her head, she began to struggle, using her nails and raking at her throat, looking for the velvet edge so she could tear the necklace off, but there was nothing, no seam at all. It was as if it had become part of her, had melted or melded into her skin somehow, and now it was so tight she could barely breathe.

The pain was sudden, searing and blinding. She would have collapsed if the old man hadn't caught and held her, and she didn't have time to think about his strength as she fought the binding around her neck, trying to escape the pain. The world went from black to white to black again, and she thought she would surely faint.

Please! The sound didn't come out of her mouth, it was just her lips forming the word. *Help me!* Nothing. There was nothing but the pain, the darkness, and the taste of blood, bitter copper on her tongue. She tried to scream, she bucked and shook, but there was no escaping the horrible agony of the moment.

And then, just as suddenly as it had come, it was gone. Kauffman shushed her as she regained her strength, her footing, trembling in his arms, but it didn't matter. She couldn't make a sound. And when she looked over the old man's shoulder at her reflection in the mirror, she saw several trickles of blood, like scarlet tears, running down her throat to pool at its hollow.

"Beautiful, beautiful," Kauffman whispered as he pressed her toward the big centerpiece bed, the one she'd dreamed of sleeping in, and as he laid her there, licking

his lips at the sight of her, Lydia shuddered, remembering the words she'd once heard him say:

I like to keep things. I like to look at them.

When he entered her, she didn't scream or cry or thrash. She turned her head and looked at the woman in the portrait, at her bright eyes, at the dark line at her throat, like steel velvet, and she finally understood.

I like to keep things. I like to look at them.

Then her eyes closed and she lost herself in the taste of her own blood.

PART TWO

He figured it had to be a hoax. Five thousand dollars to paint a nude portrait? Who the hell advertised for something like that on Craig's List? Ian sat there in his boxer briefs, chewing on a slice of leftover pizza and contemplating the phone number in the ad.

He was still convinced it was some sort of joke when he pulled his Dodge Shadow up to the address the man had given him on the phone. He double-checked the Mapquest directions just to be sure it wasn't 1313 Mockingbird Lane before he knocked on the door. He couldn't find a doorbell.

He fully expected Lurch to answer—instead, he got Uncle Fester.

"Hi, I'm here about the painting," Ian said when Fester just stood in the doorway and stared. He wanted to shade his eyes, because the sun was actually glaring off the bald man's head. "I mean...I'm here to do the painting. We talked...on the phone?"

The old man gave a stiff nod, stepping aside to let him in and Ian followed, blinking around at the spacious foyer, the spiral staircase. Every surface shined, and he understood immediately that the ad wasn't a joke, and unless this guy was into some weird sex stuff or something—in which case he was pretty sure he could out run an old man who walked with a cane—he was actually going to get paid five-thousand dollars to paint. The thought excited him.

"Upstairs."

The guy was about as talkative as Lurch, Ian thought wryly as he climbed the stairs behind him, unable to shake the surreal feeling that he'd walked into the pages of some gothic novel. The old man's gnarled, arthritic hand turned the knob on a door at

the top of the stairs, swinging it wide. Ian's eyes widened at the sight of the room, resplendent, the light from the windows warm and perfect for painting.

"Beautiful," Ian murmured, stepping into the room, and although he was talking about the light, his eyes fell onto the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen in his life. He had to blink several times to make sure he wasn't seeing things as he took in the figure of a woman, half-reclining and fully nude on a settee. Her face was expectant, her eyes bright, as she watched them enter the room, and Ian noticed a book spread open on the seat beside her.

"My wife." Kauffman made the gruff introduction. "You will paint her there, on that settee."

Ian blinked, glancing between the old man and the obviously young woman. She couldn't have been any older than he was, barely out of college, and although he had drawn, sculpted and painted countless nudes without a thought of sex, there was no doubt that she aroused him. Perhaps it was the shock of it—had she been waiting for him to arrive this way, remaining nude, waiting for the artist?

"Well, that's fine." Ian filled the sudden silence, clearing his throat. "Nice to meet you, Mrs...?"

The woman opened her mouth, but put her hand to her throat, and it was the first time Ian noticed the black choker there, her only adornment.

"Kauffman," the old man said with a nod. "I'm Kauffman. And she can't speak."

"Oh." Ian blinked again, wondering if the surprises would ever end. "Well, just so you know, Mrs. Kauffman...you can wear something when I'm not painting. A robe or—"

"No." Kauffman held up his hand. "This is how she remains."

"I can even work from photos," Ian went on, his puzzled glance moving between the unlikely pair.

Kauffman shook his head again. "I've done my homework, Mr. Baker. When you answered my ad, I looked extensively into your background. Only child, parents dead in a boating accident, graduated sum cum laude. You've done freelance work and had a few favorable showings since graduation, but you haven't really 'made it' in the art world, have you? What I am most interested in is your portraits, especially the Nora by the River series."

Ian nodded, feeling the air go out of his lungs. Anyone could be Googled, of course, but the thought of this man digging into his past made his skin prickle with some sort of dark heat.

"I can paint from life, of course," he agreed. He wasn't going to say no to five thousand dollars, no matter what the eccentric request. He'd paint standing on one foot if he had to.

"Goot." Kauffman's accent was clear on that word, strong and crisp, and he moved silently across the room, approaching his wife. "I will leave you two alone, then, to get started. I want a masterpiece to hang over the mantle."

Ian watched the man's bent index finger trace the black line of the necklace at the woman's slim throat, and he couldn't discern the hot look in the woman's eyes. Was it passion? Fear? Anger?

"I want something I can keep for generations," Kauffman explained, turning to face the young painter again. He pointed to the blank wall above the tall, wide fireplace, a wall which looked freshly painted. "Hung right there."

Ian took in the size of the space, swallowing before he said, "I don't think I brought a canvas that big." Kauffman frowned, his eyebrows knitting, and Ian quickly responded. "But I'll start sketching today, just to get a feel for the subject, and I'll bring a larger canvas on my next visit."

"One month."

For the second time that day, Ian's breath left his body. *A month?* The painting being commissioned had to be six feet tall and even wider, and the style requested – his paintings of Nora had taken him years, *years* to complete – was impossible to rush. She would have to sit for him eight hours a day, five days a week. He would be living and breathing it. He did, with his work, but to have it done in such a short time? *A month!?* It was impossible!

And all for five thousand dollars. He didn't even want to start the hourly wage math in his head.

The old man turned to go and Ian struggled to find his voice. "Mr. Kauffman, I don't think—"

"One month." Kauffman's voice was firm. "I am not an unreasonable man, Mr. Baker, but that is the deadline. If you require anything to make it happen thusly, I trust you will let me know."

Ian frowned. He hated talking money. He hated feeling like he was pimping himself out for it, but damn. Five thousand dollars for a job this big, so much work, so much time and effort...?

"What was your gross income last year, Mr. Baker?" Kauffman asked, seeming to read the young man's mind, his eyes glinting as he leaned forward on his cane.

Ian flushed, glancing at the nude woman on the sofa. She was watching them, listening, and for some reason, her presence flustered him.

“Thirty-two thousand dollars,” he finally managed, his lips barely moving. He felt numb.

“I will double it.” The old man moved toward the door, hesitating at the entry way to remind them. “One month.”

When he was gone, the woman turned her eyes to Ian and he swallowed as he met them. They were brightly blue, but they were watchful, expressive, even as her face remained motionless. He wanted to say something, perhaps make some joke about the strangeness of it all, make her laugh. Then he remembered—she couldn’t speak.

“I have to go get my things,” he explained, motioning toward the door. “They’re in the car. I’ll be right back.”

She didn’t acknowledge his words except to continue to look at him, although he thought he could feel her gaze even when he turned to leave the room. He didn’t bring all of his stuff, instead just his bag with his pencils, charcoals and a sketch pad. He liked to make a few initial sketches, just to get a feel for his subject. He shut the trunk, thinking of the “subject”—the beautiful, silent woman with the piercing eyes up there in that ostentatious room, married to a man who was probably old enough to be her grandfather.

There’s a story there, for sure, he thought, slinging his bag over his shoulder. Too bad I’m a painter and not a writer. He knew his painting would tell a story, they always did, but probably no one but Kauffman would ever see it, hanging like a prize over the fireplace mantle. And what would it mean to the old man? Already, it seemed to

him that the woman in the room upstairs was nothing more than a keepsake, something beautiful to be admired, like a diamond set in black velvet on a jeweler's tray.

Ian looked up, startled to see the woman standing in the window watching him. She was still nude and there was no shame in her stance, her breasts thrust upward, her chin jutting, but her eyes...even this far away, he could feel the longing in them.

Twice his yearly salary in a month, he reminded himself, giving a slight wave to acknowledge her as he headed toward the front door. Even if he never found out the story behind the strange woman he was about to paint, he would ultimately have one hell of a story to tell about the month he spent doing it, he was sure.

* * * *

Professional models were always so easy to paint. They understood what an artist wanted, how to assume a pose and keep it. He didn't know how they kept their minds occupied—did they recite baseball statistics, the times tables, fantasize about the future, meditate?—but for whatever kept them silent and still, he was grateful. He had been dreading doing another painting from life. If he couldn't get professional models, he preferred to do his work from photos or sketches, because his experience with real people who modeled was they loved to talk. They talked about their gardens, their stock portfolios, their children. They fidgeted, shifted, got up twice an hour to use the bathroom, and by the end of the session, were asking, "Are we done yet?" like a five year old on a car ride.

But Lydia wasn't like that. She was a dream subject, obviously quiet, but also unnaturally calm and still, resting in the same position day after day, hour after hour. The semi-reclining pose Kauffman had chosen was convenient, of course, but she

never fell asleep, as some subjects in those poses did. Sometimes he would get so lost in his work, he'd forget she was real—until he met her eyes.

God, her eyes. He didn't have any idea how he was going to capture that expression, her face, the way her eyes followed him, asked him questions, conveyed some distant longing she couldn't express. And he had almost reached that point. It was easy, those first weeks, to work on the background, the room itself. She had insisted on staying in position, anyway, even though he told her she didn't have to. He'd encouraged her to get dressed, take a break, but she wouldn't.

Instead she watched him from her repose on the settee, and he found himself wondering—just who was the subject here? Now it was time for him to focus on her, to trace the now-familiar curves of her body with his gaze and his brush. He'd been avoiding it, he knew, afraid of what he might uncover, not in the painting, but in himself. Three weeks with a silent ghost of a woman and he thought he might be falling in love.

"Lydia, I need a break." Ian stood and stretched, seeing her eyes follow his movements. Sometimes, she looked so hungry, as if she were starving for something. "Isn't about time for the old bat to bring us lunch?"

Lydia smirked, her eyes dancing as she sat, too, following his stretch with her own, her soft, long limbs flexing with the motion. Reaching under the settee, she brought out a pad and pen he had given her, their means of communication. She refused to use it at first, shaking her head vehemently, her eyes wide with fear, when he explained what it was for, but she had become more comfortable, although she still hid it carefully from sight.

You look tired.

He nodded, looking down at her girlish handwriting as she showed him the yellow pad. "I couldn't sleep last night."

A frown knitted her brow and she cocked her head at him before she wrote, *Bad dreams?*

Ian shook his head, watching her as she stood, how perfect she was, her hair like spun gold in the sunlight. "No, not bad dreams. Incredibly good ones." He sighed as she touched his cheek, her eyes worried, and he took her hand, holding it there and turning so his lips pressed a kiss against her palm.

Lydia jumped, pulling away as if burned.

"Lunch time, princess."

They both startled at the sound of Mrs. Bauer's voice outside the door. She rolled a trolley tray through, but Ian noted she would never come in herself. They had a girl who came to clean the room, a petite blonde who stared at them with big, wide blue eyes as she worked, but aside from her, no one but Kauffman ever visited.

"Think she poisoned the soup?" Ian joked, lifting silver lids to see what that day's fare was.

She wouldn't dare.

He shrugged at her written words, pushing the tray over to his chair and pulling another chair over for her. He marveled at how she looked so comfortable doing everything in the nude, even sipping soup and eating sandwiches. He had tried, a few times, to ask about the nudity, but all she would say was: *He wants me that way.*

And Ian had learned quickly, what Kauffman wanted, Kauffman got.

He wolfed his lunch down, not discovering how incredibly hungry he was until the first bite, and then ate the rest of Lydia's as well. She watched him, an amused smile on her face, and a warm look in her eyes that made him flush.

"Artists are pigs," he declared, burping loudly. "It's a well-kept secret, but it's true."

Lydia shook her head, still smiling as she stood and walked to the other side of the canvas. Ian stiffened, watching. She was there, on the sofa, not finished, of course, just a ghost of a woman now, needing real flesh. Crossing her arms in front of her breasts—a gesture Ian strangely hadn't ever seen from her—she frowned at the canvas for a while, so long Ian cleared his throat to get her attention.

"What, do you hate it?"

She shook her head, still frowning, her hand going to her throat to touch the cameo on the velvet choker she always wore. Striding back toward him, she picked up the pad and wrote furiously, turning so he could read it.

I need to show you something.

Ian grinned. "Are you finally gonna show me where he buries the bodies, then?"

Lydia didn't smile. Instead, she took his hand, pulling him toward the bed, and for a moment, just a brief moment, he entertained the thought she was going to offer herself to him, just like that. The thought excited him beyond reason, and he knew he'd have to be completely crazy to take her up on such an offer. But she led him past the bed, stopping in front of the dresser.

"It's the closet, isn't it?" Ian joked. He knew it was locked—the first day, he'd looked for a place to put the portrait, and Lydia had insisted the closet was off limits. *It's*

his. What wasn't, around here, Ian thought at the time, although he didn't know how accurate the thought really was. Kauffman owned everything—and everyone—who came through the front door of his lair. "That's where he does his secret experiments, right?"

She gave him a withering look, reaching behind the enormous mirrored dresser and pulling on something with both hands. He leaned over to see what she was struggling with and saw immediately that it was a painting. He gently nudged her aside, ignoring as best he could the soft press of her bare breast against his arm as he slowly pulled the dresser forward so he could slide the painting out from behind it.

"My god, is that you?" Ian asked, but knew the moment the words left his mouth that it wasn't. It was a different woman, certainly, her face rounder, her body a little more plump, but the resemblance was uncanny. The painting had been slashed several times with something sharp, and he had to hold pieces of the canvas up to see the whole thing. It was the exact portrait he had been commissioned to paint, the same room, same furniture, just a different woman on the settee.

"What's going on here?" Ian frowned, meeting her eyes. Lydia's eyes darted from him to the painting to the door, and just shrugged.

"Mrs. Bauer!"

The sound of Kauffman's voice got them both moving, putting the painting and dresser back quickly. They both heard his steps on the stairs, accompanied by the unmistakable thump of his cane. By the time Ian picked up his brush, Lydia was reclining once again on the settee, the only signs of her transgression the pink flush on her cheeks.

"Mrs. Bauer!" Kauffman poked his head in, although he must have know his housekeeper wouldn't be there.

"She brought us lunch." Ian nodded toward the tray. "Haven't seen her since."

The old man gave a nod, his eyes not on Ian, but the painting. "It's coming along. Another week."

"Yes," Ian agreed. Another week of eight hour sessions, spending time in the old house until the light faded while Lydia slept in the big bed across the room. He still went home and crashed at his place every night, although Kauffman had offered one of their many rooms for his use, but he didn't trust himself. Not at night, not after the light was gone, and Lydia was curled under the covers. Somehow, seeing her there like that, one thigh exposed, the soft curve of her arm, tempted him more than having her in front of him all day fully nude.

"Goot."

The both breathed a sigh of relief when he was gone, and Lydia carefully slid her pad and pen back under the settee. Ian had been there all day every day for three weeks, and there was so much he still didn't understand about this woman and her life, but he wanted to scoop her up and take her away from it, that much he knew. And that feeling was dangerous. He fought it every moment of the day.

He sighed, starting to paint, focusing on lines, textures, trying not to think about the flesh of the woman he was bringing to life on the canvas, trying not to wonder why she married such a cold, hard man, or to be curious about the other woman in the painting behind the dresser. One more week, and this job would be done, and his life could go on the way it was.

Except he knew—looking over and meeting her eyes, the way she softened when she looked at him like that—he knew somehow things were never going to be the same for him ever again.

* * * *

It's the last day.

"You don't have to tell me," Ian growled. He was never going to finish in time. The light was already fading, a rosy glow radiating through the room, turning everything a fiery orange. It was her eyes. He couldn't get her eyes right.

You can work through the night.

Ian shook his head, frowning, concentrating, barely looking at her words. He couldn't get it right, and he hated when the image eluded him, hiding somewhere in the canvas, lurking just beyond his reach.

It wasn't until Lydia was beside him, pressing against his side, resting her cheek on his arm, that he really paid attention.

He's gone.

Those were the words she was trying to show him.

"Who? Kauffman?" Ian shrugged, putting his brush down with a sigh. "So?"

For the night. He's gone out of town until tomorrow. Mrs. Bauer said it was a family emergency.

"He's still got family?"

Lydia shrugged, but her eyes were bright as she tugged on his sleeve, leading him. He understood immediately, but he froze in place, taking her hands in his, shaking his head.

"I can't." The disappointment in her eyes was a heartbreak. "You're married, and I'm..." He let his sentence trail off, the hurt in her eyes like a knife in his belly. He expected her to argue, to turn to her pad and scribble her pain. Instead, she dropped his hands, her face a sudden mask as she turned away and walked toward the window.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, swallowing hard as she hugged her arms, not looking at him as she made her way toward the big bed. It was early yet, but she slid between the covers anyway. He stood there for a long while, fighting with himself and trying not to imagine her silently wetting her pillow with tears.

"Just get it over with, Baker," he said to himself in the fading light. He meant the painting, of course.

Of course he did.

He picked up his brush and began to paint again.

* * * *

The moon was high when he finished.

He stood at the window and watched it riding black clouds for a long time, listening to her breathing behind him. It was her eyes, watching him, all the time, her gaze burning through every defense, every excuse, every rationalization. There was no arguing with her, no easy words to cover emotion. She was just raw feeling, trembling and naked and vulnerable before him in every moment.

That was what he had captured in her eyes. Finally. Finally.

"Lydia?" He whispered her name as he approached the bed, drawing aside the filmy curtain. She slept curled up like a child, one hand tucked beneath her chin, her mouth a rosy pout. The sheet covered the top of her breasts and he watched it rise and

fall with her breath. The cameo in the choker she wore glinted in the low lamplight, the black velvet band her only adornment, and his eyes followed the curve of the sheet downward as it hugged her curves, tugged tight between her thighs. She was ripe, delectable, beyond words or form, and nothing could capture her. He had done his best, but it didn't come close to the experience of being next to the woman sleeping before him.

He startled when she touched his hand and he glanced up to see her eyes were open, watching him, questioning. He raised her palm and kissed it, admiring the long, delicate curve of her fingers.

"I finished it," he whispered, sitting beside her, brushing a soft blonde curl from her cheek. She nodded, smiling, but the smile never reached her eyes. Instead, there was sadness there. He wished she could speak, to reveal the mystery of herself to him. He longed to unravel her, unwrap her, find her true center.

"Do you want to see?"

Again she nodded, sitting up in bed, the sheet pooling in her lap. He'd seen her nude for a month, all day, every day, and still, the sight of her left him breathless and aching for her.

When she swung her legs over the side of the bed, he grabbed her wrist, shaking his head. "Wait." Puzzled, she stopped, cocking her head at him. He swallowed, glancing through the sheer gauze of her bed curtains at the canvas on the other side of the room. "I'm afraid."

He didn't have to hear the question. It was in her eyes. *Afraid? Of what?*

“I’m afraid...” It wasn’t a fear of her liking or not liking it. He could care less if his art was reviewed favorably, especially by the subject. In that way, his subjects were always objects, always distant from his purpose. He slid his hand down into hers, squeezing. “I’m afraid I’m never going to see you again.”

He bowed his head at the truth, his heart hammering in his chest, a weight there like anvil. It was finished, and he was leaving, and there would be no more lunches; no more furious scribbling at him and the feel of her poking his arm with her finger, look, look what I have to say; no more feeling her gaze following him everywhere, everywhere he went.

When she slid behind him, wrapping her arms around his chest, pressing her cheek to his back, he gave a shuddering sigh at the heat, the weight of her. She kissed his shoulder blades through his shirt, her hands moving over his chest, his belly, her breath hot as she moved her mouth to the back of his neck, feathering kisses there, too. Soon the back of his shirt was wet with her tears, but she didn’t stop raining kisses over his shoulders, through his hair, pressing herself against him from behind.

“Lydia, please.” He shook his head, turning to look at her, to tell her how crazy this was, how crazy his life had become in the last month and that she was the center of his insanity, and the moment he did, her mouth found his, drowning them both with her passion. He tasted the salt of her tears as she cupped his face in her hands, and he tried to resist the soft press of her tongue, the swell of her breasts against the side of his arm. It was only when she moved into his lap, straddling him as they kissed, that he knew he was really lost.

Every moment of resistance, every ounce of energy he'd spent holding his breath this past month, keeping himself in check, erupted in that moment. He grabbed her with both hands, fingers digging into the soft flesh of her hips, tongue snaking deep into her mouth. She didn't recoil for a moment—in fact, she pressed further, grinding her hips in his hands, her crotch moving against his.

He moved to undo his pants, needing to feel her bare skin against his, but her insistent hands stopped him, pressing him back onto the bed as she straddled him. He saw the delight in her eyes as she unbuttoned his shirt, lighting raking her fingernails through the hair on his chest, tweaking his nipples hard enough to make him jump. She spread his shirt open, leaning in to kiss him again, her breasts pressing against his chest like soft, ripe melons. Then she was working on his belt, his zipper, reaching in as if looking for a prize and her eyes lit up when she found just what she wanted.

His cock wept from wanting her, had been aching for weeks for some sort of soft, feminine relief, and here she was, her small, delicate hand wrapped around the shaft, her tongue reaching to taste him. He lost his hand in her hair, guiding her mouth, that sweet red rosebud of a mouth he'd spent hours trying to capture, down around the length of his cock.

The sensation was total and he closed his eyes with a groan, her tongue moving in delicate circles around the tip as she came up, and sliding along the shaft as she went down again, burying him into her throat so far he felt her breath against his pubic hair. He let her go on far too long, bringing him much closer to orgasm than he wanted to be already, but her mouth, god her mouth...

“Lydia,” he whispered, gently pulling her up toward him. She came easily, wrapping her long limbs around his and kissing him, hungry, her hand reaching again for his cock, as if she couldn’t get enough. She worked him with her fingers, her palm, stroking him toward some delicious madness and he groaned, wondering how much longer he could hold out, or if he might simply shoot into her pumping hand like some overexcited teenager before he ever even got a chance to be inside of her.

But she seemed to know, and she rolled beneath him, her hand guiding, aiming his cock between her legs as she clasped him to her. Ian moved his hips forward, following her lead, and gasped as her flesh parted, slowly engulfing the length of him in an impossibly wet heat. When he looked down, he saw her eyes half-closed, her lips parted as her hips began to press up toward his, and he knew he’d never see anything as beautiful as this again in his life.

He gave in when she pulled him even closer, her breath hot and fast in his ear as they rocked together. He whispered her name over and over as he thrust deep into her willing flesh, “Oh god, Lydia, oh god...” and she clung harder to him, her nails digging into his back, her teeth sinking into his shoulder as he felt her shudder beneath him.

The pleasure of her orgasm, the soft, fast pulse of her pussy around his shaft, was too much for him to bear, and he shoved himself hard into her moist heat in one last attempt to give her everything those strange, beautiful eyes had ever begged him for. He poured it all into her, every moment, every longing, every gift, and when he could finally draw a quivering breath, he whispered, “I love you. I’ve always loved you,” into her hair as he collapsed in her arms.

She kissed the top of his head over and over, holding him close when he tried to move away, to ease the weight of him on her. Instead, she wanted more, pulling the sheet up over their sweat-slick bodies and snuggling in tighter. He rested his head against her chest, listening to the soft, steady beat of her heart, and it was that delicious sound that finally lulled him into an exhausted sleep.

* * * *

She was spooned against his chest when he awoke, and he knew it was late—too late. There was a soft early light coming into the high windows. Morning. They'd slept all night. There was a moment of fear, the thought of being caught by Kauffman, or even old Mrs. Bauer, but when he looked down at Lydia's sleeping form, listened to the soft sound of her breath, he knew it didn't matter.

He'd spent a month doing a painting he would never get paid for. But he would take something away from this house more valuable than anything in the world, more precious to him than he ever could have imagined. They would walk away from here with nothing, and begin a new life together outside of these strange walls.

Ian traced the sea shell curve of her ear with his gaze and watched the way her pulse beat steadily at the side of her neck. He wanted to take away all the pain and sadness he'd seen in her eyes whenever he mentioned her husband, to let her leave the past completely behind her.

His fingers idly played over her shoulder, her neck, interrupted by the feel of the velvet choker there. Kauffman made her wear it like she was some dog wearing his collar, and the pain and indignity of it heated his chest. He fingered the ties at the back of the choker, frowning. He didn't remember it fastening that way. In fact, he didn't

remember there being any fastener at all. It seemed instead to be part of her, and while she had explained that her husband was an extraordinary jewelry maker, it had always seemed odd to him.

He made his decision quickly, pulling one end of the string and untying the bow. It came undone easily, and he pulled gently at the necklace, feeling it slip from around Lydia's neck as she slept.

He held it up for a moment in disdain and then let it flutter to the bed.

"Noooooooooooo!" The sound of her voice—*she could speak!*—was all he could fully comprehend as she sat and faced him, her hands encircling her throat. He saw now a razor thin line of blood forming where the choker had been, bleeding through her fingers. Her eyes were wide with fear as she reached for him, her bloody hands grasping, and Ian held them, aghast, and could do nothing but watch in horror as his lover's head tipped backward—*I'm dreaming, I must be dreaming*—leaving him holding hands with a beheaded corpse.

Her body collapsed immediately, soaking the pillows in blood, and her head rolled, *dear god, it rolled*, and hit the closet door with a sickening thud before coming to a stop.

"*Save them.*" The whispered hiss seemed to come from both places at once, from the throat of the body pooled in blood on the bed, and the disembodied head resting against the wall, and he thought he would go insane at that realization.

Save them.

This time the words didn't come to him from Lydia—she was gone, her beautiful eyes dull, lifeless, staring into nothing—but from the painting behind him on the canvas.

He acted quickly, as if he knew just what to do, although his hands trembled and he blinked back tears as he knelt beside her head and tried to pick the lock on the closet door. She had bobby pins all over her dresser she used to put her hair up, and he grabbed one, shoving it into the hole and twisting, but it was no use.

With a strangled cry, he shoved his shoulder against the door, feeling the frame shake. He did it again, again, again, until the wood splintered and the door gave way, swinging inward and leaving him stumbling to catch his footing.

He stood for a moment, transfixed, the dawning light showing him more than he wanted to see, and then he gagged, covering his eyes with his arm, turning away from the sight of them, lined up like science experiments, heads preserved in glass jars, every single one of them staring with eyes wide open in horror.

“Lydia,” he whispered, collapsing to the floor, cradling her bloody head in his hands. “What have I done? What have I done?”

Lost in his grief, he didn’t hear the soft click of the chain encircling his neck until it was too late. The world had already faded to a blissful black.

* * * *

“Where am I?”

His voice wasn’t his own. Ian looked down at his hands, duct taped to a chair, and they weren’t his either. Old, arthritic, they were the hands of a very old man. His head swam, his stomach lurched.

“Not to worry.”

That’s me, Ian thought, feeling the world slipping sideways at the sound of his own voice coming from behind him. He was in the boudoir, his painting gorgeous in the

early morning light, and the sight of Lydia's gaze on him from the portrait made him dizzy with anger.

"What have you done!?" Ian croaked, his old man's voice thick with Kauffman's accent.

"Well, you've gone and spoiled my treasure." A hand rested on Ian's shoulder, and he heard his own heavy sigh just behind him, the sound impossibly unmistakable. "But at least I have your painting to preserve my memory. I do so like to keep things."

"What did you do to her?"

"I didn't do anything, friend. You did." The hand moved from his shoulder and Ian struggled to see the man behind him. He didn't have to wait long. When the body attached to his own voice stepped out in front of his chair, he felt the world go black for a moment, his whole body clenching in a cold sweat. *That's me! I'm him! Oh god, this can't be happening...*

"Let me go." Ian's voice was gruff with anger, but he still didn't recognize it as his own.

The young man laughed. "I'm afraid I can't do that. You're Mr. Kauffman now—at least, until Mr. Kauffman the art patron dies suddenly and leaves everything to his young artist friend."

"I'm not!" Ian struggled weakly in his bonds.

"Well, you have his face, his voice, his undeniable fingerprints. I just happen to be wearing the jewelry he never takes off." The young artist winked and showed the old man in the chair the thin gold chain Lydia had informed Ian that Kauffman had always worn since she knew him.

Ian groaned, closing his eyes, hanging his head, but his hands clenched into defiant fists. "What makes you think I'm going to do anything you want me to do?"

"Because you're going to be wearing another piece of jewelry," the younger man explained. "I've been working on this one for a month."

It was too late to stop him, and there was nothing he could have done anyway. Pain followed the dull click like a razor, and he felt a warm wetness pooling at the hollow of his throat as he gasped for air.

The younger man held up a hand mirror, grinning. "Like it?"

Gun metal gray, and thin as a wire, it encircled the old man's neck with no end.

"Unfortunately, this one's ruined." The young man sighed as he held up the bloody velvet choker, the one Lydia had so recently worn.

Ian tried to speak, tried to cry out her name, but no sound came out of his throat.

"I'm sure I'll make another, once I find a new treasure." The younger man let go of the necklace, watching it flutter to the floor in front of the portrait of the last woman who had worn it. "I do so like to keep things."

The End

ABOUT SELENA KITT



Like any feline, Selena Kitt loves the things that make her purr—and wants nothing more than to make others purr right along with her! Pleasure is her middle name, whether it's a short cat nap stretched out in the sun or a long kitty bath. She makes it a priority to explore all the delightful distractions she can find, and follow her vivid and often racy imagination wherever it wants to lead her.

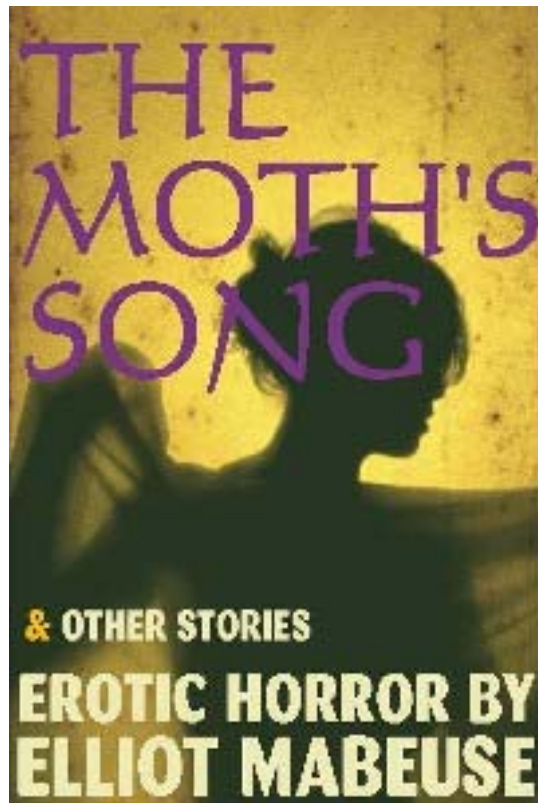
Her writing embodies everything from the spicy to the scandalous, but watch out—this kitty also has sharp claws and her stories often include intriguing edges and twists that take readers to new, thought-provoking depths.

When she's not pawing away at her keyboard, Selena runs an innovative publishing company (www.excessica.com) and in her spare time, she worships her devoted husband, corrals five kids and a dozen chickens, all while growing an organic garden. She also loves bellydancing and photography.

Her e-publishing credits include: [Rosie's Promise](#) published by Samhain and [Torrid Teasers #49](#) published by [Whiskey Creek Press](#) featuring two short stories, French Lessons and I'll Be Your Superman in 2008. Her stories and poems are in the following anthologies: [Coming Together: For The Cure](#), [Coming Together: Under Fire](#), [Coming Together: At Last Volume II](#), and finally, [Coming Together Volume 1](#) and [Volume 3](#). Two stories, [Sacred Spots](#) and [Happy Accident](#), have been published by [Phaze Publishing](#), as well as her novels [Christmas Stalking](#), [Blind Date](#), [The Surrender of Persephone](#). *The Song of Orpheus* is also coming soon! She has also been published online in [The Shadow Sacrament: a journal of sex and spirituality](#), and [The Erotic Woman](#).

Selena's story, *Connections*, was one of the two runners-up for the [2006 Rauxa Prize](#), given annually to an erotic short story of "exceptional literary quality." Her story was chosen out of over 1,000 nominees, where awards are judged by a select jury and all entries are read "blind" (without author's name available.) She can be reached on her website at www.selenakitt.com.

If you enjoyed **SHIVERS**, you might also enjoy:



THE MOTH'S SONG AND OTHER STORIES

By Elliott Mabeuse

Seven splendid tales of eerie erotica and supernatural sex. To wit: Life In Deep Rock, where creatures made of echoes avenge a cheating wife's death...The Devil's Lesson, in which a rock guitarist finds that making love to the Prince of Darkness is not what she thought...The Moth's Song, a horror story of miscegenation across nature's very orders...Incubus: surreal, mind-shattering sex with a being from a place where dreams go to dieThe Donor, a willing victim supplies a blood meal to a flesh-and-blood vampire...Hole, in which we learn how things in the earth give rise to unspeakable desires...Vampires on a Train: a trip at once exciting, erotic, and poignant, and surprisingly human. All stories soaked in the sex, sensuality, and rich atmospherics you've come to expect from Dr. Mabeuse, Master of Ecstatics...

Warning: This title contains graphic language, sex and erotic horror.

Excerpt From THE MOTH'S SONG:

The devil's kiss was like nothing she'd ever experienced in her life—devastatingly sensual and sheer ecstasy on her lips, but with the heat of hell behind it, all the distilled

passion of an infinity of lovers who'd gone before, refined and contained in that kiss. It was pure desire, pure worship, pure promise, and Lydia had never felt anything like it.

Maybe he was right and she didn't have a soul. But his kiss drew something out of her, something that lived behind her heart and above her pussy and in her throat and her eyes and her ears. His kiss was like a whirlpool of stars, like falling into an oblivion so sweet she could scarcely endure it but thought she might pass out. And then he put his tongue in her mouth.

It was his tongue that saved her, lewd and seeking and tasting her everywhere. The thrill of his tongue in her mouth brought her back into focus and stopped her from dissolving into a million shards of bliss. The devil leaned over her and held her free wrist down and pressed his hard, powerful body against her and slid his tongue into her mouth, and Lydia knew immediately that it had been the devil's tongue that had tempted Eve in the garden of Eden, and that no woman would ever be able to resist a tongue like that. It slid into her mouth and knew her, knew every place to touch, every spot to tickle, as if it knew her every secret, and though she knew that tongue had known a million mouths, it somehow found hers the sweetest of all.

Lydia groaned. She was throbbing now and lubricating, and she felt all liquid down there and ready except for her thighs, which ached to open and embrace the steel-like columns of his legs. He let go of her wrist and her hand went up around his naked back, and he was smooth and warm as any man she'd ever touched, but beneath that skin she could feel the hard strength of muscle that could do anything, that knew no limits. Beneath his skin he felt like he was made of steel and polished marble.

This is the Devil! she thought. Evil incarnate, and yet he kisses like a man, only better, and he feels like a man, only better When does this evil start? When does it get scary?

The devil lifted his mouth from hers and he was smiling, and Lydia lay there with her eyes closed and her mouth open both in astonishment and in invitation to be taken again. He dipped his big head and licked her tongue and picked off a drop of saliva, and Lydia groaned, feeling that viscous strand stretch from his tongue to hers, then he kissed her again, hard, taking possession of her as a man takes a woman.

Her eyes fluttered closed as her nostrils dilated wildly for breath, and she felt the tip of his tongue sliding down her throat, past the point that made her gag to touch a spot in her throat she never even knew existed, a spot as sensitive as a little clitoris that sent heat rushing through her limbs and a gush of hormones into her system, swelling her breasts and her pussy and starting some maddening, sucking contractions deep within her, as if her body was already practicing to draw him in, needing him like she'd never needed a man in her life.

It was then she realized that she was really about to fuck the devil, the master of pleasure, the master of evil, the being who knew her inside and out. But where would this evil come from when he knew her like this, when he knew just how to touch her, just how to kiss?

He took her breast in his hand and squeezed her through the satin. He drew his forefinger down between her breasts and the fabric parted as if his fingernail were a knife, then he opened the dress and took her breast in his hand.

“Yes, Lydia, I know you,” he said. “I know all about you. Everything you’ve dreamed of, everything you want...”

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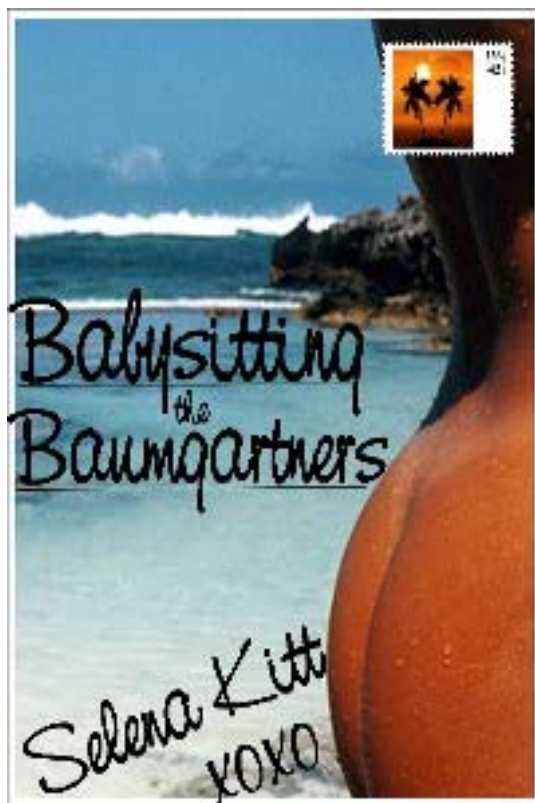


NAUGHTY BITS

By Selena Kitt

David has been brightening up his gray Surrey, England days with the porn collection hidden in his parents' shed, but when he find that his older sister, Dawn has discovered his magazine collection, things really begin to heat up. Their parents insist that their just-graduated son look for a job, but their daughter has the week off and is determined to work on her tan. Distracted David finds himself increasingly tempted by his seductive older sister, who makes it very clear what she wants. Her teasing ways slowly break down the taboo barrier between brother and sister until they both give in to their lust... but what are they going to do about the feelings that have developed between them in the meantime...?

Warning: This title contains incest and anal sex.



BABYSITTING THE BAUMGARTNERS

By Selena Kitt

Ronnie—or as Mrs. Baumgartner insists on calling her, Veronica—has been babysitting for the Baumgartners since she was fifteen years old and has practically become another member of the family. Now a college freshman, Ronnie jumps at the chance to work on her tan in the Florida Keys with “Doc” and “Mrs. B” under the pretense of babysitting the kids. Ronnie isn’t the only one with ulterior motives, though, and she discovers that the Baumgartners have wayward plans for their young babysitter. This wicked hot sun and sand coming of age story will seduce you as quickly as the Baumgartners seduce innocent Ronnie and leave everyone yearning for more!

Warning: This title contains MFF threesome, lesbian, and anal sex.

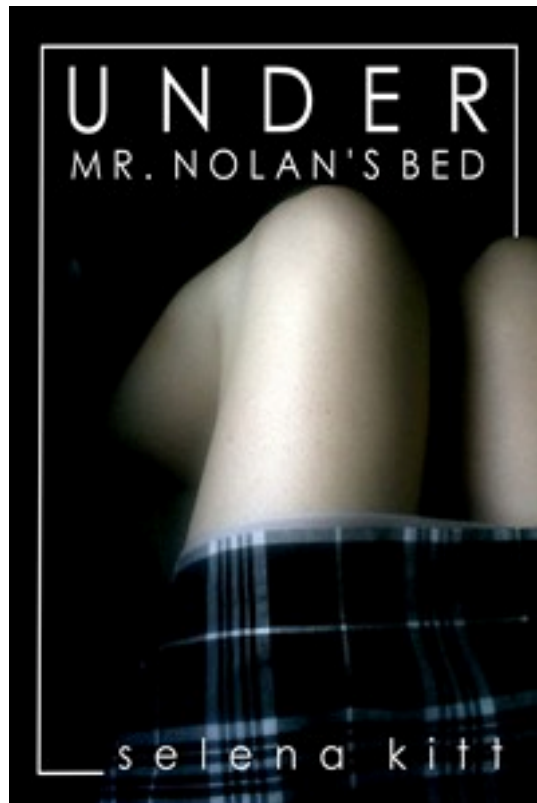


BLUEBEARD'S WIFE

By Selena Kitt

Tara's husband has never shared a fantasy with her, or even masturbated—that she knows of. However, this curious wife discovers a phone bill full of phone calls to sex lines and realizes her husband has been living a double life! Instead of getting mad, Tara's curiosity leads her to begin listening in on John's steamy conversations in hopes of finding out what he really wants in the bedroom. After several failed attempts at bringing fantasy to reality, however, a frustrated Tara turns to her much more adventurous best friend, Kelly, for help. A quick psychology 101 diagnosis from Dr. Kelly marks John as having a classic "madonna/whore" complex, and she quickly sets about making plans to rectify this situation. Tara goes along for the ride, hoping that Kelly may have the answer to bridging the seemingly ever-growing gap in her marriage...

Warning: This title contains a MFF threesome, a daddy/daughter role play between consenting adults, strong language, minor drug use and F/F sex.

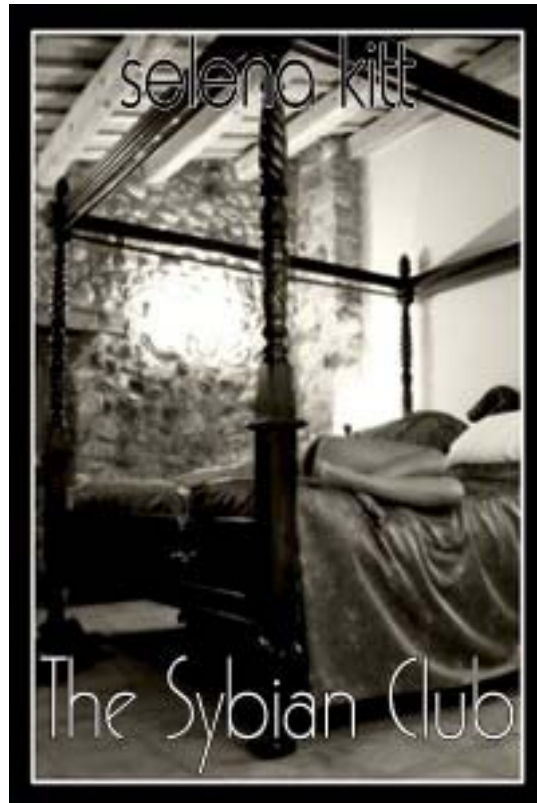


UNDER MR. NOLAN'S BED

By Selena Kitt

Leah and Erica have been best friends and have gone to the same Catholic school since just about forever. Leah spends so much time with the Nolan's—just Erica and her handsome father, now, since Erica's mother died—that she's practically part of the family. When the girls find something naughty under Mr. Nolan's bed, their strict, repressive upbringing makes it all the more exciting as they begin their sexual experimentation. Leah's exploration presses deeper, and eventually she finds herself torn between her best friend and her best friend's father—but even she couldn't have predicted the shocking and bittersweet outcome of their affair.

Warning: This title contains a threesome, lesbian sex and incest.



THE SYBIAN CLUB

By Selena Kitt

Tasha convinces her husband, Max, to buy her a the ultimate female pleasure machine – a Sybian – but he only agrees if she can come up with a business plan to pay for it. Determined to keep her promise, she creates The Sybian Club and begins bringing women to the basement room set up just for her new toy. It becomes so popular, she has to enlist the help of new friend, Ashley, to keep up with the demand, and the women enjoy an exciting ride as the business thrives. But Tasha has developed feelings for Ashley, and doesn't know how to tell her husband that she wants to add more to their sex life than just a new toy...

Warning: This title contains a threesome, lesbian and anal sex.



STARVING ARTIST

By Selena Kitt

Ellie is living the life of a true starving artist in a small efficiency apartment in dangerous downtown Detroit, but more dangerous than her surroundings are the men to whom she pays rent. Denied help by her prosecutor father, who believes his daughter is wasting her life in art school, Ellie finds herself in a precarious position and surrenders helplessly to her predicament. However, a strange twist of fate gives Ellie a chance at revenge. Will she take it?

Warning: This title contains graphic language, nonconsensual and anal sex.



ON CHERRY HILL

By Selena Kitt

Midwife Anne gets pulled over in the middle of the night on Cherry Hill Road. She's on her way to a birth, but her urgency doesn't sway the unsympathetic officer. When the cop discovers something suspicious on Anne's driving record and insists she get out of the car, she knows she's in real trouble. When he cuffs her and bends her over the hood, things go beyond trouble...

But the surprising outcome of this tale gives both Anne and the reader a jolt they never could have anticipated...

Warning: This title contains graphic language and nonconsensual sex.



ESCAPING FATE

By Selena Kitt

Sam has an unusual interest in humans—well, considering she’s a fairy of fate whose profession it is to determine their futures, it’s no wonder! But it isn’t just Karma she’s curious about... Sam has what her fairy-pal Alex thinks is an inordinate and rather wanton interest in certain biological aspects of human behavior—most notably, s-e-x.

When Sam’s job leads her into the path of a handsome man who rocks her world, Sam’s interest becomes obsession. Alex reminds her that fairies get one Christmas wish – will Sam consider using hers to become human to experience one night of bliss?

When things become even more complicated—Sam discovers that Drew, the sexy stranger she’s been fantasizing about, can actually see her—Sam finds herself immersed in a complex and tangled web of human experience. She has to make a choice that will teach her a twisted lesson in fate, ultimately change the course of human existence and even reveal the origin of Santa Claus!

Warning: This title contains graphic language and sex.



TICKLED PINK

By Selena Kitt

Who says sex can't be fun - or funny? You'll find more than enough amusing mishaps and uproarious situations to tickle your funny bone—and more!—in this delightfully wicked and delightfully sexy anthology from Selena Kitt.

Warning: This title contains graphic language and sex.



PAPERBACK ROMANCE

by Selena Kitt

Maya's heart yearns for romance and adventure, so that's what she writes about - but James Reardon, her college creative writing professor, insists she's wasting both time and talent. Determined to prove him wrong, Maya stumbles onto the fact that her professor's been keeping secrets - not the least of which is his attraction to her. Faced with a choice, she will have to decide whether or not to reveal his secret to the world—and her own desire for a man nearly twice her age.

Warning: This title contains graphic language and sex.