



Like A
Drug

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By David C. Velasco

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Even if it's not true love, everyone needs a fix.

A droning silence from the living room and bedroom beyond mocked her, reminding Megan of what awaited her once she returned. Reaching for the doorknob, she paused. Turning back, the memory of each empty night seeped into her chest, ounce by ounce, weighing upon her heart. But the evening was young. That puckish feeling knowing he'd soon be near gave her hope. Hope the astute furniture would accommodate more than one. Someday. If everything went her way. A dalliance before she closed the bedroom door behind them. Or should she leave it open?

With that thought, doubt flared up. Trotting back into the bedroom, she gave her simple outfit one last glance. In the full-length mirror adjacent to the door, she eyed the close-fitting blouse and snug low-rise jeans. The shirt covered the pound or two she tried

purging with each visit to the gym. The denim amplified the curves below, distracting his eyes from the unattractive bulge above. Her smirk of anticipation glared back from the mirror. The outfit would make a good impression.

Pleased, she sauntered out and back through the loft. Past the simple furnishings: a futon, two cushioned chairs for company, spartan multimedia center, coffee table, scanty desk, table for two in the meager kitchen. With her salary, she couldn't afford much more and live close to work. Located on the second floor of an eighty-year-old building, it faced a typical downtown street. Like others, it sat above various stores, offices, coffee shops, restaurants and art galleries dotting the downtown area. Only the hardwood floors and original brick walls remained. Remnants of the small title and loan office once there decades ago. The appliances, lights, phone, cable, internet and central air shoehorned therein gave the octogenarian loft modern comforts.

She then left. The door made a moaning sound, the newer wood rubbing against the older making up the doorsill, upon opening and closing. It echoed through the empty loft.

Across the street, in his own second story loft, Russell tore off his company-mandated polo. A plain blue tee

shirt replaced it. The jeans donned in the morning stayed on. No reason to change those. Like any working stiff, he looked forward to weekends. Away from the job as assistant manager of a small multi-use building a few blocks away. And Friday happy hour was the kick-off. Not that the day of the week prevented a trip to his fave or other nearby saloon. No particular reason needed.

In the bathroom, he ran a comb through the short dark hair atop his square face. A splash of inexpensive cologne slapped onto each cheek ended the grooming session. The effort took two minutes. Three tops. Knowing he'd get to spend some extra time near her tonight, his face got an extra close shave that morning. It cut down the evening prep time.

With a determined stride, he jaunted to the plain sofa amid the glorified studio apartment with two rooms: the mid-sized bathroom and everything else. The vaulted ceiling gave it a cavernous feel. A corner loft within the old building, large windows on both walls faced the streets. His full-size bed sat next to a small closet shoehorned into the apartment. A waist-high wall and breakfast bar separated the kitchen from the rest of the room. A small flat screen television and coffee table used more as an ottoman and dinner table than anything else sat near the sofa. He had no other furnishing. When needed, he plopped his laptop onto

the breakfast bar and stood. So roomy was the place, he let a friend host a dinner party here. Their own would have been too small for such a gathering.

Donning the light maroon jacket draped over the sofa, he moved to the front door. The fact the emptiness of the loft awaited his return didn't bother him. A few drinks drowned out coming event. He had a plan. He'd just hang in there. Bide his time.

The drab, cramped storeroom in back doubled as a makeshift locker room. Renee had no purse to sit next to those piled already on the small table, awaiting more. An ID and the little cash she managed to have on hand fit into the back pocket. Her much-needed cell found a safe home next to the register once she went on the clock. Between two stacks of unopened boxes hung a mirror erected by the employees. The unadorned cartons held pint-sized glasses. All waiting to replace those stolen or broken by patrons, bartenders and wait staff. Drunk or sober. Before her pale reflection, she double-checked her simple makeup. That and her straight, shoulder-length hair. She should use the restroom. But even this early, the two sinks and mirrors therein would find a girl or two or three crowded in front, touching up their already enhanced looks.

A step back. The short-sleeved shirt exposed her midsection. Low-rise jeans encased her legs and hips. Glancing them over for perfection was useless. They worked and were comfortable. It didn't matter. She'd get ogled and hit on no matter what. The phone numbers and pathetic notes passed to her found their way into the trash, not the faded pockets.

Enough cynicism. She headed to the door, eyeing Tammy's oversized, frayed, faux leather purse holding God knows what. A great gal. She'd end up asking about Jason and her. Attempts to keep her hormones focused elsewhere failed. Oft times she got the impression Tammy lived a vicarious sex life through her.

Speaking of life, rent came to mind. Due in a couple of weeks, and the other roommate moved out last month. The cost of the three-bedroom loft required one job paying a lot or three or more, each paying a little. Students attending the nearby university would get together and lease such a place for their time in college. Chloe and she avoided such an environment, but economics might cause both to bend. So... the tips best be good tonight. And tomorrow. And the next day. Then again, Jason planned on stopping by. Maybe Bill might let her go early tonight. A night with Jason or rent. Tough call.

With a reluctant stride, she headed out and to the server station. So begins her shift.

The crowd waxed and waned as early evening wore on, but never died. The Pub wasn't a spectacular place and made no attempt to be one. No hip, multi-colored lights or large dance floor. No scantily dressed wait staff. No bikini-clad women dancing in cages, gawked at by men acting as if they had never seen a woman before. The simple décor attracted all kinds: Businesspersons in dress suits. Bohemians in faded jeans and knit caps. College fraternity and sorority types. The assorted passerby. Listed in various colors on the chalkboard behind the bar were beers from all over the country and world. The current price per glass above. Nozzles atop each tap ranged from the simple to the ornate. Mundane to the bombastic. The chairs were made of wood. So too the tables. These bore the scars of bored or drunk patrons who, possessing any sharp object, etched various words, phrases and symbols into them. The owners didn't frown upon such actions. It added to the ambiance. But the staff remained vigilant lest legitimate phone numbers or any unsavory opinions appeared. Like many renovated buildings in the area, the original brick and mortar made up the walls. The Pub possessed a charm all on

its own. The simplicity of the décor gave it an unpretentious atmosphere. Its greatest strength.

Megan's coworkers, Olivia and Martin, joined them, sharing in well-deserved relaxation. As drinks filled the table, so too conversations about the past week. Their laughter and voices added to the din within the room. Megan looked on as Russell relayed the idiot of the week story. He rocked back, arm and foot on the chair adjacent, positioned so no one could sit in, or commandeer, the chair. Just in case, his jacket slung there proved an ineffective deterrent.

“So this guy is sitting in his car, right, probably staring at the ticket spitter,” he began. Megan shot a glance at the front door as he went on. In this instance, an individual attempted access to the underground parking garage of the building. She watched a group of college kids ambling in, but not the heavy wooden door closing behind them. Back to Russell. “...finally, he pushes the call button. He said ‘There’s no ticket coming out.’ I said back ‘Did you press the green button?’ He says no. Then I could hear him press it and the chi-clunk of the ticket coming out. What I wanted to say was ‘Did you press the green button for a ticket, dumbass? The one with the words ‘Press Button for a Ticket’ above it?’”

Everyone laughed. People lacking common sense were always a source of amusement.

“Was he drunk already?” Olivia asked.

“I hope not... it was only ten am!” Martin spat out.

“Downtown here... you never know!” Russell added. Another round of laughs.

Megan spat out a staccato giggle when the main door swung open again. Her eyes darted over and zeroed in on the figure emerging from the daylight. She froze dead still, drawing a quick sip of air. Enough to keep her heart going.

Richard walked in. His straight hair never wavered out of place as he scanned the boisterous room. A five-o’clock shadow clenched his square jaw. She glanced down, unable to stop her mind from removing the two-piece work suit still hugging his trim frame. His pose—a hand on each hip, power tie dangling onto his chest—and knowing he’d soon be next to her drowned out one other fact: Coleen stood next to him.

“Hey guys!” Megan shouted, reaching high with a waving hand.

She stood, watching the duo approach. Coleen moved with a catwalk meander, one foot set with perfection in front of the other. She stood out. At work or here. On the street. A dark alley if she chose to walk through one. Business attire of a one-button jacket, short matching skirt and heels amplified her slender build. All topped off with green eyes and short wavy hair requiring no long hours of labor to make up. Dark-

rimmed glasses gave her a sophisticated look. A billboard advertising the fact she was smart and good looking. A ringless finger no doubt added to her allure.

Now Russell stood. Once there, the men exchanged handshakes. One step behind, Coleen gave Megan a smile. “Hey there!”

“Hey,” she said in return, lunging at Rick and a hug from him.

“If you guys been any later, we might a forgotten ‘bout you,” Olivia joked, drawing a small laugh from Coleen.

Hearing neither, Megan savored Rick’s embrace. A warm sensation in her chest met the cold beer in her stomach. The mesh sent a tingling vibe down into her hips. A sensation she indented prolonging without the appearance of desperation. Done, she stepped back, keeping an arm around his waist. Coleen got a passing glance. “How did your week end up?” she asked.

The question not directed at her, Coleen let out a sigh anyway. Her eyes rolled. “I’ll let Rick fill you in.”

“The Jamison account,” he chimed. Megan hung onto every word. Her eyes drank up his face set above broad shoulders and eyes still full of life after a long day.

They all worked at the same firm. One of the many relocated establishments taking advantage of new developments, tax incentives and modern housing

popping up in the downtown area. Rick was an up-and-coming money manager and a few years older. She an entry-level accountant at her first full-time job after college. Regardless of their lot at work, they saw a lot of each other. Or she made sure of it.

Russell took in the exchange without a word. His job was done, ensuring he held ready chairs for this Rick and his girl. “Hey, I need to talk some shop of my own with some others,” he said, leaning over and retrieving his drink. “You guys can have my seat. I’ll be gone a while.”

“You sure?” Coleen asked.

“Yeah, yeah, go ahead.”

“Thanks, Russ,” Rick said. He and Coleen situated themselves, exchanging greetings with others. Russell grabbed his coat. Megan cast him a smile. He shot back a wink, then headed away.

He gravitated towards the bar. The voices of those left behind catching up on workplace revelations faded, drowned by the other conversations radiating around him. He had little interest in such financial dealings, even if he intended staying there.

He glanced up and down the bar. His eyes then fixed on an empty seat. During happy hour? Better yet, one next to the server station. Most of the time, regulars filled these. An undeclared caste system existed among those frequenting The Pub. They sat

near the end where the servers and bartenders came and went with their orders, or the kitchen staff came out to escape their duties. The more of a regular one was, or perceived to be, the more often one found them in such a position. If a patron of less stature took these, regulars waited until the commoner left, then claimed their place of honor. An honor gained through the copious consumption of beer and alcohol and time spent at The Pub.

He focused on the young woman standing adjacent, her back towards him. It was Renee. Her full, straight, light brown hair stopped a couple of inches above her shoulders. A short, tight tee shirt revealed her lower back. Low-rise jeans showed off every sublime contour nature gave her. His eyes stopped on her rear, where the denim wore a tad whiter, forming around the bottom half of each cheek. For a few blissful moments, he took in the unspoiled sight. The hint of shame this produced within didn't stop him from admiring what he saw. Hell. Who wouldn't. Exhibiting some self-control, he made no immediate dash towards her or the empty seat. The two drinks already in him helped keep his heart and emotions in check. He ambled up as she positioned a serving tray for a drink order. "Hey, Renee."

Turning, she greeted him with a mile-wide grin. "Hey you," she spouted. "Megan sent you for refills."

“Ah... no.” He took in her radiant smile and perfect teeth. The little makeup she wore suited him just fine. Too much lipstick and too much blush weren’t to his liking on any woman. Once, by chance, he came to The Pub and saw her there just hanging around on her day off. Wearing what appeared to be no makeup on at all, she looked even better. “Wanted to belly up here for a while.” He swiveled away. “This taken?”

A middle-aged man sat next to the empty barstool, a good amount of girth protruding from his paunch. He waved towards the front door. “Nah. He had a take off.”

“Thanks.” Again, the coat marked his territory. He then sat.

“You still good on that drink, Russ?” the bartender asked.

“I’ll take another, Bill. This one’s getting low.”

William and his wife owned The Pub. Older than most of his patrons, he possessed a full head of salt and pepper hair. A stocky frame gave the impression he was a bit overweight. As a few unruly customers discovered, plenty of muscle and the will to use it lay beneath.

Back to Renee, staring her straight in the eyes. “Let me guess?” he said. “You’re busier than a one-legged waitress during Oktoberfest.”

She let out a sigh, letting her hips and shoulders collapse along with her lips. “Hell yeah. But...” Her face tilted back to life. “Glad to see you’re being funny, instead of asking an obvious, dumbass question like ‘Busy night?’” She went behind him, placed both hands on his shoulders, putting all but her full weight onto them. “Least you realize we get busy here. Mind if I lean on you and rest my feet for a bit?”

Objecting never crossed his mind. A soft, gentle voice answered. “Of course you can.”

Her warm breath hit the back of his neck. The essence of some unknown body spray mingled with her perfume. Each soaked his senses as the warmth of her hands sent an ever so pleasing sensation throughout his body. Placing a hand upon her own, he gave it a gentle pat, about as intimate he could get with her at work. A few blissful moments ticked by.

“Got some strong shoulders myself.”

Renee and he glanced over at the man adjacent. His broad smile a sign he had nothing better to do but eyeball them the whole time. Renee didn’t loosen her grip. She grinned and leaned in. A gentle whisper into his ear. “Scuse a me a moment.” She moved to the man and put her arms around him from behind. “For you I have a great big hug!”

A gruff laugh and pat on her clasped hands. “You know how to make a fella feel good!”

Annoyed, Russell said nothing. Tempering his displeasure was the fact Renee was friendly towards everyone. Yet another endearing trait, if not one evoking jealousy. The embrace didn't last long.

"Hey, Renee." Another male voice boomed from behind. Appearing at the bar, Russell recognized the thin man, but didn't know his name.

"Sup?" she responded, leaning an arm upon the shoulder of the older man, propping herself up.

"You talked to Jason?"

"Nope. Hoping to see him here tonight. Why?"

"Wanted me to call him. Now the prick won't answer. His last text said somethin' bout an after-hours party. And on top of that, said he'd help me fix up my bike this weekend."

Russell stayed silent. He didn't know this guy and wanted kept that way.

"You guys still haven't got that piece of shit up and running yet?" Renee asked.

"Perfection takes time, and it's not that shitty," the man answered. He gave Russell a look and mouthed a simple 'Hey.' Russell nodded and let out a slight 'Hey' as well. The typical guy greeting between two men who didn't know each other.

The young man went back to Renee. "Well, if I don't see him tonight, tell him I better see him tomorrow and be like... ready to work."

“I’ll be sure not to wear him out tonight.” Russell noticed the seductive wink she gave as he drifted away. A sullen knife into his chest followed. Hoisting a refilled drink, the alcohol would keep his mind off her planned activities with Jason later on.

“Renee,” Bill bellowed from behind the bar. “Tray’s ready.”

She trudged back to the station, running her hand along Russell’s back, giving his shoulder a pat. He then caught the wide grin of the man sitting next to him, his eyes fixed on Renee. A crusty voice held his opinion. “She’s quite a gal. I’ll ‘member that hug all night!”

Russell cocked a smile and went back to his drink. Not a word in response. It might result in a conversation. The thought this old man might be thinking of ‘that hug’ while bathing unnerved him.

Back at the table, the group enjoyed their second or third round of drinks. Megan worked on another pint of her favorite beer: an amber colored ale brewed right here downtown. One of the many microbreweries popping up in the area nearer their customers. They too converting abandoned buildings into alcohol factories. Rick went on about the Jamison saga consuming the office. Done, he turned to her, placing an arm over the back of her chair. She leaned back, resting upon his limb.

“And I want to thank you too, Megan,” he said. “Those analyses you worked on really helped us out.”

The words of gratitude punctuated the brilliant expression radiating from his face. Megan soaked it up, along with the warmth pouring from his arm. She smiled back, staring deep into his eyes. Those mesmerizing eyes. “I’m... always there to help!”

“I’m glad you are. Aren’t we, honey?” Rick spun around, leaning back, so both women saw the other.

“Yes. You’re such a great little helper,” Coleen said.

Megan shot her a stare. Her cocked smile kept other thoughts at bay. “Thanks,” she muttered.

Why you... *Little helper!* How demeaning. Perhaps she didn’t really mean to sound so insulting. Besides, the compliment from Rick more than compensated for any slight. Unintended or otherwise.

Coleen went on, addressing everyone. “You all’ve been a great help. Wish you all could come to Florida with me and Rick next week.”

Megan froze. Words of surprise sprang from Olivia and Martin, he adding a ‘Can I come too?’ plea. She straightened up, tightening her grip around the glass. A small, lead weight formed in her stomach. Growing as the revelation set in, the only word she could muster stumbled out from behind a fractured smile. “What?”

Coleen's hand found its way to Rick's leg. She continued. "The firm's graciously allowed us some time off, and Rick here told me he's never been. *Soooo*.... I thought it best make the upcoming three-day weekend into a four-day vaykay."

"Yes ma'am!" he said, turning from Megan, putting his other arm around Coleen. "A six-hour layover in Orlando doesn't count as a Florida vacation. And she's told me so much about it..."

Mired in a restless quiet, Megan sat without a word. She listened as they talked about sandy beaches. About clear skies. Looking forward to sipping strawberry daiquiris with way too much rum in them. All next to a sun-warmed pool. Taking in an extra-long drink, she glimpsed Coleen's hand caressing Rick's leg. His hand crept towards hers, clasping as they met.

"Oh... and I am like, so unprepared. We must get to the mall this weekend. There are about a dozen things we'll need," Coleen concluded.

"Okay, honey." Rick shifted back to Megan. "Hey. Why don't you join us? Then we all can have lunch at that one place there. What's it called—"

"Great idea, Rick. And Megan can help me pick out a new bikini."

The sincere, unexpected request sent a shock through Megan. More so than the news about the trip. Another long drink. The beer and request went

begrudgingly down her throat. Done, the unanticipated reflex gave her time to think of an answer.

“Well? I...” A pause to catch her breath. “Would have to check to see if I am free.” An exalted form of female bonding, shopping for beachwear with Coleen wasn’t high on her list.

“Come on, Megs,” Rick pleaded, using her pet name. “I need help too. Besides Coleen here, you’re the only other person whose fashion judgment I trust.”

“So, you didn’t like the tie the office got for you last Christmas?” Olivia asked.

“Have you seen me wear it?”

Everyone laughed, Megan more for show than joining the levity of the moment. “You know,” she then cut in. “There are a lot of things to do around town. Maybe a day trip?”

“Wouldn’t beat a beach!” Martin shouted out.

Rick let out a laugh. “Oh Megs. I’m sure you and this city will survive without me—”

“Without us!” Coleen added. His arm tightened around her. He then delivered a peck on her cheek.

Megan sat numb, mind fumbling for an appropriate response. Or an additional excuse. Looking away, Renee appeared.

“Hey, can I get you guys anyth—”

“Yes!” Megan spouted. “I’ll take one more.”

“A... honey,” Coleen quipped in a low tone, glancing at her watch, then at Rick.

“Oh. Yes.” To Renee. “No more for us. Thanks. Just the check.”

Megan said nothing. Maybe they’ll leave without a response to his request.

“So, are we on for shopping?” he asked.

No such luck. Her mouth opened. Pausing, thoughts flashed by. “Well?” Enough courage to lie came through. “Tell you what. Ah... call me when you know when you are going and I’ll let you know. I just remembered Russell said something about the Farmers Market this weekend, and ... ah.... just can’t remember if I told him I would tag along!” Maybe her painted smile would cap off the ruse.

“Okay.” Rick grinned, unaware of the politely phrased deception.

Russell felt pretty damn good. And it wasn't the alcohol alone. The man sitting next to him left without attempting conversation. Renee, in her brief moments of rest, would say something nice. Give him a smile or a gentle pat on the shoulder as she passed by. Other than that, he remained quiet, mindful of the fact while he enjoyed happy hour she was at work. Their brief words and interactions made it a great evening.

Sipping his fourth bourbon and cola, he glanced around people watching.

“Hey Russ.” Megan sat herself next to him.

“Megan...” Startled, he turned. Their once crowded table now occupied with strangers before the seats grew cold. He swiveled back. “Early night for the group?”

“Not early enough.” Megan took down the last from her glass in one pull.

Her tone and gulping answered the question. He asked anyway. “We okay?”

She wiped her mouth. “Yeah. But I might have overdone it a bit. This is my third.” Sitting there, she held a glass and a smile. Both empty. He drew a breath, but she spoke first, staring into the glass. “They’re going to Florida next week.”

“Rick and Coleen.” A statement more than a question.

She rendered a half-felt nod. No sadness punctuated her face. Only a grim, twisted mouth accompanied her heavy eyes focused on nothing.

“Going on vacation... together... a big step for Rick. He’s never done with the others he dated... you know,” she added.

Not that you’re keeping track. He kept the observation to himself.

She gave him a spurring glance. “I’m sure they’ll have a good time. I mean... I’m sure.” A chuckle, then stare off into the distance. “Coleen asked for help picking out a bikini for the trip. Bet she’s quite the sight strutting down the beach...”

She lurched into silence with sullen eyes. Megan wasn’t unattractive. From time to time, she had a fair share of men desiring her attention. Among other things. He wasn’t blind. Her full cheeks and brown eyes gave her oval face a simple charm. Maybe, like so many others, she felt overwhelmed and outgunned. More so in a world where the standard of female attractiveness appeared to be size zero or less. Whatever the hell size zero means.

“I’m sure too.” Time to go. A wave of his hand caught Bill’s attention. “Hey. Gonna tab out.”

Bill nodded. “How ‘bout you Megan?”

Megan shuffled in the seat, staring into the empty glass. Renee strode up, empty serving tray in hand, eyeing them both. “You guys aren’t leaving me are you? Who’ll keep me company?”

Russell tuned. The angelic glow he so loved radiated from her face. Her warm touch and conversation drowned out her planned activities with Jason. The urge for more reared up. Looking at Megan, he relented. “Long week. And there’s always the rest of the weekend!”

Buzzed, Megan had put two and two together. “No Russ. Stay. Someone has to keep this girl out of trouble.”

Renee and he let out a small laugh.

“Nah,” Russell said. “Renee’s a big girl. She can handle herself.”

“You bet Russ. You and Meg take it easy ‘til we see you again. Kay?” She watched as Renee gave him a pat on the shoulder then returned to her section.

Drifting out and away from The Pub, neither spoke. Meandering down the sidewalk, Megan tussled through the haze in her head.

One brought on by the more than usual amount of beer that evening. Through the alcoholic fog, she saw Rick and Coleen strolling down a beach at sunset, hand in hand. What a wonderful thing to do. So romantic...

“Can I ask you something?” She looked up at Russell.

“You may,” he answered with a thin smile.

Hesitant, the extra beer pushed the question out. “You’re... you’re crushing on Renee, right?”

He came to a dead stop. She did the same. For a moment, his smile grew bigger. He then let out a short laugh, staring back as though waiting for one from her. None came. “Me?” He looked away. “Nah. I mean... why’d you ask?”

A shrug. “Just... you know... dealing with... you seem to want her attention.”

His evasive answer whirled around her. “Doesn’t mean I’m... well, she’s a really nice person to talk to... like you! And I’m sure a lot of guys got a crush on her. I mean... look at her.” Turning back towards The Pub, he stared at the building. He then spoke as though Renee were in plain sight through the solid walls. “It’s not hard to see why they would. I mean... you know... she has that just so smile. Always nice. Friendly with everyone. Perfect face. And great...”

“Body!” Megan finished, punctuating the jab with a slight chuckle.

He swung back. “Wasn’t gonna say that!” Shamefaced, he looked away.

“She does.” Looking back, as if also possessing a supernatural ability to see through solid objects, Renee had everything she herself didn’t. The comparison rambled through her mind’s eye: She didn’t have to deal with a petite five-foot four figure. Flat, all but straight hair requiring countless products, time, and effort to make fuller. Hips that were a bit big. That slight bulge on her stomach. Bit of extra flesh below her chin. Not like Coleen, strutting down the beach in some skimpy bikini with Rick hand in hand—

“I’d show off my mid-section more too if I looked like that...” Her voice faded off into the night. She

shook off such thoughts. Enough self-criticism for one night. Her empty loft awaited. His too. Not the only one going home alone tonight.

No words passed between them, each engrossed in silent contemplation. Pressing the issue was pointless. The right words to describe what she felt defied her. And he was no doubt just as guilty of such a crime.

“You know.” She broke the silence. “Don’t know if I ever thanked you for what you do for me and... well... when it comes to Rick.”

They shared a comforting glance. Megan turned and began the journey to her loft. Russell followed and began his own.

Walking, he whispered. “You don’t have to.”

Megan put her hands in her pockets. “I could... you know... help you the same way. I could put in a few good words for you with Renee, you know, girl to girl—”

“No!” he spat out, as if the thought mortified him. “I mean, I appreciate the offer but... I’m not really looking right now, you know. I want to enjoy myself, you know. Play the field. And... you do know she’s seeing someone right now.”

Better leave it at that. His own beguiling logic spoke for him. He wasn’t dating, seeing or doing anything with another woman, save her, on or off any

type of field. With her love life being no better, what good was she?

“And could you do me a favor?” he asked, nearing the end of the block.

“Sure.”

“Could you keep this between us? I mean... I know you're not gonna post it on the internet, but...”

She said nothing. Yet, a bit of friendly banter was in order with her best male friend. Ease the awkwardness of their close to intimate conversation. “Okay. But if you ever need me to, I'll find out what her favorite color is so... you know... you can buy her some underwear for her birthday or Christmas—”

“Megan,” Russell bellowed. “Come on.”

“You're right. Bet she doesn't wear any.”

“Megan!”

An odd lull descends onto downtown. It comes when the happy hour and dinner crowd finish their revelry. When the party crowds appear and start their own. A casual observer could sit at any street corner and observe the change. Most dramatic and obvious: how the two groups dressed and carried on.

For the happy hour and dinner crowd, their wardrobe reflected one of two types. One remained in their work clothes, or came straight from college classes. Each unwilling to change before heading to the nearest bar. Fearing perhaps the beer and alcohol going stale while they changed or dawdled. Others shed their casual attire for the informal. Cast off reminders of jobs or life they wish to forget.

Regardless, happy hour's all about a few rounds with friends and unwinding. The dinner crowd sought out a small vacation from the norm. To relax and let

others cook the food and clean the dishes. Blending in where groups of friends and families. Couples of all ages sharing a table for two to find intimacy amongst the throng of downtown patrons.

As evening surrendered to the night, casual attire gave way to a more notable style of dress. Some donned simple apparel. Most wore clothing meant to impress not only themselves, but the opposite sex. For men, slacks or well-kept jeans and collared shirts did the trick. Tight shirts attenuating the shape of their upper body graced those possessing a matching physique. One either God given or earned at the gym. The more fashionable preferred a two-piece suit and starched shirt. Women's clothing ranged from pantsuits to the infamous little black dress. Or any other color for that matter. Many of these outfits cast modesty aside. They left little to a testosterone-backed imagination. The skirts covered enough as if conforming to some unwritten rule of legality, if not taste.

Most routes coming into or out of downtown filled with cars as night wore on. The volume reaching a point where bumper-to-bumper traffic became the norm. Some drivers looked for the closest parking spot to their destination. Others cruised the streets and people watched. Then there were those who finished dinner too late to avoid the traffic. All shared the road

with jaywalking pedestrians and a few bicyclists who, taking their lives in their own hands, traveled the same roads.

Jason drove his motorcycle right up to The Pub. Legally, he could park on neither the sidewalk nor the street in front. He did one or the other on many occasions. Like many frequenting downtown at night, he knew no real parking enforcement existed after five pm. And the police patrolling the area had better things to do than write a citation for a motorcycle. Parking, those seated at the tables on the sidewalk gave him a glance. Some annoyed at the added noise, others to catch a glimpse of the newcomer. Stopped, Jason removed his helmet. Identity revealed, and no stranger to the area, some in the crowd greeted him.

An impressive young man, his short, mousse shined hair bounced up despite the snug fit of a safety helmet. His clothes were neither too tight nor too loose. Bracelets adorned each wrist, some denoting concern for various causes, other pure fashion. His slender figure fit with his six-foot frame. The type of man who caught a coveted eye. He also drew scorn as just another on the prowl for a woman to bed. For some, a mixture of both.

Renee finished bussing empty tables. Unloading a tray of empty glasses upon the server station she added to those already there. The crowd thinned out, but it

was a small calm before another potential storm. Tammy approached with the same cargo.

“Time ta take a breather,” she said. Shorter than Renee, she had black hair, a button nose and a round face.

“Me and you both,” Renee agreed.

“How’s your night gone?”

“Typical. Some of my regulars took the edge off.”

“Oh? Did see you chatting it up with that one guy?”

A sarcastic glance. "Can you be more specific?" Tammy grinned, nodding at the chair adjacent the station. “Yeah. Okay." Back to unloading glasses. "You know him?"

Tammy shook her head, placing more empty glasses on the counter. They clanged against others as she shoved them together.

“Seems a tad on the shy side, but that might be considered a plus.” Renee sighed, reaching behind the gaggle of empty, sticky glasses so they didn’t fall off the edge. “Had ta put up with those catty, needy customers way too often!” Tammy chuckled, nodding. “Forgot to ask... how’s the little one doing?”

Tammy leaned back from her now empty tray. “Oh, Caleb’s in his terrible twos. My mother warned me.”

Renee let out a laugh. “I’m sure I was a uncontrollable hellion at that age too.”

“Yeah, but he lets me have some me time at night... at least when I don’t have ta work!”

“Speaking of you time,” Renee said, helping Bill remove used glasses from the counter. “How is it going with Danny?”

“Oh, he’s great. But... we only hung out a few times, then went out that once. And... Well... no clicking, ya know.”

“Oh.” A hint of sadness. She’d introduced the two. “Sorry it didn’t work out.”

“And what about you and Jason?” Tammy asked.

Renee caught her naughty smile. Despite her rebelling muscles, she lit up her lips. They kept her voice from cracking. “Great. In fact, he’s stopping by tonight.”

“Nice to hear. What’s it been? Two, three months?”

Renee went to helping Bill pick up another load. “Yeah. ‘Bout that.” Six was more like it. Having seen him on several occasions here, oft accompanied by women she assumed were his current girlfriends. She took no notice of him until a chance meeting at a small place called the Blue Room. She there with her roommates and some other friends; him with his own. They exchanged glances, conversation, then phone numbers. Within a couple of weeks, they were an item.

A real, world wide connection everyone knew and talked about. And that fact irked her the most.

Tammy left. Renee let out a sigh, glad the inquisition ended. Before they began dating, Tammy once commented on how, if the chance arose, she wouldn't turn down an hour or so with him. Since seeing him, the subject of her carnal desires never came up again. Good. Wasn't her job to get Tammy laid. And setting her up with that Danny guy didn't do the job. Finished helping Bill, it was back to her section.

More patrons arrived to begin their night, as did Jason. He headed for the back. All the while, he returned salutations to those who knew him. A monotone 'Hey' here and there to the guys. To the ladies, a 'Hi' from behind a sly smile.

Halfway back to the bar, Renee ran smack into him. He was early.

"Hey good looking," she spouted, all but barring his path. With an empty serving tray in one hand, she stepped up and embraced him. A whole head taller, she drove up to his lips. Her quick kiss met no resistance. Done, she leaned back, taking in his clean-shaven, cologne drenched face.

"How we doing?" he asked, his strong voice clear over the sounds of the crowds around them.

“Now that you’re here... looking up!” She peered into his eyes with a fulsome smile. Loosening the embrace, their arms remained around the other. “What’s on the agenda for tonight?”

“Gonna grab some wings, brews. Wait for Jack.”

“Already here. Said a...” Releasing him, she brought the tray to her chest, crossing her arms around it. A hesitant breath, then she spat out the question. “You called him about some party and...” Relaxing, she peeped up. “Helping him with that shitty bike of his. Ha ha!”

“Oh...” He paused. A skittish look covered his face. “Forgot to call him back.”

“If you aren’t really planning anything later, I thought we could get some togetherness time in.” She skirted other issues. Maybe it just slipped his mind. Anyway, best to ask now about his plans. Awaiting an answer, Jason looked around the room. His mouth hung half open. Part of her dreaded what might be the response. Her unconscious grip tightened around the tray.

“I’d like that,” he finally said.

“Great!” The tension gripping her body melted away.

“I see Jack.” Jason glanced at the far end of the bar. “Gonna to catch up on a few things.”

“Okay, babe. I’ll stop by when I can.”

“You do that.”

Another short kiss, then they parted. Renee half-pranced back to the bar. The weight lifted, life returned to her face. She even allowed herself a scintillating smile.

Jason weaved over to Jack who stood more than sat at the bar. Upon meeting, they shook hands and gave each other a bump with their shoulders. A typical bro hug shunning any appearance of intimacy.

“So, dude, what’s up?” Jack asked. A skinny man with light brown hair, he possessed nothing as wardrobe save concert tee shirts and loose fitting jeans. Jason answered the greeting by putting his arms around Jack’s shoulders. The crushing squeeze was one of anger, not affection.

Jason’s stern voice was as unapologetic as the embrace. “Not me going to that party, dickhead!”

“The hell!” Jack shouted back, all but casting Jason away.

“Next time I give you some info, keep it to yourself. That includes my girlfriend.” He leaned over the bar and flipped through a menu. “Since she already knows there’s no sense going.”

“Sorry bro. It’s not like you shot me a need-ta-know list.”

“Besides, she’s already on me about our lack of togetherness time.”

“To–what–ness time?”

A harsh glare. “Try not to be a dumbass.” Back to the menu. “Don’t be like her. Just call it sex and get it over with.”

He went about ordering a plate of hot wings and a can of imported English beer he took a liking to. Jack asked for a refill. Engaging in small talk, the crowd around them increased. As the Pup filled, casual conversation became more difficult. Friends greeted them as they roamed around, looking for seats. Renee stopped by now and then to say a few words and give Jason a peck on the cheek. Halfway through his plate of wings and second beer, Jack brought up the subject.

“So... what’s the deal between you two?” he asked, leaning in. Behind the bar, an unknown worker washed glasses a few feet away. The sloshing and clinking sound rambled around them.

Jason finished a particularly spicy wing before answering. “Why do you care?”

“Just askin’. It’s not like you have been looking to spend time with her at parties.”

He reeled over, noting Jack’s sarcastic tone. “Sounds like you’re not interested.” Returning the sarcasm, he went back to the wings. “And don’t even tell me you wouldn’t hook up with her if God gave you a chance. All I can say is that I have an itch I need to scratch.”

“Yeah. I saw that hottie itch you almost scratched last week when we went to the south side—”

A sauce-covered finger and steely glare stopped him mid-sentence. “That info is on the need to know list.” Back to the wings. “Don’t get me wrong, dude. Renee’s great, but...”

“But...”

“Let me say that I might be needing some... I don’t know... something more. Hard to explain.” Hunched over the bar, he started in on the final three wings.

“Why don’t you just, like... break up with her,” Jack stated more than asked.

He thought of an answer. “It’s heading that way. But... has to be the right time. Breakups can get... ugly. Gotta be the right time. So that’s why I want a wait... you know... for the right time and place.” She was a good girl. He knew that. Hard not to say so. But some of her vanilla habits got to him: working a lot, begging him to slow down when on the bike, homebody a bit too often. “No sense making it harder than it might get.”

Looking up, he saw Jack staring off into the crowd. Following his eyes, he saw her as well.

She stood a tad shy of six foot. Her oval face contrasted with her ever so square jaw. Ruby red lips and black eyeliner blended with perfection onto it. Jet-black hair flowed and disappeared down her back. Skin

tight, snow–white jeans and black bustier covered by a white denim jacket encased a more than modest chest. Like many, Jason couldn't take his eyes off her. The unknown Venus fixed her eyes upon him. Various greetings from those she passed by went unheeded. Heading towards the back room, she pivoted and approached. Nearing, she glanced at his drink.

“What's that you're drinking?” Her inquiry came with a smile.

Caught off guard, he straightened up and wiped his mouth. “It's from England. I tried it a couple a months ago and I can't seem to get enough.” He now saw the knee–high black boots with three–inch heels worn over the jeans.

With a cramped laugh, she stuck out a hand. The other held a mixed drink. “I'm Jamie.”

“Jason,” he said with a smile and handshake.

“And I'm Jack!” His hand shot out. Returning the greeting, she remained fixed upon Jason. Once the light handshake ended, she pivoted around.

“Oh, Dee. He's drinking English beer,” she bellowed.

Jason sized up the man standing behind her. Shorter than her, he appeared older, but as well dressed as she. He eyed Jason's can.

“No doubt a man of taste.” An extended hand. “I'm Dwight. I see you have met Jamie already.” The men

exchanged greetings, then back to Jamie. "I'll catch up with you in a bit, Jay. Need to make my rounds." A trifling wave and he disappeared into the thickening crowd. Another attractive lady dressed for the evening followed him.

Jason went back to Jamie. She took a drink. Holding the thin straw with one hand, she drew out the clear drink with meticulous speed. Eyes fixed her eyes upon his. Puckering lips around the straw punctuated the allure.

She licked the cold from her lips. "So, how does one take a liking to English beer and..." Her gaze drifted to the empty plate piled with deboned chicken.

"Hot wings," he answered. Jamie sat her glass next to them as he scanned the area. Through the crowd, he saw Renee busy in her section. Back to Jamie. "As far as the beer, another friend of mine introduced me and got me hooked."

"You know a good thing when you see it."

"I do," Jason said, turning on the charm. "So, what are your plans for the evening? You seem a bit overdressed for this place."

Jamie stuck to his eyes. "No such thing as overdressing. But me and Dee —and his friend Amy— are going to visit a few clubs. This is just our first stop. You guys?"

“Got us an after hours party to go to,” Jack spouted, not wanting to be left out.

“Yeah.” Jason held back his annoyance. “It’s on the south side of downtown here. A guy we know who lives at the Bellows Lofts. But... we might hit a few places ourselves beforehand.”

“I know the place. We may have to crash it.”

“I could tell you which—”

“No need,” she cut him off. “I’m sure it won’t be hard to find.”

“Is that dude like... your boyfriend, or something?” Jack asked with little tact. Jason struggled not to show his continued annoyance at his socially challenged friend.

“No. We share a loft. It’s complicated.” Although answering Jack, she remained fixed on him. Her seductive stare didn’t go unnoticed.

“Where are you guys heading first?” Jason inquired. He felt an itch coming.

“Not sure. Me and Dee are never ones to plan too far ahead. You never know who you might meet and... cause plans to change.”

“Oh, I know the feeling. You never know who you may run into downtown.” Jason cast her smile as she took another sip through the narrow straw, complete with puckering and licking. “I often bar hop a bit. There’s this one place—”

Dwight reappeared, placing his hand on Jamie's shoulder. Pulling her down, he whispered into her ear. Jason couldn't make out what he said, but it had her full attention. The unknown conversation lasted only a few moments. She nodded and straightened back up.

"Hate to flirt and run, but got to go boys." She looked Jason straight in the eyes. "Hope to see you out and about tonight." She winked, turned and walked away.

Jason took a small step towards her. "Where are—" He stopped. In the crowd beyond, he glimpsed Renee passing by. Jamie turned and gave him one more look as she sashayed towards the door behind Dwight and his friend.

"Dude. I'd love to hook up with that," Jack stated, displaying no originality.

Jason said nothing. Jack had little chance with such a woman. Shaking his head, he felt a sudden grasp around him from behind. His head whipped around. Renee's face sent a wave of fear through him. Wide eyed, he froze.

"Hey! Guess what?" she said with beaming white teeth. "I can go early. Bill's being nice to me tonight."

Jason relaxed. She was oblivious to his peccadilloes. Breathing a sigh of relief, he grinned. "What do you have in mind?"

“Well, we can hit the Blue Room, then O’Kelly’s, then... my loft?” Her seductive look spoke volumes. “How does all that sound?”

“And if Chloe’s there?”

Renee shook her head. “She’s gone and we’re still short a third.”

“Sounds like a plan then,” Jason responded. From how her face lit up, his feigned enthusiasm worked.

O’Kelly’s booted them out at closing time. A slow, lumbering walk through the dark night and thinning downtown crowd followed. This allowed time for the potent effects of the various shots consumed that night to wear off. They arrived at her loft right after two that morning. Once home, they didn’t stay clothed for very long.

The bleary sounds of a cell phone woke Jason up. Renee and he still lay in bed. Both lay bare under a light blue sheet. His mind made a reluctant climb out of a sound sleep as the ringing droned on. He didn’t rise, but groped the top of the small table next to him, seeking out the phone. Finding it, he glanced at the caller ID. It was Jack on his third attempt at calling. What a shock. The first instinct was to ignore him, but he’d keep calling. Leaving a voice message appeared too advanced a concept for him to grasp. Groggy eyes

sought the talk button. He then mustered enough strength to answer the unwelcome wake up call.

“Dude, this better be good.” He sounded as though suffering from a chest cold.

“Thank God! Been tryin’ to call ya all morning,” Jack’s voice rang over the phone.

The high-pitched voice made him wince, adding to the ache surrounding his head. Jason lifted his enough to see the electronic clock on the table. Eleven o’clock. He rolled back onto the pillow. Unenthusiastic about his promise to Jack and motorcycle repairs, he sought an excuse. Still feeling the effects of all the shots last night, his mind and body didn’t want to rise for a few more hours. “I... I overslept. Might have to—”

“I ran into that Jamie chick last night!” Jack stated. His voice rang with excitement, but the volume subdued.

“The hell you talking about?” Jason asked, sure his soon to be ex friend was pulling a fast one to get him over. He ran a hand through his hair to mitigate the headache as Jack went on.

“She showed up at that party at the Bellows Loft, right...”

“Yeah.”

Comes right up to me and like... starts asking me about our evenin’ like you were there too.”

“Yeah.”

“I told her you...”

“I what?”

“You... a... you had some stuff to do cause you’d be helping me today fix my bike. I didn’t say anythin’ about... a... you know...”

Jason turned. Renee lay lifeless, still asleep, her shirtless back exposed. He turned back around. He kept his voice soft. “Go on.”

Jack continued. “She’d come in with some other dude, not that one we saw... a... what’s that guy’s name... Dan or somethin’, right? Anyway... I start talkin’ ‘bout my bike, then I told her about your bike and like she got real interested... told me about how she never had one... a motorcycle I mean.”

“Yeah. Figured that. And?”

“All the time this dude she was with was gettin’ pissed... I think. Acted like he didn’t want to be there or her talkin’ to me. So Jamie says excuse me for a moment, I’ll be back. She did, and we talked. I could tell all the other dudes were gettin’ jealous because I’m there talkin’ with a hot chick and—”

“Yeah, you’re so awesome. And?” He made no attempt to hide sarcasm.

“But, dude, she was askin’ more about you... so I told her you’d be here.”

Jason drew in a breath. “Dude. I swear. If this is some dicked up way to get me over—”

“Hello sleepy head.” Jamie’s stern voice shot from the phone. With a burst of energy defining his actual feelings, he sat up, placing both feet on the floor. “Burning daylight here.” She continued as he gave Renee a quick look. The sudden reflex may have woken her. It didn’t. “And if you could, pick up some of that English beer on your way over. Me and Jack here are getting thirsty.”

He awaited further words, but only an odd silence came through. Then Jack’s dismayed voice. “Dude, you still there?”

Jason turned back around. “Yeah... yeah—” Renee began stirring. Turning, she rolled onto her back. “Hey listen. Sorry I overslept, dude. Ah... gimme about an hour... okay? And make sure everything is there when I get there. Got it?”

“Yeah... will do—” A scuffling sound came through.

“And peppermint schnapps too. Not a big bottle, just a pint will do. It’s still early,” Jamie commanded.

Jason sat for a moment, processing what happened, hearing silence from the phone once more. Looking at it, the call had ended.

Renee slid towards him. Rolling onto her stomach, she placed one arm around his waist. Near as groggy as Jason minutes before, she noticed what he was doing, if not exactly what he said. “Who’s calling so

early?" she asked in a low, sputtering voice, mouth half buried into a pillow.

"It was Jack Ass, of course. And it's not so early anymore."

She let out a slight sigh, her mind and body begging for more sleep. The thud of Jason's phone hitting the table bounded across the bed. "Told him I'd help him, and it's already eleven."

Her head shot up. She rolled onto her back. "Eleven? We did have quite a night." She beamed a smile at him, the afterglow of their carnal endeavors still hugging her body. "Call him back and tell him you're not coming."

"Babe, I promised," Jason said.

A frown grew on her face. Next, her hand ran along his bare back. "Oh, babe. Call him back and tell him you're busy... that something... came up... again." A suggestive smile might entice him.

He leaned over and gave her a kiss. Wrapping her arms around him, she wanted to prolong the lip lock. He moved away after a moment, she still clinging to him. "I promised, babe. Us guys need our bro time." He got up and began a search for his boxer shorts. They sat near the door next to her bra.

Renee fell back onto the bed. The upper half of her stripped body exposed, she was unable to put up much of a struggle, given the effects of all the beer and shots

the night before. The extra liquor and lack of a good night's sleep denied the mind clarity and body energy. She cleared her throat. "Yeah, I... I 'member you all talking about that." The thought of asking to tag along came and went. Fatigue and simmering headache combined to say no.

She watched him put on shorts. With a body rebelling against her, she decided to get up. Dragging herself to the small closet next to bed, she retrieved an oversized tee shirt from off the top shelf. The extra-large, clean white shirt covered her body save the legs. Next, she shuffled to the dresser next to Jason, seeking a hair tie. He rummaged through the overnight bag he kept there.

"I'll make some coffee. You'd like that?" She twisted an elastic tie on her hair.

"Sure, babe," he responded without looking.

"Maybe some breakfast?"

He turned towards her. "Just the java for now. Gonna use the shower." He gave her cheek a gentle caress then left.

Her eyes followed him as he headed for the bathroom. She then left herself. A sumptuous feeling seeped its way through the hangover as she prepared coffee in the small kitchen. The flutter in her stomach mingled with other sensations still fresh in her mind. So too her tingeing body. Things were starting to look

up. There was no lack of physical passion between them, she mused with a smile. Last night's activities and benign pang in just the right place contested to that. Some time with his friends ought to let him know she didn't have him on a leash. She convinced herself that's normal for any relationship. Wasn't it?

Hanging over the tub, Jason let the running water reach the desired temperature. He wondered if a pint of schnapps would be enough. He smiled, burning daylight. It was going to be a long day. Play his cards right. It might be a long night too.

Back in Jack's ramshackle garage, Jamie handed the phone back to him. His attempt at a stealthy conversation fell well short of secret agent standards. She heard every word said to Jason. Gliding over to a beat up refrigerator standing next to a tool-covered workbench, she gave the near assembled motorcycle in the middle of the room a passing glance.

Standing speechless, Jack looked at the phone. "Should I call him back? Make for sure he's comin'?" he asked.

"Nope. He'll be here," she said, opening the fridge door. Without looking, she felt Jack's eyes undressing her. Light blue shorts covering only her hips exposed the entirety of her flawless legs. A low cut camisole showed off her assets. They weren't meant for him.

“Three things, Jack,” she said, leaning in, getting a look at what little the fridge contained. A small lesson was in order.

“Yeah?” he inquired.

“One— If you want the company of attractive women, you should know how to act around them. Two— If you spent as much time looking at my face as you do my ass, you might notice I have blue eyes.” A peek over the door. His eyes fixed upon her hips, she continued. “Us girls do like that compliment, you know.”

His gaze shot off her rear end. “Ah... And three?”

She straightened up. “You have any ice?”

Monday morning began as usual. Most returned to the task of making a living. Among them were those who kept the downtown area clean and tidy, and Monday mornings were busy. Most experiencing the area didn't leave their trash behind. Nor find it necessary to deface something for no good reason. Yet, a handful did. This kept busy those cleaning up their mess. If one confronted such persons, asking if they acted like that in their own homes, the sad answer would be yes.

Oblivious to all this were those coming to and from work. Their concern a safe commute and a desire for the day to be over already. No different from the two hundred others working at the firm, Megan had similar longings. The big difference- her commute consisted of walking. Casual attire stayed home, replaced by a

professional look. Her white, long sleeve blouse and knee-length gray skirt reflected this. Gray pumps complemented the comfortable outfit. She didn't engage in the fashion show occupying the time of so many other women –and some men she would admit if pressed– at the firm. On occasion, she donned a much shorter skirt or revealing top, but not today. There were no scheduled meetings with Richard present.

The desk comprising her workstation sat in an oversized cubical. Two other overworked and underpaid entry-level accountants shared the standard office home. Brandon, Molly and she worked on various accounts the firm managed. Like many entering the workforce, they hoped to move up the corporate ladder. After working ten-hours a day earning thirty grand a year, they too may one day make a hundred thousand working eighteen-hour days.

Mid-morning arrived before the trio engaged in something other than work. Checking email, following up on loose ends and receiving new tasks from on high consumed the morning. Nearing eleven, Brandon strode back into their cubicle with his daily ration of coffee and donuts.

“Break time folks,” he announced, sitting back at his minimalist desk. Megan turned and nodded in agreement. Molly's attention remained fixed upon her

computer. “By the way, how was everyone’s weekend?”

“Typical. Didn’t do much. Checked out the Farmer’s Market they have here downtown on Saturday mornings,” Megan answered.

She asked Russell to join her, easing the guilt about lying to Richard the night before. The trip to the market and lunch at the Sub Hub keep her occupied. It also avoided accepting the shopping invitation.

“Didn’t know there was a Farmer’s Market here,” Brandon said.

Neither did Russell. His listless demeanor the whole time spoke to his disinterest in organic produce. As penance for dragging him there, she paid for his lunch.

“Oh, by the way, I saw Danielle in the break room. Think she’s heading this way.” Brandon warned.

This caught Molly’s attention. Her shuffling announced a readiness for a sudden departure if needed. No sooner had Brandon sounded the alarm when Danielle appeared. She wore a beaming facial expression verging on the mischievous. It reminded Megan of the Cheshire Cat. One of several office busybodies. She appeared to have no function other than to roam from place to place and dispense gossip. That or give advice to those whose problems she happened to overhear. Mostly harmless. More

tolerated than loathed. At least she sat a few steps higher on the buttinsky ladder than those at the bottom. Those with sadistic glee who not only enjoyed seeing the misery of other people's problems. They perpetuated them as well.

"Hello all," Danielle said. The trio of financial analysts rendered short, monosyllable greetings, hoping she would pass by. Their effort failed. Danielle entered the cubical and sat on the edge of Megan's desk, getting comfortable. Megan decided to be nice. Not so much because of her nature. She had no choice. Danielle cut off her escape route.

"And how was your weekend?" Megan asked. Molly stood, smiled at Danielle, and fled without a word.

"Wonderful. Harry and I took a day trip down to that vineyard south of town," Danielle stated with obvious joy. She crossed her arms. "Not like a trip to Florida, I suspect. But I hear our office love birds will be finding out soon."

News travels fast. Megan suspected their trip would be common knowledge by close of business Monday. She and Brandon glanced at each other for a moment as he finished his donut.

Danielle lowered her tone. "You know, I also heard that Coleen's parents live there. Invested in a condo, like many others in God's waiting room."

“Oh. I did not know that,” Megan stated. Her only response to the unconfirmed tip and unflattering nickname for the state of Florida.

“Probably wants to meet before he pops the question,” Danielle added.

Megan shot her a glare, clamping down on a wave of insolence yearning to break out. “Well, you can’t believe everything you hear.”

“I could imagine how he might propose,” Danielle continued, staring into the distance. “The way I wished Harry had done. At sunset, he would get down on one knee, there on the beach...”

Back to the computer. Concentrate. She bit down on the desire to tell the unwanted guest to shut up and leave. Danielle rambled on. How romantic it would be. How he would ask Coleen to marry him. As if she intended advising Rick on how to do so.

“... us ladies could only hope to be so lucky. Don’t you think?” Danielle asked upon finishing her mini romance novel. Megan remained mute, hoping her silence would speak for itself. Danielle continued. “Bout’ time someone snatched him up. But Coleen’s the type of woman who gets what she wants. From what I heard... she made the first move. Didn’t want to see a hunk like Richard go to waste and...” Megan held her tongue. She typed random words onto the financial estimates upon the screen. “... Coleen has

that alpha female personality. Bet she's got a libido that would test the stamina of a man like Richard—”

“Excuse me a moment. I need to visit the printer room.” Megan shot out of the chair. Voice monotone. Stare devoid of emotion. She strode past Danielle, brushing her arm against her own.

Danielle said nothing as Megan stormed away. She turned to Brandon. “Have you tried the new coffee the office is using?” she asked.

Abandoned by his coworkers, he smiled. It's all he could do.

Megan made her way to the floor below. To the room containing a large volume printer and miscellaneous other items associated with office work. Thanking her luck, no one else was there. She needed solitude.

Once inside, away from other eyes, both hands covered her mouth. She commanded herself to breathe. Breath normal. Curse that Danielle. She glided back and forth through the room. What just happened? Her feelings got the best of her. That's what happened. Like at The Pub last Friday. Sitting there, suggesting a way to stop him from going off with Coleen. A day trip. How lame. How childish. Then lying to him. Lying to him! She cursed herself. He might have seen right through that. Then what would he think of her?

Stopping next to the oversized printer, she lowered her hands. Her breath caught up with her slowing heart rate. Thoughts became more coherent. Sheets of paper leaped from the machine. She eyed them. Pages full of colored pie charts and graphs. All intermixed with paragraphs full of business-like words to describe them all. Her head told her to disregard the gossip from the likes of Danielle. Her heart found the words hard to ignore. Certain, undeniable facts crossed her mind. Each rolled out as each new sheet sprang from the printer.

Things were different between Richard and her than with his other girlfriends...

They were acting like a couple on the verge of something more...

What does she have...

Her mind swung to Rick. How she came to feel the way she did. The tortuous path replayed itself. How, but never why. The one thing she could never answer. Why...

A crush. That's how it started. Like the others. Others she had on various men in the course of her young life. Maybe it was that special look about him, one catching the attention of a young woman's heart. The more interaction, the more her heart moved from a girlish wonderment to yearning. More of a burning each time near him. Trips to the coffeehouse near

work, their meetings at The Pub, the dinner party she threw—

A deep breath. What a huge mistake. She had him alone...

What else could— No. Should have done. She dropped the hints. Smile. Look into his eyes. Compliment him. Tell him to call if he needs anything. Anything. She should have been more. More what? Aggressive? Like Coleen. The alpha female. Then it would be her on that beach.

She was being a romantic. That's it. Waiting for him to show up at her loft and profess his desire for her, whereupon they would spend the rest of the night—

“Megs?”

She swung around. Shock rang through her. Her eyes sprung wide. Every muscle in her body tensed up. Holding up the icy lead ball in her gut. “Rick! Hey!” She brushed on a smile. “Didn't see you there.”

He moved toward her. “Came down to get that updated hard copy of the Jamison report. Too many pages for my office printer, so I sent it here. Hope I didn't interfere with anything you're working on?”

“No. No. Of course not.” A step back, she collected her thoughts, soaking him up the whole time. “Ah... I thought all the Jamison stuff was finished?”

Rick thumbed the pages. “You, me and about ten others. Apparently, some loose ends appeared. Nothing major, but enough to take up most of my day.”

“If there is anything... I can do, just... just let me know.”

He paused, then peered into her eyes. “There is, actually. There’re some numbers I need to rerun...” A fluttering sensation reached out from her stomach. It grabbed her heart and added to the randy feeling shooting up her spine. Wide eyed, Richard went on. “...and I can have everything ready by the time Coleen gets back.”

Her eyes fell. “Gets back?”

“Yeah. She’s on the west side of town tying up some things of her own before we take off.”

“Oh.” The trip. She struck back fast. “I can get with Phil to see if I can help you.” Phillip was her immediate supervisor, or overseer, depending on his mood.

Richard gave her a smile. “Tell you what. I’ll call Phil and tell him I need you. After he gives you the go ahead, come on up. I’ll order us lunch and maybe we can all get home at a decent time tonight. Sound like a plan?”

She throttled her response wanting to gush out. “Yeah... yes... I mean.” Her cheery demeanor returned. The thought of alone time with him, even at work, just the tonic she needed. Rick still needed her.

Renee stood in the bathroom in front of the mirror. Almost noon, she finished donning the makeup she intended wearing that day. A double shift day. Although not needed until two, she got everything ready now. There was no sense waiting.

Her roommate Chloe jostled up, still dressed in her usual bedtime attire: skin tight boy shorts and tank top. Monday and Tuesday were her days off, so she began her weekend. Standing a couple of inches taller, her skin gave her a look most men found exotic. She hated the expression. Unsolicited observations from customers came with the job as a cocktail server. She worked at the Blue Room. A club downstairs of a restaurant called Napoli, one specializing in Italian and Mediterranean cuisine.

“Looking *gooooo* girl,” Chloe said, wiping her eye with a tissue.

“Thanks.”

“By the way, there’s another opening for a server at work. If you still want to make some extra cash.”

Renee smiled, putting away her makeup. “Thanks again. But... I’m still not much for uniforms. ‘Specially the ones you got a wear. Don’t think walking around dressed like a Vegas showgirl would work for me. ‘Least you got the figure, girl.”

Chloe let out a chuckle. “Works well for tips. Sure you’d rake them in too.”

Tight shorts barely covering one’s hips and black stockings held no appeal for Renee. Tips or no tips. “Any plans for the day?” she asked.

Chloe tossed the used tissue into the trash. “Catch up on some of my shows on-demand. Veg out for now.” She left and returned to the couch. “Seeing Jason today?” she asked, getting comfortable.

“Ah... maybe later.” Renee answered, looking into the mirror, unsure if that was true. “Said he and Jack were going to hunt down a hard to find part for his piece of shit motorcycle. May have to go out of town. Riding around double with Jack on his bike must a been fun. Freaks me out hanging onto him from behind. Specially when he speeds up.”

She turned to leave, but stopped in the doorway. “By the way, thanks for Friday night. We really needed some alone time. I’ll return the favor if you need me too.”

“No problem. But don’t worry about it. I’m good,” Chloe quipped, fiddling with the cable remote. “If I’m gonna rock some guy’s world I’ll do it at his pad.” She remained transfixed on the television.

"Means this guy’s working out for you then?"

Renee nodded, leaning against the doorsill. “Yeah. We’re not batting a thousand but... things are moving along.”

“You ever run into Patrick guy since you two dated? That was what...”

“About a year or so ago. We went out for what... a month?”

“Sorry that didn’t work girl.” Chloe found the show she was looking for, then sat down the remote and got comfortable.

Renee crossed her arms and stared at the television. “Yeah. Never really asked why. I mean... was more like a mutual agreement it wasn’t working, you know. Not that lengthy heart to heart discussion on why I... we felt that way. He’d always been great, you know. But...”

Chloe didn’t take her eyes off the screen as the opening credits rolled under the scene. “But?”

Renee caressed her arm. “He seemed a bit distant.” Or maybe it was something about her he didn’t like. Being nice by not saying anything. Save her feelings.

She meandered to her bedroom. There she looked at her cell atop her disorganized dresser. No missed calls from anyone, including Jason. She thought about calling him again. Not the first time they hadn’t seen each other for a couple of days. Although not without spending a good amount of time on the phone or

texting –sexting now and then as well– while separated. Besides, don't want to seem needy. He didn't have her on a leash either. She had a life too. Well, somewhat of one.

Shoving the phone into a back pocket on her jeans, she headed out. A distraction from the routine might help get her mind on something else.

“See ya tonight,” she said, heading to the front door.

“Leaving already?” Chloe didn't look away from the television.

“Yeah. Wanna do a couple of things before my double shift.”

“Take care. Make some good tips.” The lack of a third roommate with rent coming up and overtime over the past few weeks was wearing on her.

Renee sighed. The overtime wore on her too. She should have stayed at work Friday night but... “From all the inquiries, the pickings are slim,” she said.

“Yep. Lot a college girls,” Chloe blurted. “Not looking ta turn this place into a dorm. Them fellas down the hall are enough.”

“That reminds me,” Renee spouted, getting her keys ready. “Need to call Whitney to see if she's still interested in moving in. I'll do that today.”

Renee decided on splurging before her shift. Treat herself to lunch, albeit a late and inexpensive one. Her conscience also needed food. She had a sudden taste for Mexican. And no better place downtown for that than Juanita's.

The lunch crowd had pretty much left by the time she entered. It wasn't a large place. Roomy enough to seat about a hundred. Their food was no doubt a local favorite. The lines of people waiting for a table at lunch and dinner contested to the cuisine. Its décor reflected the Spanish roots of the owners. Murals depicting the rural life and landscape of old Mexico covered the walls. The ceiling and doorways made to look as though made of adobe brick. An old fashion, genuine tortilla press mounted to the wall. Unique to the downtown area, and the entire city, was its selection of tequila. Behind the bar, several glass shelves stretched the length of the counter. Every tequila one assumed existed sat thereon. The colors of the liquor derived from the agave plant varied as much as the bottles encasing them.

By now, only a few of the tables remained occupied, and no one at the bar. Renee went there. Sitting, the man behind the bar turned to be of service to his new customer.

“Hey Pat,” Renee said with a smile.

“Hey you! Long time no see.” Surprise reeled from Patrick with his hello. She reached over the counter and gave him a hug best she could. He was a young man of average height with dirty blond hair. The few acne scars dotting his face didn’t diminish his youthful looks.

“How’s The Pub, girl?” he asked. “You’re still there, right? Or am I out of the loop?”

“I’m still there.” A chuckle and a smile. “Not done with school yet, I see?”

“No, but I’ll get my master’s next spring, provided my professors don’t dump on my thesis.”

“Good for you!”

“So, you here to eat, drink, talk, waste time or all the above?”

“All the above, but I’ll start with some ice tea.”

“Chips and salsa, too?”

“Yeah.”

“Mild, medium or hot?”

“I like my salsa hot. Like my men!”

Both laughed. Patrick left to get food and tea. He wasn’t gone long. “That should hold you over for now,” he said. “Be back in a bit.”

Renee smiled as he left to perform some unknown duty. Despite the distraction and conversation, Jason remained on her mind. She sipped some tea, then

pulled out her phone. Still nothing. It went right back into her pocket.

“We still good?” Patrick returned, drying his hands.

Renee welcomed the distraction. She nodded, unable to answer, her mouth now full of food.

“So how’s life?” he asked.

She grinned and swallowed. “Good. Putting in a shitload of hours though. And...” She looked down, scooping up some salsa with a chip. “And I’m seeing someone.”

Patrick leaned in and smiled. “Congrats. I’m glad for you. A good guy I hope.”

She nodded. “Works at his father’s car dealership on the east side.”

“A car salesman? Hope he’s not trying to sell you a lemon.”

Both let out a chuckle. Renee swung her head side to side. “Oh no. He just does various odd jobs and things. Think his father wants him to take over the family business. Met him once during some reception for employees and former customers. Seemed a decent man.”

“A nice BF to have, running his own business and all.”

A hollow feeling came over her. Toying with the salsa, she couldn’t look him in the eye. “Get the feeling

it's just a job to pass the time." She sensed he had no intention of entering the world of management anytime soon.

"Like I said, glad to hear it."

Renee looked up into his eyes. They gleamed with comfort and happiness. He had that same look the last time they met after their brief time as a couple. After their anticlimactic break up. She drew in a breath. "Can I ask you something?"

He straightened up. "Sure. Shoot."

She sat quiet, wondering how to phrase the delicate question.

The chime of the bell above the front door broke through the air. Patrick looked over. "Hey Dwight!"

Renee turned and saw the newcomer.

"Greetings and salutations, Amigo. How are we today, Patrick?" the man said in a cheery tone approaching the bar.

They shook hands. "Good there Dwight. Let me guess— a margarita?"

The many feigned surprise. "Am I that predictable?"

It was Margarita Monday. The phrase lacked originality. But it brought in customers on what is traditionally the slowest day of the week.

"Yes, but you know you like it!" Patrick added.

The two laughed while Patrick turned and made ready a drink. She looked him over, noting his medium build, wavy hair and the beginnings of a receding hairline. His dress was casual but fashionable. He sat two seats away, looking her over as well. He rendered a polite smile at her. She did the same. A few more silent moments passed before Patrick sat a drink in front of him.

“Thank you Patrick. I am certain it will be good.”

“Only the best for you, Dwight.”

Renee looked on as the man took a sip and acted as though it was the best he ever had. “As I suspected. Excellent margarita!” He finished another swallow, then gave her another gaze. “This may sound like a cheesy pickup line, but you do look familiar.”

She smirked. She’d seen him before too, but couldn’t quite place him. “I work at The Pub. And it does sound like a pickup line!”

“Renee, this is Dwight,” Patrick broke in. “He knows how to have fun.”

“The Pub... yes! Jay and I popped in last Friday for a bit.” Dwight took another sip. “And I am sure you’ve heard many a good –and bad– pickup line.”

Chuckling with a mouthful of chips, she tried not recalling ones she could remember. She swallowed. “I take it you’ve used a few?”

Dwight let out a small but melodramatic laugh with a smirk to match. “Too many. In my younger days.” His demeanor shifted. “But I have grown up since then. I have, through years of painful trial and error, discovered the most perfect one.”

Curious, she pressed him. “Oh? And what’s that?”

He got up and approached, extending a hand. “My name is Dwight. What is yours?”

His simplicity impressed her. So too his lack of social fear. She shook his hand. “That is the best I’ve heard.”

“Hey. How’s Jamie?” Patrick cut in.

Dwight released her and turned towards the bar. “Oh... she’s out and about.”

Curiosity again gripped her. “Who’s Jamie?”

“Jay is... how would you say... my good friend and loft mate,” Dwight answered. “She’s taken a sudden interest in motorcycles.”

“You have a motorcycle?” she asked.

“Me? *Nooooo*,” Dwight returned to his seat. “I’d probably get myself killed. The only leather I like feeling cover my car seats. And the only wind I like going through my hair is that generated by air conditioning.” A sip then a shrug. “Of course, if the weather’s right, I will put the top down on the convertible. If the weather’s right.”

Back to her chips. “Motorcycles seem popular these days.” Shoving one in her mouth, she noticed Patrick move towards him.

“Let her know to give me a call, will you?” he asked in a low, almost shy tone.

Dwight took another sip before answering. “I’ll do that, friend.”

She caught a hint of ambivalence in his answer, not to mention an odd look on his face.

Patrick smiled. He turned to leave, stopping next to her. “Oh, sorry. Got some stuff to get ready but... you were gonna ask me something.”

Fixed on his eyes, she drew a breath, painting on a smile. “Oh, nothing. Forgot what I was going to ask anyway. Ha ha!” He left. She scooped up some more salsa. Taking it down, female intuition took over. Probably none of her business, but she decided to ask. “She’s not going to call him, is she?”

Dwight stared into his drink. “I’ll relay the request. Then the ball’s in her court.” His response held no emotion.

“Didn’t know Pat was dating anyone.”

Dwight took down most of the margarita. Staring into the near empty glass, his obscure answer came back. “They never dated, per se. Just two ships that passed in the night.”

“Oh.”

“Jamie is at heart a good person,” Dwight continued. “She’s also the type who enjoys living. Taking in all that this world has to offer. I’m the same way. Most of the time.” A contrite laugh and light-hearted stare straight into her eyes. “I just wish sometimes she wouldn’t leave some people with... how would I put it... unreasonable expectations.”

Despite the urge, especially when it came to Patrick, she kept her curiosity in check. “I see.”

He leaned towards her. “Jamie is an adult, so are her friends. And despite her allure, she’s never made anyone do anything they didn’t want to do.” His head lowered as though ashamed. “Perhaps we encourage each other too much with our hedonist lifestyle.”

“Like you said, she’s an adult.” The same held true of Patrick. And her.

Dwight raised his head. “Oft times people don’t listen to their heads when the heart is talking. And vice versa.”

She turned to her tea. “True.”

“That, of course, is true if the head is doing the actual talking.”

“Men aren’t the only ones who think with their crouch,” she said, relaying her cynical observation. She looked back at him. Dwight displayed a smile, but his eyes showed sorrow.

“Yes,” he said. “We get our just desserts. One way or another. We get ‘em.”

Sitting on the small pleather couch, Megan's eyes refused to move from him. All he did was sit behind his desk, rereading a part of the Jamison report the two worked on all afternoon. Richard's simple, thought filled poise captivated her. His white, starched shirt fit him to a tee, hugging his v-shaped torso. The red power tie added to his air of confidence and strength. Not one strand of hair stood out of place. Each the right length to complement his face. Savoring their lunch, albeit a working one, he sat next to her on the couch. His alluring cologne stood out over the mustard he liked on his sandwich. She relished each nose full. Even now, keeping her mind on work was a constant challenge.

After a few minutes, he sat the papers down and beamed a smile at her. "As always. Couldn't a done it without you."

She drew a breath. She needed one as the compulsion to run over and kiss him thrust up within her. Herculean effort controlled the urge. “Without us!”

They let out a chuckle. He then stood and wandered past towards a small table next to the sofa. There he plopped the report atop of other papers scattered thereon. She eyed him each step of the way.

“Can I ask you something?” he said. “Or should I say... ask for your opinion?”

“If you’re wondering about some of my figures—”

“No. It’s not about work. I wanted to ask while we ate, but wanted to get all this out of the way. It’s more of a...” He rolled his hand. “Personal matter.”

Megan dared not speak as confusion gripped her mind. Her gaping silence drew a blank look from him.

“Ah... sure. Anything, Rick,” she finally spat out. His expressionless face stared back.

He dallied back to the desk and sat on the edge facing her, then crossed his arms. “I need a woman’s opinion. And I know you’ll keep this between us.”

She almost stopped breathing. “You know I will, Rick.” Standing, she took a small step towards him, as though a magnetic bond drew her in.

“I feel a bit embarrassed even asking—”

“You never... ever have to feel that way with me.” Her heart beat faster.

“I know. That’s why I enjoy talking to you.” His eyes peered into hers. “I’ve dated before and I know I should know these things. But I want our time... Coleen and I... on this trip to be the best it can...” The hesitation in his voice rang clear. “As a woman, what would you consider a romantic evening? I mean...” Lowered his head, he acted with the shyness of a teenager. “Something nice. Out of the ordinary. Special.”

What? Speechless, caught off guard, her mouth hung open. She tried closing it, but it weighed a ton. So too the lead weight forming in her stomach. Lifting his head, his needy eyes ached for an answer.

“For you and Coleen?” A useless confirmation of the obvious, but her conscience demanded it.

“Yes.” A confirming smile.

She eyed the floor. The part not wanting to answer spoke first. “Rick... ah... I’m not really an expert or anything—”

“I’m not looking for a professional opinion, Megs. A woman’s gut feeling. You know. I mean... I know it might seem a dumb question—”

“No! No. It’s not.” Her head snapped up, pouring over his eyes, attempting a smile. “But Rick, come on. You’ve had— I mean... dated before. Just like you said.”

“True. But...” He focused on her. “It’s different with Coleen. I want it to be different.”

Transfixed on his begging eyes, he leaned back, awaiting an answer. She couldn’t disappoint him. No. Not even now. No lies this time.

With a mirthless smile and a heavy feeling in her stomach, she stepped back and plunged in.

“Well.” She glanced away. From her sinking heart, the romantic sprang forth. “She’d be waiting for you, dressed in her favorite... little black dress. You’d come to her door, and when she answered... she’d see you there dressed for the evening...” Compelled to gaze upon his face, she turned back. “You’d be wearing a nice two piece, with a perfectly pressed shirt, but no tie. And you would be holding a single red rose. Not a dozen or a whole bouquet. Just one.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “And...”

She pushed the words out. “You and her would walk, hand in hand, to someplace quiet, nice but simple. No fancy restaurant with a host or candle lit tables and the like. Maybe... a place that serves authentic pizza and good wine.”

“Like that one small pizzeria on the edge of downtown? Next to the square? With that rustic, open-hearth oven to boot?”

An affirming nod. “Find a small table for two. Small enough that...” She moistened her mouth as

though the word would leave quicker. “The two of you could hold hands without reaching over too far.”

“Sounds nice. Go on.” His eyes begged for more.

“Afterwards... you and her would... take a walk on the beach, being in Florida and all.”

“We’re going to be in Tampa. On the Gulf Coast.”

Remembering her geography, the setting sun allowed one to watch it while on the beach. She recalled Danielle’s unwanted advice earlier. Acting as though she would tell Rick what would be romantic. In this case, she’d been asked.

“That would be... perfect!” she said. “The two of you then would... head to the ocean, of course. Take off your shoes and... well... walk just along the shoreline... letting your feet feel the water. All the time she would have that one rose with her.”

“What would we talk about the whole time?”

Despite the ravaging torture, she continued. “What you felt like at that moment, whatever came to mind. How she makes you feel. She would tell you how you make her feel. I’m sure that once there... you’ll think of something.”

Impressed, he smiled. “If that’s not an expert opinion, it’s damn close. Some lucky guy has either treated you to such a night or should do so.”

All she could muster was a thin grin. Given that compliment, she wanted to say more. A gale of

unspoken words, thoughts, desires sought an escape. The same courage she summoned to give him an honest answer beat against the very wall holding the rest of them back. Eternal seconds passed as her eyes passed over his serene face. Her mouth opened. A flood of words reached the bottom of her throat—

Coleen darted into the office. Her stilettos scrunched the thick carpet beneath with each step. Rick shot his eyes away and fixed onto her. He stood. “Hey honey. How was your trip?”

Megan glared at Coleen, dressed in her usual short skirt. She sat down an oversized briefcase on the table. Richard all but leaped towards her.

Coleen let out a tired sigh. “Typical boring old work stuff. But one less thing to worry about. Got your text about the Jamison stuff.” She shot a glance at Megan. “Hey there. I see you came to our rescue once again!”

The two embraced and gave each other a kiss. Megan lowered her head and stepped back towards the couch. Smacking lips filled the air, prolonging their intimate moment with her still in the room.

“Oh!” Coleen spouted. “Guess what? Mom and dad called and said that a friend of theirs will take all of us on his boat. We can spend an entire day on the ocean!”

Megan caught the couple’s beaming smile.

“That’s great, honey,” Richard stated, turning towards her. “This trip is getting better by the moment!”

She forced a smile. One of two rumors confirmed. “It does sound great.” She felt happy for them, but wished she knew less about their trip than she did already. Scanning her watch, she edged towards the small table. “I need to get back to my desk. It’s almost four and there’s probably things waiting for me to do.”

“And I need to run to the print room and get a hard copy of that report, then email the whole shebang to the interested parties,” Richard stated, then gave Coleen another kiss before leaving. Collecting some paperwork, Megan caught her striding behind Richard’s desk.

“You know, Rick thinks very highly of you,” Coleen said.

Without turning, she muttered, “I’m always there if he... and you need me.”

The sounds of Coleen opening and closing apps on her cell echoed through the room. Her brash voice added to the electronic din. “I am *sooooo* glad my parents were able to get a boat for a day. Renting them can be expensive.” A pause and beeps. “I am going to spend the entire day in that cute new outfit I got this weekend. You should have come.” She went on, twisting the knife. “It’s a jet black, two-piece with a

skimpy string top. Rick hasn't even seen it. I made him go shop elsewhere while I got it. I'm going to surprise him." A girlish giggle came next.

Gripping the papers in her hands, she picked up a few more. Coleen wasn't trying to be cruel. She knew that. It was typical girl talk. One she didn't care about engaging in.

"And Rick and I are going to do nothing but lounge around and take the occasional plunge into the ocean," Coleen kept on. "Too bad my parents will be there. He he! Know what I mean. That's on my bucket list as long as nobody's looking—"

"Just let me know if there's anything else I can help with," she spouted, again without turning. She didn't want to look at her. Not when she came in. Certainly not now. She knew exactly what she'd do with Rick if alone with him on that boat. Under a clear, sun-filled sky in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico. Then she'd come back and gloat over Coleen—

Drawing a calming breath, she scanned the ceiling.

"Hey," Coleen quipped. "Why don't we all go over to The Pub? It's been a long day for us all."

Half turning, she forced another smile. "Thanks, but... wanna hit the gym after work. Try to get in my three trips a week."

Coleen put away her cell and nodded. “Know the feeling. Gotta look good for those special people in our lives, don’t we?”

“Yes, we do.” She turned and stormed out. A sullen ache cramped her stomach. She didn’t want to look at Rick anymore that day either.

Jason remained in bed, watching Jamie’s every move. What a turn on to watch a woman get dressed after the fact. Couldn’t explain why, only that it was. Renee wouldn’t do that. She just put on an oversized tee shirt soon after getting up. He never brought up the subject. She too possessed that smoking hot figure. Watching her dress would add to her attraction.

Bit by bit, Jamie moved the festive green, lace-trimmed brief up her legs, casting a judicious eye now and then back at him. It matched the bra she donned with no deliberate speed moments before. She turned, snapping the elastic waistband of the shorts once over her hips. His eyes fixed on her backside. How the green silk formed around each cheek, fitting with perfection upon her silken skin.

Jamie glided towards the bed, planting one foot in front of the other. Once there, she leaned over. He sat up and met her eager embrace. A deep, extended kiss came next. Finished, she stepped towards a vanity table next to the walk-in closet. Cramped in front of a

lighted mirror lay countless perfumes, cosmetics and the like.

“Hope Dwight doesn’t mind all the noise we made last night... or today.” He leaned back onto the bed, still taking her in. She sat in the matching chair in front of the vanity and began brushing her hair.

“I can assure you he doesn’t. Besides, probably had company of his own.”

“You two have an interesting relationship.” He wondered about them. During their brief time together, she never spoke of Dwight. He doubted the two lived together without sharing a friendly yet beneficial relationship. “And I guess he sees plenty of action. It doesn’t seem to bother you.”

A smirk came with her answer. “I know what you’re thinking.” She sat down the brush, leaning forward to remove the mascara she still had on. “Dee and I aren’t friends with benefits. I’ve never slept with him. So rest easy I won’t be hopping over to his bedroom after you leave. And...” She turned to him. “He’s no sugar daddy either.”

Her answer called for a retreat. “Just curious, babe. I’m a live and let live type of guy. And you did say it was complicated.” Realizing he may have screwed things up, he said no more. She might start asking about his current status. Instead, he held quiet as she

turned back and resumed brushing her long, black hair. “Gotta say you have quite the passion for living.”

“Going down the highway at ninety miles an hour gives me the thrill of living I enjoy.”

He sat silent for a moment before speaking. “Listen. Have to meet up with some friends tonight, something we planned last week. Some bros of mine. So... how bout we get together again tomorrow, after I get off work? We can go to dinner, then the movies if you want.” He had to see Renee tonight. Since last Friday, a nagging, guilty feeling kept popping up within him from time to time, coming from that part of him who thought it only fair he ends things.

“Dinner and a movie sounds great,” Jamie said. She rose, then sashayed over to him. Beholding her every move, she climbed up and straddled him. Grasping her hips, she lay one hand on his chest, then glided the index finger gently along his skin, from neck to belly button. The two leaned towards each other and engaged in another extended kiss.

After a stop by her walk-in closet for a thin, black, satin robe she didn't bother tying up, Jamie emerged from the bedroom and strode into the kitchen a few feet from the door. Glancing over the spacious living area, Dwight sat on the white leather couch, feet upon a

matching ottoman, typing away on a laptop upon his legs.

“Is that the fellow from The Pub?” he asked. “The one who was going to tell you where that party was?”

She peeked inside the stocked refrigerator. “Yes. He didn’t know we possess that uncanny ability to find the nearest party. Not to mention knowing nearly every bartender, server and cook in the places we care to frequent. One way or another, I’d a found it.” Closing the door, she moved towards the sink. “You should a come.”

He didn’t look up. “Yvette and I had other plans. As did you till you stumbled onto your new friend. Will there be three for dinner tonight?”

She retrieved a glass from an overhead cabinet. “No.” She filled it with tap water. “He’s getting dressed. He’s got plans.”

She took a long drink, then stepped to the stand-alone, marble covered counter separating the kitchen from the living room.

“Speaking of plans.” Dwight gazed at her, keeping his voice low. “You still planning on that little excursion this extended weekend?”

“Come hell or high water.”

“And your new friend?”

Sitting the now empty glass on the counter, she trotted out of the kitchen. “I’ll get another dinner and movie out of him.”

With a devilish smile, he returned to the laptop. “Extending your little encounter, I see.”

“He’s got that zest for living, and pretty good in bed—”

“Remember our chats about too much information—”

“—but didn’t want to inflate his ego. He’ll figure it out soon enough.” She plopped down next to him sideways, placing her left arm across the back of the couch, never bothering to close the robe. “What’s on tap for tonight?”

“Think I’m just going to stay in. Maybe cook up some of the salmon I got at the Deli.” He looked at her. “Some stir fry perhaps to compliment it.”

“And wine?”

He nodded. “Dinner for two then I assume?”

She grinned as he glanced back at the computer and resumed typing. Reaching for his head, she teased his dark, wavy hair. “Yes. Been a busy weekend for me anyway. Need to work a couple of nights. Then relax and save my strength for this weekend.”

Russell strode up to The Pub. Having called Megan earlier to see if she was up to it, she declined. Still at work and she'd be there late. He sensed something amiss in her voice. Usually when she talked about Rick there was a sing-song ring to it. Describing the help rendered to him earlier in the day sounded more like a chore. She also added a few particulars about their pending trip. Not asking for details, they'd get together soon enough and chat about their problems. Ones they could solve and ones they couldn't.

Entering The Pub, he stopped dead. The thick crowd shocked him. Scanning the entire place and walking by the bar, he discovered why. A ballgame occupied the flat screens above the bar and the large one in the back room. One of the teams had a big following among the locals, making The Pub busier

than normal for a Monday night. Apparently, the game brought out those who would rather sit here than at home to celebrate victory or complain about defeat. All but a few of the chairs at the bar full of enthusiastic sports fans. He also noticed Renee working feverishly behind the bar. A moment later, Renee noticed him.

“Hey, Russ,” she shouted over boisterous conversations and the noise from the game. Frazzled hair added to her harried look.

He stepped over, eyeing her strained face through the crowd. “What’s up?”

Her face lit up. “Hey!” she said. “There’s some empty seats around the corner. Grab one, ‘kay?”

He nodded and headed around to the far side of the bar, unable to pass up such a request. Once there, two open seats awaited him. Sitting in one, Renee appeared, holding two drinks.

“I hope a bourbon and cola is what you wanted.” She sat one in front of him and the other in front of the empty seat.

Confused, Russell kept up his grin. “Planning on joining me?” He could always hope.

“I wish. Need it and some friendly chitchat.” She let out a sigh. “Bill didn’t schedule another bartender, and he and wife are out of town. This ballgame crap caught all us by surprise. Got a pull the whole damn load!” Leaning over and getting closer, her face

morphed from tired to serious. “I need you to do me a huge mega favor, if you could. Please?”

“Anything.” No hesitation existed as he drew close to her, placing both hands on top of the bar to steady himself. Her gaze melted into his eyes. Placing her hands atop his, the warmth of her touch instantly sank in, hurling a voracious tingle through him. Something bad had happened. Only he could help.

“Jason’s planning on stopping by, and I wanna make sure there’s a seat for him here. As busy as it is I’m not gonna be able to break away.”

His anticipation sank. That wasn’t what he wanted to hear, feeling at a disadvantage enough when it came to the man. Now they would be next to each other, allowing Renee a side-by-side comparison. She continued her puppy-eyed appeal.

“So, could you make sure no one gets this seat next to you? Okay. Please?” She all but pleaded, gripping his hands. “He finally got back with me and plans on stopping by. I hoped there’d be a lull so we could talk, but I’m... *jeez!* Wonder if fate’s working against me.”

“Sure, Renee. Anything.” Helpless to say no, he had plenty of smile but no enthusiasm. Squeezing his hands once more, she broke into a wide, teeth filled grin.

“Thank you so much, Russ. And this other drink’s on me.” She released him and headed back to the server station.

Alone, surrounded by people he didn’t nor wanted to know, watching a game he cared nothing about, he stared into the drink. Happy he could help Renee the only solace. That beaming look on her face when he accepted gave him a warm, glowing feeling of accomplishment. He then eyed the other drink meant to stake out a place for Jason. Holding an empty seat for someone was something he had done many times. But...

He glanced up and locked onto Renee. Busy at the beer taps filling two glasses at once, she had on shorts tonight, exposing most of her legs. He took a long look at them, alternating his glance between them and her face, just in case she caught him. He didn’t want to look like some perv if she caught him checking her out. That would ruin everything. Renee wasn’t stupid. Probably notices tons of guys doing that. Guilty of the crime, he didn’t want her to put him in the same boat.

With one jolt, the room bursts into a loud cheer, breaking his amorous concentration. Apparently, the favorite team just scored.

It startled Renee too. She detested such abrupt outbursts. This one almost caused her to drop the pint in each hand. Assholes. Fresh from the wash, these

glasses were slippery enough as it was. Once the noise abated, she shot the glasses onto a tray at the wait station, then slapped a thin paper with the order's name printed thereon. Turning back to the taps to begin the next orders, she caught sight of Russell. He sat quietly, not engaging in the high-fives and handshakes patrons gave each other, as if they had performed the feat just witnessed on television.

Tammy stood by the wait station for the drinks Renee just poured. Another server approached as she placed more pints onto Tammy's tray, then began preparing victory shots for one of the more vocal tables.

"Wasn't ready for this madhouse," Dakota said, wiping split beer off her hands.

"No shit," Tammy concurred.

"Tell me about it," Renee added. "Was hoping to get a breather with Jason coming over."

Tammy made room on her tray for all the shots. "Pfft! Good luck with that!"

"Got my friend Russ holding a seat for him." She nodded that way while holding two bottles, pouring each simultaneously into a large shaker. Next, she lined up shot glasses on Tammy's tray.

"Well," Tammy noted as she poured the mix into each shooter. "If he doesn't get any tonight, he'll have you to blame."

Renee caught her naughty smile. She turned. A young brown-haired woman and he conversed. Russell waved his hand over the seat. The girl smiled, touched his arm, and walked away. Renee went back to Tammy. “Ha ha. Funny.”

Tammy hoisted her tray and left. Dakota stepped up and awaited her turn to load up. Renee gave Russell one more glance, then back to the taps, reading two more pints. As the foam rose in each glass, so did the self-loathing. Perhaps that girl wanted to sit there for a reason. He was a nice guy and not bad looking. They might a hit it off. He might not have got any. Tammy’s mind was in the gutter. What a shock. But she couldn’t shake the guilty feeling. But he kept his promise. Maybe she could find that girl and maybe—

The crowd let out another cheer. For now, it was too busy to leave the bar anyway.

It felt like he’d been there since dawn. Had not the occasional glance at his watch told him otherwise, it only been an hour. The Pub no less crowded than when he came. The crowd and Renee’s position behind the bar negated any significant one-on-one encounters. She did jet him a thin smile when near, only to see it drop away when she turned. On his third drink, Renee placed glasses of water with a lemon slice in front of the empty seat to help hold it. Devoid of a jacket to put

there, he needed the reinforcements, having to fend off people as though the seat was made of solid gold.

Looking at the front door, Jason glided in. He weaved towards the bar. Renee waved and caught his attention. Still too busy to come from around, she couldn't give him the greeting she desired, one no doubt involving hugs and kisses. He shrugged off the image. She then pointed towards the empty chair. Neither smiling nor waving, Jason moved towards him, donned his usual form-fitting shirt. Sitting, not a word came from his clean-shaven, all but flawless face. Renee came up as Jason took his seat.

"Hey, honey," she said, both reaching across the bar to hold hands. With a hushed ogle, Russell watched her thumbs caress his fingers. "I've missed you."

"Sorry babe. How's your night gone?"

Her smile disappeared, replaced by a dour expression. "Horrible. I wasn't expecting to be this busy—"

Tammy summoned her for another big order. Turning back to Jason, her mouth shot open, like she wanted to say more. Instead, she gave Jason a pat on the hand and returned to her miserably busy night. Jason settled himself in but said nothing. Must have figured out the water was for him, for he took a long drink from it.

He took Jason in. Perhaps he should properly introduce himself. He'd never done that. Renee would have, for sure, but figured she was too busy. All he really knew of this guy came from casual observation. Being on good terms with her BF might be a good thing. He drew a breath.

"Hey," Russell said. Jason finally gave him a glance. "Renee asked me to help hold this seat for you, but could you tell her I had to go talk to a friend of mine. I probably won't be back." Not a total lie. He did eye Steven through the crowd, a tenant in the building he helped manage. He could strike up a decent conversation with him.

"Sure thing," Jason stated with a grateful smile. "Thanks for helping us out. I appreciate it."

"No problem," he quipped, heading for the other side of the room. He's out gunned. As busy as it was, any conversation with Renee was near impossible. Besides, the two would talk about things he didn't want to know about. Images that would dance around his head until whatever bourbon he had left back at his loft drowned them out.

Renee dried her hands as she strode back to Jason. The last order took a while and she was still multitasking. "What would you like babe?" she asked, turning towards another register at that end to cash out a customer.

“Your beer menu...”

She pivoted around at the unfamiliar voice. The young guy there next to Jason wasn't Russell.

“And I'll take the usual,” Jason added.

“Ah... did... Russ leave?” she asked, pulling a multi-page beer menu from under the bar and placing it in front of the new customer.

“Yeah,” he answered. “The dude said he held this seat for me, then said he had some friends to go talk to.”

“Oh.” The seat wasn't even cold before occupied by another. She scanned the entire room. He'd bolted before she had a chance to thank him. Wouldn't want him thinking she was just using him. “Well, if he does come back by, let him know to give me a holler before he leaves, okay babe?”

Jason flashed her a nod. She took the new man's order, then scampered back to her bartending duties. Swiveling back and forth, he stared at Renee, taking in her frantic, controlled actions. One thought occupied him: How to end things with her. Best not to do it here, or tonight. Experience taught him public breakups are a no-no. Watching her work so hard, he didn't want to cause any more pain than the pending breakup might already do.

She returned with beers and an exhausted look. “Here you go, babe.” Leaning on the bar to get closer,

she let out a low, gruff sigh. “God... my feet are killing me!” She then managed a meager smile, looking into his eyes.

“Busy night, huh,” he stated instead of asking.

“Yeah. Was hoping to talk a bit more, catch up on things.”

“I understand, babe. Don’t let it bother you.” A lengthy conversation right now is the last thing he wanted. She might ask questions he didn’t want to answer.

“I was thinking about maybe... after work, but I got a close too.” Sorrow filled her voice. “I volunteered for a double today, thinking it wouldn’t be so bad. Plus, I need the money. Lucky me, huh?”

“You’re doing fine, babe.” Jason then took a long drink, wanting to keep the conversation short. “Besides, I have to be at work early tomorrow. My dad wants me to help with lot inventory. So, it’ll be a long day.”

“Don’t have to be at work until seven tomorrow. Maybe something after you get off work?”

“Like I said, long day tomorrow. Lucky to be off by six.” He took another drink. That bought him one more day.

She frowned and lowered her head. “Damn work shit gets in the way of having a life.”

The disappointment in her face struck his own. She normally doesn't swear unless really pissed. He leaned forward and took her hand. "Hey, listen, babe. Why don't we... we plan something on say... Wednesday or Thursday, instead of this 'let's check our schedule' thing. I understand you need the money."

Her head popped up. "I think I can get Thursday night off. I am only scheduled until six. I was planning to double that night too, but I'll pass on that for you, babe."

"That sounds great. I'll stop by your loft about then. Okay?"

She lit up. "That'll be great!"

The disarming smile across her beaming face almost changed his mind. The joy was short-lived. Both Tammy and Dakota beckoned her. She turned. Duty calls.

He said nothing as she went back to work. Best not to stay long tonight, or any night thereafter. Gulping his brew, a couple of friends stopped by to say hello. Normally he didn't mind spending time drinking, hanging with friends and watching sports, but not tonight. Returning to his drink, he finished it in a few gulps. Thought of getting a hold of Jamie crossed his mind. Looking over Renee, she flashed him a smile and kiss. No. Not tonight. Jamie'll be there tomorrow.

And afterwards. Plus, he wasn't lying about work the next day. Dad wanted there at 6 am sharp.

He rose. Catching Renee's attention, he motioned her to the server station. He prodded over, winding his way through the crowd, intent on giving her a proper goodbye. From the looks of things, she needed it. She deserved it.

Renee stepped out from behind to meet him. She had an order to fill but that could wait.

"Leaving already?" she asked as they embraced.

"Yeah, it's been a long day... and I don't want to bother you when you're so busy."

She leaned up and engaged in an extended kiss. Done, she gave him a bear hug, savoring the embrace one last time for the night, burying her head into his shoulder. Jason did the same. She eyed the crowd through their grasp. Some customers paid way too much attention to her. Geeze. Yeah. We should get a room, but the way some of them salivated—

She caught a whiff of a familiar scent. What was it? Shooting back, she glanced into his eyes. Grasping his biceps, her arms became rigid as the muscles in her face. Ones contorting themselves into a gasping reflex.

"You okay, babe?" he asked.

A mass of thoughts went through her mind. Regaining composure, she put her best face on.

“Nothing... babe,” she spouted. “It’s just been a long day. Call me later?”

A cracked smile. “Sure thing. You be careful tonight.”

“I... I will.”

Her eyes followed him as he left. He didn’t turn to glance back. Dumbfounded, the main door closed behind him. What the hell just happened? What the hell did I just do? It’s not like... like what?

Dakota beckoned her to the bar, breaking up her dilatory musing. People wanted to drink, and she was there to help provide the spirits.

Ready to go himself, Russell didn’t see Jason leave. Fixated on the game, the conversation with Steven during the commercials centered on what had just happened. Excusing himself, he wound his way towards the bar to pay up. He went to the server station where Renee busied herself making drinks for thirsty patrons. There he waited a few moments before getting her attention.

“Hey,” he spouted over the voices of all the others. Renee eyed him as he indicated it was time to tab him out.

She nodded. Walking out from behind the bar, she stopped right in front of him. With a tired simper, she

spoke. “Thanks for helping me tonight, for all the good it did. The drinks are on me. You deserve it.”

The disappointment in her voice matched that in her eyes. “Anything, Renee.” He hoped that would cheer her up. Pulling out some cash, he placed it on the bar. “You deserve this too.”

They stood for a moment, smiling at each other. A patron summoning her for a refill distracted neither of them. She rubbed his arm. “Thanks.”

She slunk back to her job behind the bar. He turned and paced towards the front door, weaving through those coming and going. Stepping out, he turned back. He needed one more glimpse.

Renee looked up from mixing a drink in time to catch his final glance. Walking out, she panned over his backside through the crowd. Would he be ticked if he knew she was checking him out? Nah. That was just something us women did, interested or not.

Megan sat by herself at a small table in the downtown grocery and bistro. Called the Deli at Downtown, its official moniker is The Deli@DT. Opening earlier that year, it was an instant hit. It fast became a favorite of many, including Russell and Megan. She called him earlier and asked if he wanted to join her., mainly for the company. She decided on a salad after her visit to the gym, not even bothering to go back to her loft and change. Loose sweat pants fit her just the way she liked them. So too a snug tank top. She preferred that way when she worked out. That and her round glasses instead of contacts.

The salad bar offered a great variety. With an excellent hot bar selection, one could walk away with quite a meal. This complemented a kitchen where

cooks prepared other fare. Although enjoying the salad bar most of all, the food satisfied her hunger. Her mind was on something else.

Yesterday. The day replayed itself. The time with Rick. The nearest thing to a date given the circumstance. It started off great. The whole time, that warm, tingly feeling she'd get was like a blanket. Him needing her. Wanting her near him. The fleeting moments of hope before his question....

She hadn't run into either him or Coleen all day. A good thing maybe. That unwelcome reminder was the last thing she needed.

Soon he and Coleen would share that perfect date.

A happy thought. Last week when he chatted away about college. They swapped stories. Likes. Dislikes. Friends. Frenemies. Bet he made a girl or two happy back then too...

All this aroused her own memories. Her time in college. What was his name? Samuel. Sammy to his friends. That was it. How could she not remember? Attended some of the same classes. Frequented the same clubs as she and her friends. The ginormous crush she had. Took away any courage she could muster. Couldn't express herself then either. Funny. The more things change, the more they seem to stay right where they're at. He went through several girlfriends too. And the occasional hook up. Yeah. She

noticed that. Then that night. The night she finally... might have... gained his affection. He ended up leaving with that other girl...

Running back to her dorm room and crying until morning. All those crazy thoughts going in and out of her head. It all played out in her mind, tinged with the hope she could make things different this time—

A feeling of nausea swelled up. She sat her fork down. With hand clenched to mouth, she stared out the large glass windows covering the entire side of the dining area. People passed by on the sidewalk. Cars rolled by on the street. They're all going somewhere. Then again, maybe they're heading nowhere. Fighting back to the present, she returned to the salad.

"Hey there," Russell said, appearing from behind. He sat.

With a mouthful of lettuce she must look silly. She grinned, but swallowed before speaking. "Thanks for coming. Figured you couldn't pass up dinner here." She didn't bother asking what he would have.

"You know it!" He surveyed the menus hanging on signs over the hot bar. "But you know, maybe I should try something new. Keep hearing variety's the spice of life."

Megan continued eating as he mused over the selection. A voice sprang from the kitchen.

“Hey Russ. The usual?” Albert was a shift supervisor, often there when the two came by to grab dinner. Usually, one would have to go up to the register and order, but Albert knew Russell’s eating habits better than she.

“Ah... yeah... that’ll work,” Russell answered without much thought.

Albert flashed a thumbs up. “Burger and waffle fries coming up!”

Back to Megan. “So, how was your day?”

Fixed on her meal, she heard him, but like he spoke from the other end of the room. She remembered how good it felt when Rick asks her that. Seeing him when they’re leaving for the day—

“What’s up?” A louder voice sprang from him.

Her head shot up. “Oh. Just... trying to enjoy this.”
Back to the salad.

“It’s Richard and his trip thing, isn’t it?”

Lifting her eyes, but not her head, she swallowed. “I shouldn’t let it get to me, but...” It wasn’t as if Russ didn’t suspect anything. They’d been friends too long, ever since she moved in across the street and met at The Pub.

“Then don’t let it. I know...” He shrugged and peered out the large window, keeping a gentle tone. “That’s easier said than done.”

“I know... I know...” she spat out, alternating a gaze between him and the salad. “I’m acting like a teenager whose date’s leaving the dance with someone else.” He said nothing as she continued. “I mean... I keep thinking... what could I have done... you know... differently.”

“What do you mean... differently? With Richard?”

“Yeah... I guess. I mean... I keep thinking about all the times we were together... either alone... with others and...” She paused. Russell did that flip with his hands, motioning her to continue. “What I could have done. I... keep thinking that if I had just once, one time...” She speared a helpless cherry tomato with her fork. “One bold step... maybe... things would a been different.”

“What would you have done, thrown yourself at him?”

“No... God no, nothing like that. Maybe I should have asked him out, on a real date. This is the Twenty-First century.”

“Us cavemen might object! *Uga uga!*” he sputtered with a small laugh along with his best caveman sound. She smiled. It was short-lived.

“Maybe it would have made a difference. Who knows?” Back to the salad again. “Maybe some one on one time with him... before *she* came into the pitcher.

Talking about how I feel... who knows? I thought about doing that. I regret it now.”

The chair beneath Russell creaked as he leaned back. “But Megan, come on. You don’t know if that would have changed a thing. And regret is one of those dirty, more than four-letter words.”

Part of her knew he was right. Another turned the tables. “So. What would you think if... if it were Renee going off on vacation, strutting around in a string bikini with another guy? Dropping hints about what she planned doing with him? Knowing that guy wasn’t you? And you had to sit here thinking about it.”

His shrug and curled lips spoke before he did. “Come on Megan. With Renee it’s not the same. I’m not really—”

“You’re not really... what?” He turned from her glance and shuffled in his seat, twisting towards the kitchen. She pressed the third degree. “Don’t you ever think about... what could you have done different... maybe just once said or did something and you wouldn’t be going home alone—” Russell lowered his head. A hand covered his eyes. He remained silent. She touched a nerve. “I’m sorry Russ. Maybe I’m just projecting my misery.”

He glanced back with a half-full smile and chirped. “I guess... I might feel just as crappy.”

They shared a stare without a word. That type of blank stare mixed with fear. Wonder if you had said too much. Asking questions you didn't like the answer to. Groping for reasons. Disgusted by what you found.

Breaking eye contact, Russell decided to crack the agonizing silence. "So... what are your plans for this long weekend? Suspect the firm will be closed on Monday."

"Yeah." Megan lit up enough to show some teeth within her thin smile. "Yes, it will." From her looks, she welcomed the conversation going elsewhere. "I'm going to visit my parents. Maybe some time away will be good."

"I know you don't mean time away from me, but that sounds great."

A chuckle. "And you?"

"Right now... *naaat* much. Wanna rest up, forget about work. Next week our company starts managing a new building here in downtown, and I've been tasked to help take over from the old management company. I was there on the initial tour. Jeez. We've got our hands full."

"Moving up in the corporate world, aren't we?"

Good question. "We'll see."

Megan continued into her meal. Chewing, she looked out the broad window. He turned and joined. The setting sun gleamed off the panes of the old office

building opposite. Its rays lighting the sky in vain above before darkness set in. Turning back, he then caught sight of an old man seated at the small bar nearby. His hair was gray, clothes rumpled and back arched in a way to give him a perpetual slump. No smile or hint of emotion. He sat alone. Drinking alone. Maybe wondering when that attractive bartender was going to show him some attention.

Megan broke the visceral silence. “Thanks for listening while I complain about my life.” He turned around. She glanced up. “I didn’t mean to bring up Renee to be mean.”

He shot her a friendly, reassuring grin. He knew that. All the same, she had a point. He flexed an ear to ear smile. His way of saying everything was cool. Megan wiped her mouth with a napkin and stood up.

“I’m gonna get seconds. No sense letting an all you can eat salad bar go to waste.” It was then Albert appeared with his order.

“You didn’t have to do that, Al,” Russell said.

“Hey, not a problem,” Albert answered. He flashed Megan a smile. Heading away she gave one back. Albert remained as Russell arranged his burger and fries the way he liked them. “You guys doing okay tonight?”

“Sure. Just enjoying some dinner, catching up on things.”

Albert pivoted, casting a glance towards the salad bar, but said nothing. His eyes fixed on Megan. Russell gave her a look as well. For the first time tonight, he took note of her simple glasses, hair done back in a ponytail and tight gym top hugging her chest. Not bad looking. No shock Albert admired the view. He seemed like a good guy, always helpful, always nice. Not the first time he'd noticed Albert checking her out. The workout gear showed off more than usual. And that's just something guys do.

"How you doing tonight? Keeping busy?" Russell asked.

"Yeah." Albert turned back around. "Not expecting a big crowd, though." He turned again as Megan strode back. Russell started in on his meal.

"And how are we doing this evening?" Albert asked as she sat.

"Doing well." Despite the earlier display of torment, Russell noted she responded with a smile. "Thank you for asking, Al. Hope the same's true for you?"

"Yes, it is," Albert said. "Glad to see you are doing well too. That's good." He shuffled a bit, nodding. "You guys take care tonight."

He gave Megan one more look before leaving. The two sat in silence once again. Russell dove into his burger. Then a thought: bring up the fact Albert might

be interested. Maybe if she knew that Richard guy wasn't the only man on the face of the Earth might cheer her up. He took up a fry. No. The last thing she wanted him to do was play Cupid, even if he knew how. Besides, for all they knew, Albert could be some sex feign with a computer full of porn at home.

Dinner over, Russell wandered back to his loft. The thought of hitting The Pub for a few crossed his mind, but decided against it. Renee would be there, and he didn't want a repeat of last night. The conversation with Megan still bounced around in his head. He'd seen that look on her at The Pub last Friday. She hadn't been the same since. And she's never talked like that before. Wow. But she was human. So was he.

Surprised, he couldn't shake off the questions their all too personal discussion brought up. Especially about their lives. About Renee. So much for hiding that fact from her. The fact he had a chance the night before to do something different answered the question. He should have struck up a conversation with Jason. Maybe it would have meant something to Renee. Then again, it might a meant jack squat. The crush of self-doubt filled his stomach. Maybe that's why he felt like being alone tonight within his chasmal studio loft.

After the normal routine of kicking off his shoes, he made himself a drink. Bourbon came first, covering

the ice, then cola. Next, to the sofa, slumping into it, placing his socks covered feet on the coffee table. Alone, with a few sips in him, what Megan was going through crossed his mind. What she had said and, of course...

Renee. That all-consuming bug. What was it when it came to her? A few more sips. Was life so plain and devoid of purpose that it consisted of work, The Pub and her? There was Megan, those whom he knew at and away from work and, of course, the other places he frequented downtown. But everything seemed to come back to Renee.

What was it really about her?

Look past her obvious traits: the great smile, pretty voice, beaming personality. And yeah, great bod. Was that shallow? Who couldn't be attracted? Wasn't that what people do when it comes to the opposite sex? But there was something else about her. He just couldn't explain it. Like a preference for bourbon versus vodka or rum. He's not obsessed. No shrine dedicated to her sat tucked away in some corner of the loft, full of her pictures and used candles. If only they could get together and really talk, one on one, like Megan wanted to do with that Richard guy. Yeah. That would really show her what he's like. But she always seems busy, or surrounded by friends he didn't know walling her in, or with someone else. And how would he know

if she would even want to go out with him? There are a lot of guys lined up wanting to do the exact same thing. Hell. As far as he knew, she just saw him as a regular customer, a friendly one, but nothing more, nothing less.

Nothing more...

A song popped into his head. A tune from his time in college, when life seemed less complicated. Devoid of consistent companionship, but less complicated all the same. It was one of those campy one-hit-blunders, overplayed and over hyped until the next popular song came along.

I wake up in the morning, ready to face the day.

Shaking off the sleep, hoping things will go my way.

I know you're not yet with me, but you are on my mind.

That friendly smile I know you have, any better be hard to find.

*It might be this morning, or maybe this afternoon,
Today our paths may never cross, but I hope it will be soon.*

Can't remember the name of the tune, nor the group that sang it. Or was it a solo? Whatever. Only that it was a song about finding the perfect person, or at least a person looking for one. The main chorus stuck out the most.

You are the one of my dreams, but are you only a dream?

A reflection of what I want, a reminder of what I need.

Should I spend a whole life searching, to catch you in my sight,

Then be nothing more than an image in the night?

A long pull of the cold, cola tinged bourbon. The snowy mixture slid down his gullet.

The really, really hard question splashed across his mind: Was he just chasing after something he could never have? Maybe he was in love with her, and just kept trying to hide the fact. Convince himself he wasn't some loser pursuing a woman he couldn't be with. She's not the only woman he knows. Single, unattached women were plentiful. Perhaps he should do what he told Megan he wanted to— play the field. His luck hadn't been too good so far, but if he just applied himself, this may change. More of the song came to mind.

My friends they all tell me to stop living a dream, before the engine of youth runs out of steam.

From time to time I wonder, if that's what I should do.

Give up the search and live, and the hope of ever finding you.

I find my heart doubting what I want, fate may not bring.

I might find another love, another heart or just a fling.

Planting his feet on the floor, he leaned forward, wiping the cold from his mouth. A sigh followed. In the end, his instinct was to stick with it. Or was it simply emotional desire, not instinct or reason? Who knew. He couldn't just give up. Deep down, he felt his luck would change when it came to her. He was a good guy, wasn't he? Yeah. As long as he didn't screw anything up, there was hope. The last part of that maddened tune rang clear.

Time will go by and by, and things will come and go.

But that want I know you have for me will one day start to show.

My head and my heart are often filled with doubt.

But the spirit of hope within me knows what it is all about.

So I'll keep the faith, believing you'll soon be mine.

If that means I must wait for you, that'll be just fine.

What if she shot him down? Finishing off the drink, he'd cross that bridge if he had to. Right now he had to be positive.

What about the upcoming holiday weekend? He leaned back. Perhaps a change of pace was in order.

The normal routine would be to catch up on personal issues like laundry or cleaning the loft, then visit The Pub in the evenings. Glancing over at the overflowing clothes basket near the bed, laundry was still a must. But other than that?

The Farmers Market wasn't too boring, and the stuff that kettle corn vendor cooked up sure smelled good. He hadn't been to the mall in a while either. Perhaps a movie?

He scrutinized the near empty drink. A few days away from The Pub might do him good. Part of him knew he might find his way there anyway, regardless of his plans. Besides, it will always be there, and Renee would be too busy anyway for a decent conversation. With or without Jason present. Not that he's giving up on her, but he needed to regroup, so to speak. Both his head and heart needed it.

Getting off work, Jason planned on heading to his apartment and change. Then to see Renee. Sitting on his bike, he called Jamie first. He planned to see her Tuesday, but in fact had to work late. Jamie suggested they postpone their dinner and a movie night to Wednesday, which they did. Everything went as hoped: Jamie wanted some one-on-one first, then dinner and a movie, followed by more one-on-one. The phone rang three times before she picked up.

“Hello,” Jamie said over the phone.

“Hey babe, it’s me.”

“Oh... hi.”

Jason waited for her to say something else, but she remained silent. “Just got off work,” he said. “You up for anything tonight?”

“A... can’t. Have to work.”

Surprise shot through him. The subject of her having a job never came up. “Oh. I guess I should have asked. What is it that you do?”

“Contract work. Something I do on the side.”
Silence again followed her short answer.

“Well,” he finally said. “We have a long weekend coming up. You have plans?”

“Not yet, but that may change.”

“If you’re interested—”

“Sorry hun, but got a get ready for work. Give me a holler tomorrow if you want, okay?”

“Sure thing, babe,” he responded, confused by the tone in her voice. “I should be off early tomorrow.”

“Sounds great. Take care...” Her voice trailed off over the phone.

The call ended before he said goodbye. Staring at the phone, he wondered what was up, then tucked it into the holder on his belt. Starting the bike and donning his helmet, he didn’t put much more thought into it. He’d see her again soon enough. Perhaps he should visit the mall and get her something. Given her love of lingerie, he could add to her collection.

Speeding away, his mind began focusing on Renee.

Renee sat on the couch. Legs crossed. One bobbing up and down. She wasn’t sure what Jason wanted to do: go out, or engage in some togetherness time. At least

Chloe worked till midnight, ensuring an uninterrupted evening if he chose the latter. Between the long hours at work and trying to get some sleep, she had little time to think about him or their life. He'd called her each night since his little excursion to ask how she was doing. The conversations didn't last very long. Now, waiting for Jason to appear, she had plenty of time to think.

Monday night. That smell. That perfume. There had to be a reason. He had plenty of lady friends. She met a few. He'd give a hug or two upon saying hello or goodbye. She caught him eyeing other women. He was still human, just like her. She didn't care if he admired beauty as long as he kept his hands on her. Maybe she should have said something.

No. Don't want him thinking she was some type of jealous girlfriend. Then again, maybe he was going to get her a gift. He would bring it by tonight. That's it. Then again? What if—

She shot up and jaunted to the kitchen. The contradicting thoughts racing through her head became too much. Why is it she always thought the worst sometimes? The not knowing was the worst. She felt a lot for him. The way he swooned her with that stern voice, face and carefree attitude. Made her forget about the month-to-month existence she lives.

Was she falling for him? Really falling for him? It was silly to be seeing a guy, banging him and all, and not feel something more towards him...

She paused in front of the fridge. One covered with fading magnets and a small calendar one — no — two months behind. She never thought about that before. How she felt. Why now? There was something beyond just really liking someone. She wasn't dumb. Was it she was getting tired of just drifting? Maybe. The unfulfilling, unmemorable —mostly— hook ups. The best thing to do was to talk about it. Adult like. That ought a set everything straight. No more being afraid of finding out things she didn't want to know—

Or maybe not. She'd see.

Rubbing the back of her neck and staring at the floor, she remembered there were a few beers in the refrigerator. A cold one would help ease her mind. Save the others for later.

Taking a first, long pull a knock jolted from the door. She froze, every muscle in her body tensing up. She sat the beer down. Despite the ale, her mouth dried out. A few breaths. Wetting her lips, she flew to the door.

Jason stood outside, holding a light jacket in his arm. The sight of him brought a beaming smile to her face. "Hey babe! Glad to see you!" she said.

They embraced and gave each other a prolonged kiss there in the doorway. Done, he looked into her eyes, but didn't release her. "Glad to see you too, babe."

Holding his free hand, she led him towards the sofa. He swung the door closed behind him. "I'm glad we could finally get together," she said as they reached the couch. "I know that I must have pissed off Bill when I told him I couldn't stay for a second shift tonight."

"You deserve time off too, girl." He watched her sit, still holding his hand.

"Don't you know it! Ha ha!" Expecting him to sit next to her, she made room. Instead, he released her hand. Laid his jacket on the back of the couch. Walked passed and sat in the small chair next to the sofa. Puzzled, she kept a smile on her face. Jason leaned forward and grinned.

"I'm sure you've had just a busy a week as I have." He looked into her eyes.

"A... yeah." She scooted over to be nearer. "Three days in a row of double shifts. I hope your father didn't run you into the ground."

"No, he didn't. But he can be demanding at times, trying to teach me the business and all."

He stared at the floor and became silent. Eyes fixed on him, she said nothing. Half expecting him to

continue, or ask how she was doing, no words came. Only an odd silence.

“Oh!” she then spouted, smiling. “Whitney’s really thinking about moving in, so hopefully, no more double shifts unless something comes up.”

“That’s good. Should help you and Chloe out.”

Staring askance at him, her smile dropped away. His usual sunny disposition was gone. So too his solid voice. Not to mention any attempt at physical affection. A sinking feeling grew in her stomach.

Not raising his head, he spoke. “Renee, listen... you’re a good girl... and our time together... has been really great...”

Rotating her head with no deliberate speed, he went on about all the ‘good times’ they had. Spoke with cowed eloquence about what a ‘great person’ she was. And there was no gift of perfume. She grew numb. A nervous weight grew within as each pointless complement left his mouth. She fixed her eyes on the small pile of magazines on the coffee table a couple of feet away. The cover of one displayed a few words in bold, red letters. Standing out over all the others. Let the reader know of some must read article within. She took in those words: Does Love True Exist?

Well, apparently not.

“...we’re still young,” Jason continued. “And we’re just starting out, you know. Our schedules—”

“If you’re breaking up with me then I’d appreciate it if you just come out and say so. Okay.” Her eyes never left the magazine.

No words broke the cold air between them. A few moments passed while she took it all in. A mixture of fear and confusion pounded against her chest. A dozen different thoughts rocked her mind.

“I think it’s for the best that we do,” he finally spouted.

Springing up, she paced towards the kitchen, crossing her arms. “Why?” She turned back.

“Babe... we tried, but like I was saying, our different lives—”

“Yeah, yeah! I... I heard that. I’m not fu— deaf.” Confusion gave way to anger.

He leaned back. From the look on his face, her reaction came as a mild shock. Did he expect her to just accept his explanation? He looked on as she stood there, as if there was no reason to say more. He returned to staring at the floor.

She tried breathing normally. Then, “I think... think I’m a pretty glad... good person.” Hands tightened their grips on her arms. “You said so yourself... right?”

“Yes—”

“Is it something I did... or not do? Just... just tell me.”

“No, no. It’s not that—”

“If there is, well... I’m sorry... I know I’m not miss perfect—”

“No. It’s not that,” he spouted again, then fell silent. Her vexing eyes narrowed at him, cutting the air between them.

“Why then?” she demanded. There was something more. She saw it in his pathetic eyes. “Last... last Friday, you didn’t seem to be in the breakup mood when we got here! I think I have a right to know. I don’t—” Her arms dropped as she paced towards him. “I don’t buy this different lives excuse.”

Jason tensed up, but kept an even voice. “It’s nothing you did, Renee. You are a great person, but...”

Stopping after a few steps, she stood agape, eyes fixed upon his. He turned to avoid her.

She tried catching up to her racing heart. A few short breaths. “You know,” she then spouted. “There are a lot of guys who would appreciate the type of person I am. Who would... enjoy my... company, time, effort. You know.”

His eyes rolled. “You’re a good person. You are. But like I said... I just don’t see this going anywhere. We’re leading two different lives, it seems.” From his tone, she sensed he didn’t want to repeat himself, but did anyway. Like he wanted to finish the task and leave. Wham. Bam. Thank you Ma'am.

Hiding the anger in her voice was useless. “Just not good enough for you, is that it?”

“No... that’s not it.”

With a stomping step towards him, she pointed. “I know this may sound... arrogant, but... but there’s nothing wrong with me. I’m a good person. screwed up a few times. Yeah. But a good person. And you should appreciate that.”

“Look. We tried.” Annoyance tinged his voice. “This isn’t the end of the world for either of us. We’re young, we both need...”

Biting her lip, she turned back towards the kitchen. He repeated a different version of the same excuse. Like some broken record. She heard his mouth groping for words but didn’t let him finish. “You’re lucky to have someone like me, you know.”

“Come on. You act like you’re some great piece of—”

Her heart all but stopped. She wrenched around, feeling her eyes widen. Jason fell silent. A look of shock twisting his face. A mixture of anger, dismay and disbelief coursed through her.

“Piece of what, Jason?” Her brows perk up in puzzlement along with her tone.

“Renee, I—”

“No Jason. Please. Finish what you’re going to say. After dating all these months, screwing each other. I’d love to hear your opinion of me!”

His mouth hung open, unable to send words through it.

“A piece of ass. Is that what you were going to say? You little *shit!* Think that’s the first time someone said that to my face. But you were going to call *me that?*” Her last words held no hint of fear or kindness.

He stared back at her for a moment. Shock clinched his face. “No. I wasn’t calling you... I didn’t mean to imply that. I’m sorry... okay! I know you don’t deserve—”

“What did you mean?” The last semblance of self-control left her. Again, he turned away, saying nothing. She turned towards the kitchen. A disquiet giggle. “I should a figured it out. There’s someone else, isn’t there?” He said nothing. Wheeling back, he still avoided her stare. “Is she a better lay than me? Is that it?”

“Listen... I didn’t want it to end this way—”

“*CAN’T YOU GIVE ME A STRAIGHT GODDAMN ANSWER!*” His lack of desire in answering the question meant only one thing. Not the first time the same thing happened. “Is she an ex? Some... some slut you picked up during your bro time? Huh? One of those girls I saw you with before we

started seeing each other?” He remained silent as her anger and suspicions rolled out unabated. “Please tell me you didn’t screw some...” She couldn’t find a word demeaning enough to describe another female. “Then came here and... treat me like a second-rate booty call!”

“Renee, maybe I should just—”

“Just because other girls act like a piece of meat and jump into bed with any Tom, Dickless and Harry after a few shots doesn’t mean that *I’m ONE!*” She all but charged at him.

“You’re no saint yourself,” he shot back in a futile defense. “I’m sure you had a parade of boyfriends before we—”

“Excuse the shit out a me!” Hands up in sarcastic apology. “So, that puts me into the slut category? Huh?”

Neither spoke. The accusations hung in the air. The weight of the words sank in. Another dozen thoughts raced through her head, then through her heart. More astonished than angry, as the seconds ticked by, that began changing.

She drew a few angry breaths, reading a scathing voice to hurl at him, letting her arms fall limp to her sides. The muscles on her face tightened. Her brows distorted. Her lips twisted, as though positioning themselves for the onslaught. As the seconds ticked

away, the fury waned enough to get the words out. With a raised hand, a single finger sprang from her white-knuckled fist. A moderate but firm voice shot out the words.

“You know what... to hell with you. Your friends. Whatever whore you’re banging. And while you’re at it...” He rose and headed for the door. “*YOU CAN GET THE HELL OUT!*”

She sprang to the couch, grasping his jacket still lying on the back. He passed around the other side and headed towards the door. She threw it at him and followed. The red glow of anger beaming from her face.

“Lose my cell number and anything else you can use to call me,” she commanded, treading behind. “And if you come back to The Pub this piece of ass will have Bill throw your ass out!”

Putting the jacket on, Jason didn’t respond. He opened the door and strode into the hall without looking back.

Stopped at the door, she felt tears filling her eyes, cooling the white hot anger burning them. “That’s right, don’t look at me... *ASSHOLE!* And by the way...” She stepped back. “I’ve had better dickheads than you call me that!”

The sound of the wooden door slamming against the doorsill reverberated throughout the loft. The wall

adjacent vibrated. She remained standing behind the now closed door, staring at it as though Jason was still there. “*I’M NOT...*” She covered her mouth with her hand, fighting back tears. Her anger gave way to sorrow. “I’m not—”

She glanced at the kitchen. The unfinished beer. She strode over and picked it up, taking a long pull. As the alcohol went down her throat, she drew in long stretches of breath through her nose. Exhaling the spent air through the same. Another long drink, then an angry glance at the front door.

“ASSHOLE!” she shouted. Another pull of beer. She let it go down. “Who the hell needs you anyway? HUH?” She turned back and finished the beer, plopping the empty bottle onto the counter. Another look at the door.

Her eyes morphed from a piercing, angry, focused red to despair. More long breaths through her nose. Just as fast as the doubts came, they left. Anger took control once more.

Flinging open the fridge, she reached inside and pulled out the four beers remaining in the six-pack. As the door closed shut, she stomped into her bedroom.

Friday came once again. As usual, most everyone looked forward to the weekend. This time heightened by the fact it would be three days long. Such a boon meant a variety of things to a variety of people. Those traveling were packed and ready to go. Those staying wanted to start enjoying themselves ASAP. Those working wondered what kind of crowds they'd see. Such weekends were hit or miss for most of the clubs, bars and restaurants downtown. With so many traveling, a holiday could produce smaller than average crowds. Then again, some actually saw more business. Many chose to stay near home. Desiring the routine over the new. Catching up with friends.

Many of those working with Megan had already left, as did she, or taken a vacation day. The company didn't frown on such acts prior to a holiday. It saved them money. Before setting off to her parent's, she

visited the Deli. Grab a few snacks for the road. Nothing much. Some chips, some chocolate and a can of green tea. The munchies and music should help distract her mind from the solitude of the drive. Tonight, her mother would prepare a meal rivaling Thanksgiving. Insisting her mother not do so upon telling her she was coming was useless. And she knew it. But it's something mothers like to do. Some maternal instinct hand in hand with having kids. She could see her own. Playing with Rick on the lawn he just mowed—

She clutched the helpless candy bar in her hand. Back to reality.

Her aunts and uncles would be there for dinner tonight as well. Her mother extending an invitation to them. Make an evening of it. Perhaps dinner surrounded by talkative relatives and a full feeling afterwards would help keep her mind off other things. Rick and Coleen were already on their way to Florida, soon to be prancing on some sunny beach.

Before checking out, she passed by the hot bar. The cooks always had some new dish prepared to please the palate. Today it was whole crawfish. The small, lobster looking creatures smelled good. All drenched in special seasoning and steamed to perfection. She never indulged in such a dish, nor intended to. The only way to get at some of the meat was to pull the unfortunate,

yet dead creature apart, then suck out the innards. The thought diluted the desire. As tasty as the result may be, she could never do that.

Albert caught her eye as he approached from the kitchen side. A mile wide smile beamed at her. She smiled back.

“Hey there,” Albert said, leaning over the warm food. “An unexpected... but welcomed surprise. Early lunch?”

“No. Just picking up a few things for my trip home.”

His smile morphed into a thin, confused grin. “So... I... won’t be seeing you... and Russ this weekend?”

“You may see Russ, but I’m heading to my parents’ for the weekend.”

“Oh. Well... have a safe trip. And make sure you get back here safe and sound.”

The sincerity in his face and voice wrapped around her. “Thanks. I will. I’d hate not to see you or the Deli again.”

His smile returned. “I’d hate that too.”

With a small wave, she walked away. His name spouted from one of the kitchen staff gave her pause to glance back. Despite the summons, he watched her as she glided away.

Russell was home by four. Most of the offices in his building closed early. He and his crew had done a good job putting out all the maintenance fires found or had erupted. Striding home, he wondered how to mix things up for the weekend. Part of him felt drawn towards The Pub. It was like a magnet. So far, he was doing pretty good at resisting the attraction.

After getting home and getting comfortable, he made himself a drink. He then flopped on the couch and rested his feet upon the coffee table. He reflected on the long week, knowing it would only get worse come next Tuesday. The thought of cleaning up the mess left by others disgusted him. But that was his job. For now, he would forget about work and think about...

About what? About who?

He downed most of the drink. Inspecting the glass, it must have been a much longer week than he thought. Or maybe he just needed the liquid courage to stick to his plans. Hell. It's futile not to think of her, no matter how much bourbon he had in him. He'd like to think there was enough man in him not to be so whipped into—

He shook off the thoughts. It wasn't her fault. She didn't know, and there was no sense believing she did. Or blaming her. Either way, he felt like another drink.

After fixing one, the idea of stretching out on the bed had its merits. A feeling of fatigue began swelling up from within even before he put down half the drink. Laying there, staring at the ceiling, he first thought of Megan. Hope she gets to her parent's house okay, and returns the same. Boy. Can only imagine how much it must suck. Then again, he can. Seeing Renee show or talk about her affection for someone else...

He couldn't help but think of her. Rubbing his eyes, he sat the glass on the small table next to the bed. He saw Renee— her smile, that friendly glow she always seemed to have. He commanded himself to think of someone else. Something else. The heavy feeling in his eyes grew with each passing second. A few minutes later, he was asleep.

Renee rolled over and looked at the clock. Two empty bottles stood next to it. Another lay on its side. A fourth had rolled onto the floor next to the small table. Still in bed, she had to be at work in an hour and nowhere near ready. Neither her body nor mind wanted to face another human being. Let alone the myriad of people she would deal with at work. Last night, she sat for another hour or two after Jason left. After expending so much anger on him, she mustered enough strength to get up and change. Whether it was the brews or fatigue, she finally fell asleep.

She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling; her mind a blank slate. Raw emotions or just plain tired? She didn't know. Maybe it's both. Her mind wanting to forget everything, the numbness would be short-lived. All the memories, emotions, pain, anger, whatever, would soon be back. Maybe she should call in sick. Good luck with that. Bill and everyone else at The Pub would soon find out. Updated social network status or not. They'd know she was lying. In the end, she needed the money. Still no word from Whitney, and rent's coming up. So... she would have to get up and get cleaned up. Then at work, paint a smile on her face when someone asked whether the pale ales or India pale ales on tap were any good. Acting as though they were some type of beer connoisseur. Pfft! Like it mattered. Alcohol was alcohol. Most people she dealt with couldn't tell the difference if they tried. Then get bitchy if she brings the wrong one, as though the fate of the world hinged on her ability to distinguish between all the glasses at the server station. In the end, all they wanted to do is get drunk. Forget about whatever unfulfilling, pathetic, miserable life they were living. Join the club.

Muted sounds from the living room whispered through the closed door. Must be Chloe. She ambled from under the blanket. Her body didn't want to rise. Her spirit seconded the motion to stay put. Her mind

overruled them both. She stared at the door. Better Chloe hear it from her. Better than some text message or call from their friends asking what was going on. At least she wouldn't drill her too much for details. Someone, somewhere will. Then the cork atop the bottle of anger would pop off. She knew that. Couldn't hide that fact. With luck, it wouldn't happen for a while. With even more luck, out of view from anyone else.

Jason walked up the steps towards Jamie's loft at a slow pace. He was in no hurry, certain she would desire some one-on-one time before heading out. Also gave him time to purge the distasteful reminders of the breakup.

...a lot of guys would appreciate the type of person I am...

The jealousy card. There were, in fact, many men would enjoy her. It wouldn't be her personality they were after.

Just not good enough for you, is that it...

...there's nothing wrong with me. I'm a good person. And you should appreciate that...

You act like you're some great...

He paused mid-step. How the hell those words reached his lips shocked him. Sure, he was getting pissed. But didn't mean for the words rattling around

in his head to come out. He broke up with others before, and knew she had as well. She was dragging out the inevitable.

It's nothing you did... You are a great person, but...

Renee was a good person, but...

He continued upward, his mind fumbling to answer that. A few feet from Jamie's door, he gave up.

Earlier, he visited a couple of the lingerie stores in the mall, and found what he believed Jamie would like. While not unique—he'd seen many of the items she possessed—it was the thought that counted. As a reward, he might get another fashion show. Calling her earlier, both went straight to voicemail. Still working maybe. That contract work she mentioned. If not, a surprise visit with a gift in hand was spontaneous. Just the way she liked things.

Rapping the door three times, he awaited an answer. A few moments later it opened. Dwight stood there wearing a white robe. After a short bout of uncomfortable silence, he brought the quiet staring to an end. "Hey, Dwight."

"Jason," Dwight spouted with a cocked smile. "How are we today?"

"Okay. Good," he responded, painting on a curious smile. "Is Jamie here?"

Dwight's eyes and mouth gaped wide for a moment. His eyes then shot down to the gift in his hands. "Sorry. She's not here."

"Oh." Dumbfounded, he tried not showing it.

"She's in Vegas. Last minute thing. And if anyone knows Jamie... well... she can't pass up a weekend there."

Jason's brows shoot up. "Oh. Must have really been last minute."

"I'd ask you to come in, but..." Dwight motioned towards the balcony with his hand. "I have company of my own."

Peering over his shoulder, someone sat in one of the lounge chairs on the balcony, also clad in a white robe. All but facing the other way, from what he could see it was a woman.

"Sorry, dude," Jason said, not wanting to intrude. How not to look like too big an idiot standing there with a gift in his hand for a woman who wasn't home crossed his mind as well. Nor did he want to look like a lost puppy. "I understand. Jamie is... Jamie. Right?"

Dwight smiled. The two stood without a word for a few more moments.

Jason gave a blank stare at the gift box in his hand. "Well then. When she gets back, could you give her this... and ask her to give me a call?"

"I sure will, Jason."

He handed the gift over. “It’s not much, but wanted to get her something.”

“Ah...” Dwight said with a bit of surprise as he took the box. The store's logo beamed out from under a purple ribbon wrapped around it. “That one store in the mall. I am certain Jamie will be flattered.”

“Yeah. I think she has a lot of other stuff from there. But I figure one more won’t hurt.” A small laugh.

Dwight gave him a measured grin. “No doubt. Thanks, and... have a good weekend.”

“You do the same, Jason.”

Walking away, he gave Jamie the benefit of the doubt. He might have gone to Vegas on a whim as well if she’d asked. Most certainly would have. He could always find something to do to enjoy this weekend, and she’d be back on Monday.

Dwight watched as Jason turned towards the stairs. Closing the door, he then meandered back to the balcony.

“Everything okay?” the young woman bellowed from the balcony.

“Yes, Molly.” Detouring over to a small table, he sat the box down and began opening it. “One of Jay’s boy toys. Apparently unaware of her little trip.”

“Did you tell him?”

He pulled out the garment. “Don’t like being the bearer of bad news, but yes. He took it well.”

Lifting the simple, one-piece, blue satin teddy, he cocked a brow. The gift impressed him.

“Cool,” Molly said. “Don’t need any drama this weekend. See enough of that at work.”

Glancing at the lingerie hanging between his hands, a thought hit him. Looking over at his friend on the balcony, he let a few moments of contemplation pass, then began a slow walk that way. “Molly?”

“Yeah?”

“What size do you wear? Think I have something you may like.”

She rose and cat-walked over to him. The soft white robe exposed most of her legs. Her eyes grew with glee as he presented the gift.

“Where did you get that! It’s so cute!” she said, taking it.

“Don’t ask. Suffice it to say the intended owner won’t be wearing it.”

Renee strode down the pitted sidewalk towards The Pub. She cursed herself with each step. Whitney texted last night and said she would move in. Great. Then tried calling her this morning to see if she needed help. No phone. And if she hadn't left it at work last night, she wouldn't have to go back. Worse, can't even remember exactly where it was. But it had to be there.

Friday and Saturday night were super busy, so her mind remained fixed on her job, not her life. Or you know who. No great shock. Some people already found out about them. From his circle of friends no doubt. Male and female. The gossiping little tramps. After her shift each night, she all but flew back to her loft. Didn't even want to run into insects that might a crossed her determined path. Leaving her phone there might a been a good thing. It was filling up with voice and text messages she didn't want to deal with. All she wanted

to do was go in, get it and leave. Not her first breakup, but given how many people knew both Jason and her it would be the most publicized.

Like wildfire, it started the day before. Some of the regulars and friends wanted to know what happened. A short ‘long story’ or similar answer fended off any discussion of the subject. Why can't they mind their own business? Sucking the most— those acting like some type of shrink or self-help guru. Like she needed their help ‘dealing’ with it. Or about their friendship, real or perceived. Whatever. Then there were those who would just look at her, wondering why she got so much attention. By now, every coworker and regulars would be in the breakup loop. At least Whitney would be coming. The only good thing happening so far this weekend. This helped her wallet. Did jack squat for her heart.

Approaching the front door, she painted on the best face she could. Not a smile or cheer. Enough to look less pissed off. No more. Sunday afternoons were one of the slowest. With luck, more so because of the three-day weekend.

She flew by the tables on the sidewalk without a word. A couple of regulars caught her eye. Their stare weighed on her, whether they knew or not. Entering The Pub she headed straight to the office opposite the kitchen. The thirty plus people seated at the bar or

tables nearby busted any hopes of a deserted clientele. Most were regulars. Don't they have a life? Striding past the server station, one of the patron's 'Hi, Renee' went unanswered. Neither did she bother looking to see who said it. Within the small office, Bill sat at his desk, one covered with papers of varying size and color.

Stopping right inside the doorway, a hesitant breath, then words. "Hey, Bill. Did a... anyone find my cell? I seemed to have left it here last night. Ha ha!"

He looked up. Puzzlement graced his face. "Ah... don't know. Gi'me a moment and I'll ask." He stood, walked past her and headed towards the bar.

Oh shit. "Ah... Bill..." A feeble attempt at stopping him from making some type of announcement. "You know, why don't I just—"

"Hey folks," he bellowed, approaching the bar. At once, he attracted the attention of nearly everyone. "Did anyone find Renee's cell? She's here to pick it up."

"Yeah!" Tammy spouted, having returned from her tables. "Found it when we opened."

Tammy glided past her towards the back storeroom. The thought of looking over those assembled never crossed her mind. She retreated toward the office. Great. Now add forgetful ditz to the list right under freshly dumped.

Tammy reappeared a moment later. “Hey girl. I thought you might need this. I saw it wedged between the spare bar napkins and box of straws next to the wait station.”

“Thanks.” Renee snatched it and eyed the screen to see what she missed.

A moment of silence, then Tammy spoke up. “Hey, I heard about... Jason... and you.” Sympathy filled her voice. Her hand reached up and caressed Renee's bare arm. “What happened?”

Renee took a small step back, eyes glued to the phone, hoping to be out of reach. “Ah... it's... complicated.”

“Well, how are you holding up?”

Browsing the text, most were the usual ‘SUP girl’ and ‘how r u.’ As suspected, most asked what happened. Was she okay. Give them a call. Other messages of varying length. After going through a dozen, she exited the app. “I’m... fine.” She shoved it in her pants pocket.

“You know that if you need anything, you can ask—”

“I know, I know, thanks.” Tammy was trying to be nice. She knew that, but didn’t want to talk about it. “Listen, I’ll see you... a... what... Tuesday... yeah. I’m scheduled then. Kay.” She turned and fled, eyes

fixed on the floor. So far, no one else attempted conversation as she aimed for the front door.

“Hey, Renee.”

She looked up. Jack stood a couple of feet ahead. He just walked in, dressed in his usual faded jeans and concert tee shirt.

“Hey... Jack.” She didn’t want to say anything more. Further human contact wasn’t a priority. Especially with Douche junior here.

He barred her path. Puffing up, he muttered, “Heard ‘bout what Jason did. He can be a douche, you know.”

Takes one to know one. Drawing a restrained breath, she stayed quiet. He knew all the details, before and after the fact. Prick. A few other choice words to describe Jason’s personality crossed her mind. Thought about hurling a few at this dumbass too. Acting so innocent. Don’t wanna scene. Jack would recite everything back to Jason, like some well-trained flunky. Not to mention further self-inflicted embarrassment.

“If it means anythin’,” Jack continued. “What he did was pretty crappy. You deserve better.”

Crappy? That was being nice, but she didn’t say so, mustering a few words in a hope it would shut him up. “Thanks.” She held the sarcasm a notch above her

contempt. Considering him dense as iron, he wouldn't catch on.

Jack smiled. "Anytime."

Shooting past, the sensation of his hand on her shoulder brought her to a stop.

"Hey listen," he said in a consoling tone. She didn't bother facing him. "I'm taking a little road trip tomorrow, now that I got my bike fixed. If you want, you can come along. Maybe... it will help get all this off your mind, you know."

Summoning the entire supply of patience remaining within, she glared at him. "No thanks." Her patience tank was now empty.

Storming off, his hand fell away. Jack stood dumbfounded, but made no attempt to follow. He watched Renee open the front door. "A... cool. Le' me know if you change your mind."

Jack was lucky. She didn't hear him.

Anger galvanized her desire to leave. Free of Jack, she headed straight out the door. A quick right past the patio tables sent her treading down the sidewalk. How humiliating. The bastard must have known what was going on. Then to put the moves on her, like he took a number and waited for her to be available. Like she'd go out with him, let alone—

The thought sickened her. In a flustered daze, she looked up. The biggest dance club downtown loomed

across the street. She froze. Glancing around, steps from the corner, she'd gone the wrong damn way. Turned the wrong way leaving The Pub. Cursing herself yet again, she decided against heading back. Passing by the tables again. No. Just detour around the block.

At the corner, she stood quiet. Let her head clear out. A short, unplanned walk might help that, or at least vent her frustration. Standing there, alone with her thoughts, Jason's haunting words mixed with her own sorrow. Both sprang into her head again. Like a broken record repeating the same bitter words, her mind unable to shut it off. Then the stares she got at The Pub. She could feel their eyes, whether she could see them or not. Damn... them or me. Then Jack...

She shut her eyes. Raising her head, she drew a long breath, fighting back the urge to run, cry, scream or all three. Confusion only added to the emotional pain desiring an escape—

“Hey, Renee.”

The sound of her name was the last straw. Her eyes flew open. She twisted, her words leaving with subtle thunder. "Why don't you go fu—"

Russell stood next to her. A beaming smile shot from his face under wide, candy store eyes. Both made a sudden jolt to confusion.

Lurching back, she composed herself. "Hey... Russ." She cleared her throat. "What's... what's up?"

"Ah... saw you trotting down the street and wanted to say... hi. Didn't think you worked Sundays, but... always good to see you!"

A desire to turn and run swelled up. She wanted to leave. Just run. Now more than ever. Of all the people. To get the routine from him. "I've... I'm off today, and tomorrow. Left my cell at work. Had to pick it up. Silly me." She forced out a small laugh. "Ha, ha."

As planned, he avoided The Pub all weekend, but still thought a lot about her. Like a movie playing in his head he couldn't turn off. And now here she was. Tight, low-rise jeans and a light blue tee shirt fit her to a tee. Her reaction came as a bit of a shock, but what the hell? Gave him an opportunity for some unexpected, unaccompanied conversation.

"Oh," he began. "Me... I'm just trying to enjoy this weekend best I can. No sense letting a long weekend go to waste, you know. Megan's visiting her folks and... I've got tomorrow off." Renee looked distracted, but he went on. "I mixed up my routine this weekend. Right now I'm heading to a place called Little England. They have some specials on Sunday," he said. "I know... I know... I'm just a lush!"

"I know of the place. Never been." She turned and stared at the traffic.

They stood for a moment without a word as cars flowed by. Hints of the conversation with Megan flashed before him. His heart raced. Being so close to her one reason. Maybe... a shallow breath, then he let it out. "Ah... hey... if you aren't busy, you're welcome to tag along." What the hell. The worst that could happen is she said no. A nervous chill came over him.

She twisted her head the other way, not wanting to look at him. Please Russ. Not you too. Just go. Leave her alone in her misery. Be the quiet nice guy, and just leave.

"And if Jason wants to come too well... the more the merrier. Right?" He figured she'd do no such a thing without him. Even with him around, he'd still be spending time with her.

She spun around. He didn't know. Wow. "Thanks... Russ. That's... that's nice, but..."

The expression on her face said neither yes nor no. It displayed no anger, surprise or shock. An icy lead ball formed in his stomach. The thought his offer offended her added weight to it. Saying no is the worst thing that can happen. She stood speechless, staring at him. He royally screwed up. Bad. He tried swallowing, but his mouth dried up. His beating heart all but deafened him. "Yeah... yeah you know... I'm... I'm sure you and Jason got... have plans. Hell, if I was seeing someone, so would I!" A forced laugh to cover

his fear. “You... you guys take... care, alright. Enjoy your weekend.”

He started moving before finishing, commanding his wobbly legs to take it slow despite the urge to jet away. Mortified by the thought of Renee thinking ill of him made it harder.

She watched him past. Turning and facing his retreating back, her desire to shun the human race abated. And drinking was involved. “But... why don’t we start at Juanita’s first? They’re open on Sundays too. Kay?”

He stopped dead. Stunted, he spun back. A gleam of a smile graced her face. Her eyes more alive. Wanting to say something, he forgot the entire English language. They stared into each other’s eyes. Seconds ticked away before he recovered an ability to speak. “Ah... sure. Juanita’s great too!”

Breathless, a warm wave of relief splashed over him. The cold weight gone. The thought of some spending time with her the tonic he needed. He hadn’t screwed things up after all. Stepping back toward her, he grinned. “You, me and Jason can have a good time and forget about work!” He let out a laugh.

“Yeah... sure.” Renee nodded. “Let’s go.” Desperate for a distraction, she led off. With some luck, she might even get through the night without breaking down.

The two crossed over. Juanita's sat only a couple of blocks away, walking by the Deli to get there. Russell waited for her to strike up a conversation, giving her a wide smile every now and then. All the while, butterflies fluttered up and down his chest. Finally alone with her, he was at a loss for words. Everything he planned to say when this happened all but disappeared. Retreating into some remote corner in his head, unwilling to come out. After a few minutes of walking, he noticed her still expressionless face. Best to make the most of their time before Jason got there.

"A... sorry I didn't stop by and say hi this weekend," he said as they walked past the Deli's patio, already full of Sunday patrons. "Haven't forgot about you guys, just was... you know... was mixing things up."

Renee had to think for a moment. She hadn't seen him all weekend. So consumed with her life and work she hadn't noticed. "Oh." She gave him an apologetic smile. "Sorry if I'm a bit out of it. Got some things on my mind. But..." Back to eyeing the sidewalk. "No need to act as though the world's about to end. Nothing a few shots of tequila won't help sort out. Right?"

She nudged his arm. He laughed in agreement.

"You bet ya. I think you two are gonna really like Little England," he said as they stopped to cross over another street. "Surprised you've never been there."

She glanced left and right, looking for oncoming traffic. "Yeah, 'bout that. Jason won't be coming."

"Oh. He outta town too?"

Might as well get it over with. No sense continuing the farce. Everyone else already knows. "We broke up."

Russell sat speechless most of their time in Juanita's. The news she was available had bolted through him. But the sweet taste of exhilaration in its wake soured. As Renee sat eating chips and salsa and downing a few shots, he kept looking into her eyes. So too when they chatted about mundane things like their work or the weather. There was no life in them. No glow he often saw. The barren look she held the whole time began making sense. The way she acted when they first met today. An unwillingness to answer her phone when it vibrated. And never bringing up the subject of Jason.

They began a muffled walk away from Juanita's. Her eyes remained fixed on the sidewalk. He strolled beside her. Once again, unable to remember anything he wanted to do or say if and when she became

available. Here and now, seeing her normal, cheery self all but gone meant only one thing. The fleeting moment of joy knowing she was available had long faded. He never thought about what she might have to go through. Now he was. “Like I was saying earlier... I guess... you’ll like this other place... Little England,” he said. Lame. But that’s all he could think of.

A feeble smile and look. “I’m sure I will, Russ.”

Little England wasn’t far away. The small place sat about twenty comfortably, and on some nights standing room only. True to its name, it specialized in European beer and spirits. Also, keeping with the traditional English pub, a sign hung above the front door. It swung back and forth during a stiff breeze or when hit by a passer-by displaying their athletic skills. Real or perceived. Russell held the door open for her. A middle-aged couple and the bartender watched them enter. There were no other patrons or employees.

“Hey there,” the bartender bellowed. His name was Henry. Like many who worked long hours in the smaller establishment downtown, he owned the place. “Who’s the pretty one?”

Renee spoke. “His name’s Russell.”

The three let out a laugh. The couple looked on. Sitting at the bar, Renee surveyed the various beer taps, then the bottles along the wall.

“Henry, this is Renee.”

“Welcome Renee.” Henry greeted his new customer in a jovial tone. “Glad to have you.” Shaking hands, he then placed coasters in front of them.

“Well, Russ... this is my first time here. Any suggestions?” Renee asked.

“I’m not much of a beer drinker, but if you are looking for true English beer then...” He pointed towards the tap with the biggest handle. Its yellow color stood out from the rest.

“Russell knows his beer. And it’s two for one today,” Henry added.

“Does that include shots?” The beer wouldn’t be enough.

“Tis. But I don’t do anything fancy here,” Henry answered. “Mainly straight whiskey and I pride myself in boasting a good selection of rum as well.”

Renee smiled, pointing at the big yellow tap. “Well, one of those and a shot of... rum?” Shouldn’t go too bad with the tequila.

Henry looked at Russell. “Should I make that two?”

“You bet, Henry.” He saw Renee’s smile, hoping it was genuine, not just for show or to make him feel better.

As Henry readied their order, they readied themselves for a few rounds. She complemented the

décor, telling Russell and Henry she'd never been to England, or out of the country for that matter. Russell made the same admission. Henry went on about his travels through and admiration of the Old Country. Much of Little England was meant to give Americans a feel for a traditional English Pub.

She took in her first shot and chased it with a mouthful of beer. Russell did the same. Henry excused himself, tending to other things. Unlike the crowded Juanita's, the two sat all but alone. Neither said anything for a few moments. Renee took large gulps from her pint as Russell sipped at his.

Having plowed through a third of her pint, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, then stared into the glass. "You're probably wondering what happened."

Russell shuffled in his seat. How to respond to that. Despite their interaction at The Pub, bonding over booze and the like, he didn't know a lot about their relationship. The ignorance compounded his apprehension. "Well... I guess if you want to talk about it... you will. If not..."

She flashed him a smile, then returned to her beer. Another large swallow. A meager buzz finally sprung up across her head. The fact he wasn't pushing for details was a relief. She had about enough of that shit. Then again... "It... it didn't end well."

“I’m sorry.”

“I mean... it wasn’t... it didn’t hit him... but part of me sure as hell felt like it.”

Russell didn’t answer. He knew about hell having no fury and all that, but never imagined Renee the type.

She caught Henry’s attention and asked for another shot. “I feel bad about asking you to hold a seat for him that night. I guess... I guess I wasted your time, huh?”

“You didn’t waste my time. I was going to be there anyway, right?”

A small laugh sprang from her. Russell did the same. She then fell silent.

“There’s one good thing I have to say about him.” She watched Henry pour another shot.

“And that is?” Russell asked, hoping she wasn’t going to say that he was good in bed, and she would miss it, or something similar.

“At least when he wanted to break up...” A small chuckle. “He had the balls to do it in person.” She let out another, then slammed her shot.

Russell heard of many breakup stories, ranging from the mundane to the bizarre. Oddly, few entailed a face-to-face encounter. With the help of modern technology, most involved emails, text, voice message or social media posts. Share the harrowing event with all their family and friends.

“I found out... things,” she continued. “Not that he came out and said he was fuc—” She cleared her throat. “Seeing someone else before we split. I kind of... inferred that. You know. I don’t know who she is... and I don’t care.” She did. But it was neither the time nor place to bring that up.

Part of Russell wanted to find Jason and beat him with a bat. Although it might feel good, it wouldn’t solve a thing nor, as he speculated, make Renee feel any better. She again motioned for another shot. Henry inquired if Russell needed another also. He did.

“I wished it could have gone better for you,” he said.

“Thanks. Me too. But... from what he said... it would a ended all the same.”

Henry placed their shots in front of them. “Here you go.”

“Thanks, Henry,” Russell said.

This time Renee didn’t down hers. Instead, she drank up half of what remained of her beer. The last conversation with Jason had popped into her head. The beer helped abate the rage and sadness.

The conversation with Russell helped too. “It’s times like this that you find out things... you know... about people,” she said, staring at her drinks.

“What things?” Russell asked, finishing his second shot.

A serious look. “Things about people. Things you suspect but... but don’t really want to know. It’s... complicated. Ya know.”

She wondered what was worse: breaking up or how friends and strangers treated her afterwards. Two sides of an emotional coin with the same outcome. Flip it and you still lose. She turned back and finished her beer, then asked for another.

Sipping away at his, Russell wondered if he should slow her drinking down or try keeping up. He set a middle course. He'd wait a bit before having another. Once her fresh pint appeared, she downed her shot.

“You know what really gets me,” she then said, the buzz in her head settling down to a steady hum, the alcohol loosening her thoughts. “I swear... I wasn’t single for more than a day before damn near every guy I know started hitting on me. Not overtly, of course. Trying to be *coool* about it. Yeah right. I can see it in their faces... you know.”

“See what?” Russell asked.

Sarcasm tinged with frustration in her voice. “That... that little sparkle. Like...” She snapped her fingers. “If they're quick enough I’ll start dating them. Hop right into bed with them... get me on the rebound.”

“Maybe... they’re just trying to be nice.” He wasn't naïve. He knew some were after something else. But

he was guilty of the same crime, if only in spirit. Despite the topic, seeing her talking more was at least a step in the right direction.

Renee felt her phone vibrate. Shuffling around, she yanked it out. Glaring at the text message, she rolled her eyes. "And there's another!" Scoffing, she deleted the message. She'd endured enough cyber sympathy. "Delete... Delete... Delete," she repeated, fingers moving across the front of the phone. Not going to read a one. Nor return the missed calls.

"The wonders of modern technology... reach out and delete someone," Russell said. She placed the phone back in her pocket, smiling as she turned, giving him a wink.

"And the worst... guys like—" The image of Jack popped into her head. "Well... who say..." She made the quote sign. " 'I'm here for you if you need anything' crap." Henry pointed at the empty shot glass and raised his eyebrows. She nodded. "I'm friends with a lot of guys. Doesn't make 'em special."

"The bastards." Russell attempted some humor. This time she didn't laugh.

"And it won't be long before the girls start playing Cupid, *aaaagain*, because they *aaaall* know some guy who's *reeeeeally* nice. Like I couldn't find a guy myself." A few beaus from her past crossed her bustling thoughts. "I'm not that pathetic."

What? Russell couldn't believe it. The fact she applied that word to her came as a shock. How could she even...

He thought about telling her no one said she was, or some other words of comfort, but remained quiet as she vented. Something to cheer her up maybe? What is it most say: You'll survive... Find someone better—

“You know what I mean? Right?” she spouted, turning to him.

His eyebrows shot up. “Well—”

“When... when you went through a breakup, didn't your friends do the same thing?”

A cautious shrug. “Well... yeah a—”

“Whether it's your fault or not?”

Better look nonchalant. “Yeah. Of course—”

“And say dumb ass things like ‘It's not you, it's him’ or that fishes in the sea shit.” Turning, she grabbed her shot and hoisted into the air. “Because if I hear from anyone that crap again, I'm going to grab a baseball bat and run amok. Cheers!”

Thankful for the warning, Russell raised his shot glass also but said nothing. He sipped. She pounded hers.

Done, she looked him over. Confusion painted his face, looking down at the countertop, remaining silent. Like he feared a tongue-lashing directed at him. “Hey. Okay. I know... I know not all guys... girls... are like

that.” Even holding a damn good buzz, she had to admit that. He fixed onto her as she cracked a smile at him. “I mean... look at you. You’ve done nothing but sit and... listen while I bitch about men, women, life.” Back to her drink, taking a sip. “You haven’t tried to put your arm around me... taken my hand... caress it... all the while telling me everything is going to be fine. God... that’s the last thing I need right now.”

The thought had crossed his mind, but again thankful for the heads up. He thought for a moment, thinking of something to say. The extra shot finally began freeing up his apprehension. “To be honest, I... I don’t really know what to say,” he began. “In the end, the only person who knows what you are going through... is you. I guess. There’s only one you... one Renee... and, well... you’re it. One of a kind.”

At that, she turned. He stared into the mirror behind the bar. His simple words weren’t the usual clichés. And his honest admission that he didn’t know what to say was, in its own way, comforting. He didn’t have an answer for everything. Didn’t act like some self-help nut job. And he wasn’t hitting on her. “Thank you, Russ. You’re a good guy too.” She gave him a nudge with her elbow.

The warm glow returning to her face gave him a good feeling. It wasn’t just the alcohol doing that. She turned and summoned Henry.

“Another round and... two more shots,” she commanded, then looked back at him. “You’re right Russ. There is no sense in seeing a holiday go to waste.”

He didn’t object, happy to see Renee trying to enjoy herself. Part of him knew the pain might return tomorrow. But that was then. This is now.

The two left another local watering hole called Island Liqueurs. Neither had ever been there. Given a sudden desire for the new, they decided to check it out. Copious amounts of alcohol helped in their decision. Totting down the sidewalk, one could tell neither had been sober for a while. They laughed at anything appearing funny, oblivious to the stares they drew from the few roaming the streets. While not falling down drunk, a few more would put either of them in that state.

Russell felt good, glad to have made her evening better. Part of it all the liquor, no doubt, but seeing Renee having a good time was a drug all on its own. The two discussed a variety of subjects while hopping around: their work, the ups and downs of living downtown, their friends. The whole time neither brought up the subject of boyfriends or girlfriends, or anything intimate. That might have led to talk about Jason. Both stayed away from talking about the future,

which suited him fine. He wanted to concentrate on the moment. In the end, being a good friend, listener and the like, she would see he was different.

Renee felt good too. All the beer and shots were having the desired effect of numbing her mind. Every once in a while, Jason popped into her head. What the bastard said. How she felt about the asshole now. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. But Russ was there. To talk to. Laugh with. It been a while since she'd let loose, and it felt good. Damn good.

Through the buzz in her head, she began rambling about an incident from her past. At the moment, it sounded funny. Approaching an intersection, she finished the story about her early days as a waitress. "Then... then... they used some... some coupon for some free wings..."

"Ah huh," he mumbled, hanging on to her every word.

"I bring them their... free... free order of wings... right..."

"Then what?"

"And a pitcher of water... yeah... water. That's all what they... they wanted."

"Water! Pfft!" He scoffed. "What's the point? Real men have beer with their wings!"

"Real women too, Russ!"

Both laughed, reaching around the other's waist to give a small hug.

"Then... then," she continued. "This one guy says 'Thanks' and that's all. Not even... even a tip!"

"Cheap bastards."

"You know it!"

They came to a halt, staring at the four-way stop. Where to go next? Russell released his hold and looked down the street. He saw the building with his loft. During their bar hopping, the two had made a complete circle.

"Wow," he spouted. "We really got turned around. There's my loft... down... down there."

Renee saw him point down the street. One subject never coming up during their debauchery was where they lived. Through the steady whirl in her head, she realized her loft was on the other side of downtown. "Wow! You're right... we don't know where the hell we've... we've been going all night."

"Just been winging it... following the booze."

They laughed. Renee glanced back down the street towards his loft. "Hey can... can we stop there... your loft... I have to... to pee." Most bars and restaurants wouldn't let them use their facilities unless they were customers. The Pub tried evoking the same standard. Even sloshed, she had no intentions of going there tonight.

Nowhere near sober, the realizations smacked him: She'd be coming up to his loft. They'd be alone. With his eyes locked onto hers, he gave an answer. "Ah... yeah... sure."

They set off. He couldn't remember if he cleaned up before leaving. And that pile of laundry still sat ready for the wash.

Renee stumbled more than walked through the front door. Once inside, Russell pointed towards the bathroom.

"It's... it's there."

Eyeing the door, she patted his arm. "Thanks."

He stood by as she lumbered in. What to do next? Should he get comfortable? If she saw him getting ready to stay, she might think he was trying to seduce her. Scratch that. Maybe she wanted to hit some more bars? The buzzing in his head confounded any ability to think straight. Wandering over to the couch, he didn't sit. Instead, he leaned against the back of the sofa, slouched and waited. He's got to get focused. He won't get another shot. Besides, he might have to use the bathroom himself.

Renee washed her hands with halting speed. Done, she braced herself against the sides of the sink, resting her hands upon the white porcelain. Numb as they were, she couldn't feel it. Looking up, her blurry image

mocked her from the mirror. The glazed eyes. Ruffled strands of hair. Missing makeup on and around her mouth from wiping it too many times with the back of her hand. The haze of inebriation couldn't hide those. She was drunk, but not enough to recognize that fact.

Drying her hands, the pronounced buzzing became more acute with each swipe of the towel. There she was, after another binge. Her sloshing logic questioned her reflection. Drunk because... what? Why? Because of him... all the others? Me? That's how she handled it. "You're... you're right... Jason... you ass... asshole," she hissed at the mirror. "I'm... no saint."

Russell caught the door as it swung open. Renee emerged and strutted towards the couch.

"Wow. Oh boy Russ. I feel... much... a shit ton better. Thanks."

"Anything for you... Renee."

"You got anything to drink... here... to drink?"

Straightened up, he looked over the kitchen. "A... I don't remember." Removing his jacket, he wandered there and slung it over the waist-high wall near the breakfast bar. He couldn't remember if he had any bourbon left as he rummaged through the cupboards. Turning back, Renee stumbled to the couch, slumping into it more than sitting down. "A... jeez. I'm out. Sorry."

No answer. She sat at the end, rubbing her head. He paced towards her. “A... I... have nothing here... Renee. Sorry.”

His voice came through the ringing in her ears. She looked over as he neared. “Oh. That’s... that’s okay, Russ.” A slurred voice passed through numbing lips. “You’ve been... nice enough... nice already.” Unlike other douche nozzles. Jason popped into her head. What, or who, is he doing...

“Thanks.” Unsure what to say next, that’s all he said.

Renee went back to rubbing her head. “You know... you know. I wish...”

“Wish what?”

“That some people weren’t such... such dicks... you know...”

Although buzzing from all the alcohol, he figured she was talking about Jason. She hadn’t mentioned him since Little England.

She rambled on. “You know... you know... he’s prob... probably over me... me by now... screwing some...” Her voice trailed off. “Now I know... I know...” she spouted, the words sliding out of her mouth.

“Know what—” Russell began, then stopped. In an instant, he regretted doing so. She might say things he didn’t want to hear.

Her muddled mind saw Jason. “All he... he wanted me to do was lay there... moan until he was done... then he could leave... that morning... that’s where he... he went.”

He didn’t want an explanation. Neither could he find words in response.

She droned on. “Maybe... maybe that’s all I’m good for... you know. Why should I try to have... have feelings...”

Shocked, he came to her defense. “Come on. Please. Don’t... don’t talk like that. It’s not your fault—”

“Maybe Jason’s right... I’m no saint...”

He came around to the front of the couch, but kept his distance. “How could you ever... ever think you’re to... to blame—”

“You don’t’... don’t know me... Russ. I seem to... to choose... hook up with guys who... I don’t know, Russ. Maybe... maybe I... I’m no good at...” The last, painful conversation with Jason came roaring back into her head. She tried fighting it off, but now the alcohol worked in the other direction. It broke down any mental barrier she attempted putting up.

He couldn’t make sense of what she just said. “No good at what?”

“Like that... that one guy in... in college. When I was in... for that one... year. Oh we... we had a great

time. Then... Christmas break and he... comes back... how he reconnected with a...a old GF over the break. Yeah. Bet they... he reconnected her in a dozen... positions.” She waved her hand. “The... he never came... came out and said it but... sitting there in that... coffee shop. But she was from... the... right side of the tracks.”

Her eyes fell with her chin. Russell moved closer.

“Maybe it’s... karma. I... I...” she continued.

“You what?”

“Maybe it was my... fault,” Renee spouted in a slurred voice. “I... I don’t know... maybe... Jason might... maybe... me...”

He could still his tongue no longer. The anger swelled out. “Stop that!” he spat. “For the love of God... Stop that!” He stepped towards her, pointing. “I know... I know you’ve heard a lot of clichés... fishes in the sea... it’s not you... blah, blah, effin’ blah. But they’re true. You’re a wonderful—” A stumbled back. “Ah... person... yet you sit and act like it’s all over... nobody cares... that you should just give up... blaming yourself. So the hell what? We’ve all screwed up when it came to... to people. Please Renee... stop it! Show some respect for yourself!”

Motionless, raising her head as he spoke, her eyes began swelling up. Her body started shaking with the coming tears. The cork just popped.

The sight shifted his anger to regret. He moved towards the couch.

“I’m so... so fucked up right now!” She gasped between sobs, turning her head away. He plopped on the couch next to her, almost sliding off due to his own inebriation. Recovering, he placed consoling hands on her arms.

“No, no. You’re not,” he stated in a gentle tone, watching the tears rolled down her cheek. “I’m sorry... I didn’t mean... to be... to say—”

“I’m so fucked up—”

“No... no—”

“People think that... I have... this great life... but... they don’t know... I’m a big... big loser!”

“No... no you’re not...”

“Yes... yes I... I am Russ...” The tears were now a small torrent.

“Don’t say that about you... yourself—”

“All I do... is work... drink... screw around... bitch...” Her head moved back and forth with each self-condemnation.

“Don’t say that—”

“Work... drink... get fucked... I. Have. No. Life—”

“No... don’t say that!”

“It’s true... you don’t have... have to... to lie... I don’t... like being... lied to.”

He could think of nothing to say he had not already tried. Nothing worked.

“I can’t... even... keep... a guy... like Jason,” she continued, sobbing even harder. “He was... banging... *SCREWING* someone else... someone... better... before we... even... broke... up!”

“Don’t... blame yourself—”

“Just like... I did... back then...”

Renee continued sobbing, her mind and body filled with fear, hate, sorrow and remorse. The alcohol mixing them all into a pool of despair pouring into her heart. Pouring from her eyes. Nothing mattered right now except expelling it all. Not work. Not Jason. Not the world. Not even Russell. She spat out her confession.

“I cheated on... this guy... this guy... and I didn’t care... back then... I was... like... so what we’re... not married... and...” She coughed up some spit. “And now... now... karma’s...” With a hand on her head, she went on. “I’m no saint... I’m no saint and no... no one cares.”

Then silence. Russell’s eyes grew wide. All the dreams he had of her. All the little fantasies his eager mind concocted. About the perfect relationship befitting such a great girl. They turned their backs and walked away.

Despite her state of mind, she remembered where she was, although seeing and thinking was difficult. Opening her tear-filled eyes, Russell sat next to her. Her crying abated.

Russell peered into her drenched eyes and cheeks. “Hey. I... care.” The dreams may have left. But his heart... never.

He continued a dumbfounded stare, believing his words had no comforting effect. He felt powerless, not knowing what else to do. Gazing into her eyes, she at least wasn't crying as hard. “What you need is... rest... sleep. Tomorrow things will look better... I promise.”
Lame. He knew it. It was the only thing he could think of.

The pain and alcohol prevented her from making sense of things. But his comforting words started working. “Yeah... yeah. Tomorrow. It will be better... better... tomorrow.”

“Yes. All you need is some rest... sleep.” He attempted a smile, part of him knowing he could never deliver on such a promise.

Placing her hand on his arm, she smiled through the tears. “Thank you... Russ.”

She could hardly stand, let alone make it home, and Russell knew it. “You can... stay here... tonight... if you want,” he said before his senses told him not to. Inebriation caused the words to leap out before they

registered in his brain. He screwed up. She'd take it the wrong way. Releasing his hold, he shuffled away. "I... I mean... you on the bed and... I'll do the couch—ah... sleep on the couch. And... like I said... things will be better tomorrow."

She looked up and attempted a smile. Unable to argue. Unable to think much beyond the here and now. "Thanks. You're so... so sweet."

"I'm sorry if what I said... those things... made you cry... I wasn't trying to be mean."

"It's not... not you, Russ." She wiped her eyes with her hand. "I'm not... not crying because of... of you. And... I'm sorry... I'm acting... like... a baby... like this."

"I'll get you something to wipe your eyes with." He got up.

Fatigue, emotions and the alcohol began hitting her with a vengeance. Returning with some tissue, she could hardly lift her arms to wipe away the tears. Leaning forward, her crying came to an end, propping her arms on her knees as she cleaned her eyes.

Russell sat back down at the other end of the couch. He too began feeling the need for sleep, brought on by all the alcohol and his own emotions. Seeing her like this was so unexpected. So painful to watch. Finally, seeing her stop crying brought some comfort.

“You’re... you’re going to be okay... in the morning... I’m sure.”

She faced him, still hunched forward. She smiled, then leaned back, sitting lifelessly as she tried to speak. “I know... I know... I will... Russ. Thanks... thanks to you.”

He smiled back. Her last words the best he heard all night. He could finally do something for her.

“I think... I think...,” she spouted. “I need... to lay down... sleep.”

“Yeah. You're right.” He got up, knowing she’d need help getting into the bed.

Renee kicked off her shoes with zero subtlety before standing up. He aided her as she walked, or more wobbled, towards the bed. She put her arm around him to steady herself then let out a small belch. “I am glad... it was you... with me tonight.”

“Me too,” he responded. “I mean... to make sure you... you got home... or at least somewhere... safe. Just get... comfortable. Okay?”

They both stopped next to the bed. He made sure she wouldn't fall before releasing her. He then proceeded around to the other side to ready enough pillows. “Let me get these... fluffed up... for you.” He leaned over the bed, careful not to fall over. He wasn't much better off than Renee. “Plus... if you need... need another cover... I’ve got... one... another.” He

pulled back the thin blanket. When's the last time he changed the sheets? Too late now. Finished, he stood back up and looked at her. "If you need more I'll—"

Her jeans were halfway off. The shirt didn't go below her waist, and what she had on below that didn't cover much. Her entire, all but bare backside stood in full. Transfixed, a dozen thoughts raced through his inebriated mind. Having long imagined what she'd look like if and when she got this way, her physical attributes were near perfect. The fact she was on the verge of passing out diluted any glamor. There should have been a thrill. A sense of accomplishment for having finally won her over. He felt neither. A wave of apprehension came over him. Finally, he turned. "Ah... I am... so... sorry..." He spat out words more than spoke. "I should... give you some... ah... privacy, I can—"

"Don't be... such a... a prude. You said... you said... get comfortable!" She sat on the bed, yanking the jeans off, letting them drop onto the floor as she stood again. Her emotional episode only minutes before all but forgotten, she made a drunken attempt to lighten the mood. "Besides, I'm sure... I'm sure..." Both hands pointed at the bed. "You've had more than a few... few chicks here with their... their pants off... in this loft... yeah... ha... know what I mean... you... you *stuuud* you! You don't fool... fool me... Russ. I

bet... bet you got a drawer full off... of... trophy... undies... right there..."

Not wanting to discuss a number hovering near zero, he turned back. Renee slogged herself under the sheet and blanket. With one knee on the bed, he bent over and arranged the pillows. She then rolled over, her head landing in his hand. Motionless, her blurry, light blue eyes locked onto his. Despite all the tears, the waning red and puffy eyes, the confessions, her stumbling, he still saw a flawless beauty through his own haze. Her alcohol drenched breath reaching him each time she exhaled didn't cover the inviting smell of the perfume she wore. He wove his fingers through her soft hair. She made no attempt to stop him.

The emotional rollercoaster finally burned itself out. She was safe. In his bed. Willing eyes stared into his. Seconds ticked by. Thoughts and desires, surreal and unfulfilled, struggled to make themselves known and expressed. It was here, and it was now, as if their entire lives led to this one moment in time. Nothing else mattered. Except the future.

"Rest now, okay," he said with a gentle breath. The moment of temptation was now past.

A feeble smile spread across her face. Her eyelids danced up and down, fighting off and begging for sleep. She then rolled over. Scrunching into a fetal position, her head buried itself into the pillow.

Laying there, the words Jason spoke to her filtered past the alcohol and fatigue. Through the haze of drunkenness, they again brought out the anger.

“You...” she mumbled, mouth half buried into the pillow. “You... called me that you... fuckwad...” The words flooded back. Tears creep into her eyes. She bemoaned. “I’m not... a piece...” A few incoherent huffs. More tears and curses. “I’m not...”

Russell had already plopped onto the couch as her paltry cursing drifted through the loft. Turning towards the bed, the back of the sofa between them, he listened on as she sobbed. Lying there in a petrified buzz, he felt helpless once again.

ighting out of sleep, a dull pain radiated from the back of her head. Moving, it spread throughout her entire back. Opening her eyes, Renee then squinted. The sunlight greeting her sight showed itself through the windows. Rolling onto her back only sent a wave of pain throughout the rest of her body. Closing her eyes didn't abate the growing headache. Opening them again, she noticed square patterns covering the ceiling. They differed from the parallel ones greeting her from above while lying down. Then her mind limped through whatever memories popped up from the night before. Her cell phone. Going to The Pub. The bastard Jack. Meeting Russell. Juanita's. Little England. Island Liqueurs. Russell—

She was still in his loft. Holy shit. Part of her wanted to shoot up and out of the bed. The rest of her

hangover body didn't have the desire to do so. Last night's images poured through the fog of her binge. A dry, pale taste robbed her mouth of spit. Bits and pieces of her conversation with Russell. Talking about Jason. Her sobbing, pouring her heart out. What else did she say or... do...

Shame and embarrassment began filling her. All this to add to what would be one helluva rough hangover.

She pulled her arm from under the blanket and caressed her head in a futile attempt to abate the headache. The events of last night started sinking in. All she wanted to do now was get up and leave. God knows what Russ thinks of her. Thinks she's some manic-depressive who can't hold her liquor. An emotional basket case who hates the world, men and herself.

Mustering what strength she could, she sat up, placing her feet on the hardwood floor. All the time, she held her head with one hand. She leaned forward, resting her arms on her knees. The urge to go to the bathroom hit her.

“Morning.”

Looking up, Russell stood a few feet from her. He donned sweat pants and a tee shirt. The faded logo thereon representing some university still visible. She wiped her eyes, cleared her throat and lowered her

head to hide her face. “Mor... morning,” she whispered, the feeling of shame growing stronger. How bad she must look.

“Hope you slept well.” Russell stood there, feeling not much better due to his own hangover. At least he had enough strength to get up and make coffee.

“Yeah... yes... Russ. Thanks.” She didn’t want to look at him. She’d already made a big enough fool of herself.

“The couch wasn’t too bad,” he said with a slight smile. Her desire to avoid sudden movements and lack of conversation meant she must be feeling it too. “I guess all the shots I... we had helped last night. Although I’m feeling it now.”

She raised her head enough to see the sofa sitting a few feet beyond the end of the bed. Part of a pillow peeked over the arm and part of a blanket slung over the top. He’d surrendered his bed to her while he slept on what appeared to be a not too comfortable couch. Great. Now she feels worse. A desire to leave grew stronger by the moment. But something else beckoned her immediate attention.

“I need... the bathroom.” She got up and strode past him.

“A... I put a spare robe on the bed if you need it...”

Hearing him, she looked down. Her state of undress lay bare. She froze. “*OH MY GOD!*” Her subdued scream filled the loft.

A massive wave of embarrassment crashed into her. A semblance of modesty returned along with sobriety. She tried covering herself with her hands, all the while wondering if he was staring at her butt. A few moments of fumbling then she realized her hands wouldn't be enough. Looking over the bed and seeing the thin blue robe, she grabbed it, but didn't put it on. Instead, she wrapped it around her waist, hurrying herself into the bathroom.

Russell stood by. Best to let her compose herself. He might act the same way if that had been him.

It took Renee a few minutes to finish her business, finally putting the robe on before heading to the sink to wash up. Looking at herself in the mirror, she felt like she'd done this before. Despite the *déjà vu*, one thought rang through: did she look worse now or last night? Then she wondered when she felt worse: last night or now. The gaps in her memory. She looked down at her hips. Absent was that one rousing sensation. So they hadn't...

But what else? What the hell else did she do or say? Looking back up and into her eyes, the regret screamed at her. To undress in front of him. Parade around half-naked like some type of cheap date. For fuck's sake!

You came onto him? Didn't you? Wanting to stick it to that dickhead Jason. You thought about that before you got piss drunk. Russell must think—

She leaned over. Questions about last night weren't the only thing coming up. She bolted to the toilet. She made it with a half second to spare.

Russell heard the faint, unmistakable sounds radiating from the bathroom. Wanting to go and offer help, he refrained. Heaving was something she wanted to do in private. Instead, he crept towards the bathroom door and waited to see if she summoned help. A couple of minutes later she fell silent. Then came the sounds of water running in the sink. He headed back to the kitchen.

Renee emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later. He readied a glass of water, just in case.

“A... where's my... my stuff?” She didn't even look at him as she headed away from the bathroom.

He came around, glass of water in hand, motioning towards a chair next to the bed. “I put them there.”

Her jeans sat folded over the back of the chair and shoes resting on the seat. She hurried towards them. With a smile and offering, he hoped to make her feel more comfortable. “I have some water, if you need it. I know you are probably—”

“Thank you for last night.” She began putting her pants on without removing the robe.

He stood speechless, confused by her actions, unable to figure out why she was in a hurry. “Renee... you don’t have to leave. Everything’s cool. Have some water, coffee—”

“I don’t... don’t want to be a bother.”

“A bother? You’re not that.” He did something to offend her. Had to be it. If he had, he wanted to know what and apologize. “Renee... if I did something... please tell me. I was just trying to... to help... be nice—”

“I... I just need to go.”

She still didn’t look at him, buttoning up her pants, feeling what she believed his judgmental stare. Finished, she cast off the robe, then grabbed her shoes, but didn’t put them on.

“A... again... thanks for everything,” she said, heading towards the front door. Halfway there she paused, but didn’t turn to look at him. Bits and pieces of her lying next to him last night shot into her mind. All that happened. And what didn’t. “Thank you for not...” With that, she turned and continued to the door.

Russell, standing there speechless, puzzled and dumbfounded sputted, “Renee! Please!”

Feelings of shame and embarrassment almost robbed him of the strength to follow. She didn’t answer. He wanted to stop her, turn her around and ask her what was wrong. What had he done? But she found

a burst of energy defying her obvious hangover. He stood back as she unlocked and opened the door. As with so many other things happening since running into each other the day before, confusion froze him.

All Renee thought of was leaving. The less she said, the better. Humiliation drove her forward. Humiliated by Jason. Humiliated by the stares from her friends and customers and now Russell. Humiliated by the likes of Jack. Thoughts consumed her. Acting like some drunken floozy. Waking up in a strange bed. Drunk and half dressed. What was the matter with her? Now, with no one to blame, she'd humiliated herself, scurrying out in a flustered walk of shame.

Russell didn't attempt to go after her. He gazed on as the door closed behind her. Flabbergasted, he stood with the glass of water in hand. Stupid. Stupid just standing there. But what else could he have done? He must have done something. Something wrong. And now she hates him.

He headed to the bathroom. Once there he poured out the water into the sink. He then looked in the mirror. He felt sick to his stomach. His hair was a mess. Bags under his eyes. He looked and felt like crap. Having ruined any chance with Renee only made him feel worse. He jolted away from his unappealing reflection.

“Way to go... Russ,” he hissed. “You screwed up again.”

Renee didn't wake up until Tuesday morning. By then, she'd been in her own bed for an entire day. A dull pain in the back of her head greeted her as she awoke. This time, it didn't intensify as she moved. The stiffness told her she had not moved in quite a while. She couldn't remember the last time a binge put her down like this. When opening her eyes, the parallel patterns on the ceiling greeted her sight.

After a few minutes, she rose from the bed, stretching the remaining sleep out as she stood. A muscle spasm in her neck caused her to wince and sit back down. Other than that, and a continued feeling of fatigue, she felt okay. At least her body. Her emotions? Boy. That was another question.

Sitting there, she tried not thinking about the last few days, hoping the memories wouldn't come back. A fleeting hope. They started. Jason. Herself. Drinking. Meeting Russ. His loft. Running away. Adding to her self-imposed torment— she was supposed to help Whitney move in yesterday. Or was it today?

Sounds of movement out in the living room caught her attention. She didn't want to go out and face Chloe, or even Whitney, either of whom wanting to know

what happened. They knew about Jason and her, so their curiosity would be about Sunday night. No one was home after she all but ran back to the loft yesterday. After entering her bedroom, still sick to her stomach and hung-over, she didn't bother washing up. Gathering what strength she could, she stripped and put on shorts and a tee shirt, then passed out.

Hiding forever wasn't an option. Better to get it over with. Besides, hunger pains and thirst began making themselves known. Rising with no deliberate speed from the bed, she stretched once more. Emerging from behind her bedroom door, she saw Chloe rearranging some boxes. Whitney was moving in today.

"Well, well." Chloe's mischievous smile rang clearer than her words. "Look what the cat dragged in then woke up."

Renee ventured a smile. Her face rebelled. "Morning. Ah... what time is it?"

"It'll be morning for about another hour," Chloe said, heading for her own bedroom. "You must have had one hell of a weekend."

She didn't answer. Wasn't it obvious? Instead, she crept towards the kitchen, weaving around a pile of boxes.

Chloe reemerged back into the living room. “Girl, I hope you didn’t go to Pound Town or got some freaky revenge sex. Cause if you did—”

“No! No... I didn’t,” she responded, nearing the kitchen. “It was just... one of those days... nights. Days again.”

Chloe left it at that. “A listen,” she quipped. “I need to do a few things before work this evening. And Whitney will be back soon with the last of her things, and I mean the big things— bed, dresser, you know.”

Renee nodded. “I’ll... I’ll help her. Sorry I wasn’t up earlier. I’ll help her with that big stuff. We’ll manage.”

Not all that sure she could, she felt bad about not helping so far. If she used small steps, she might be able to make it through the day without any bodily harm.

“Oh... you don’t have to worry about that, girl. Those college fellas that live down the hall in the corner loft... remember? And their friends... remember? The ones who might have plans today when I asked for help. Well,” Chloe headed for the front door, “when they saw Whitney this morning, one nearly got trampled in the rush to volunteer.”

Renee let out a chuckle. Her chin fell into her chest.

“You gonna to be okay?” Chloe asked.

“Yeah. I’ll... I’ll be fine,” Renee answered as she neared the refrigerator. “Go. Be careful.”

Chloe headed out. Renee then rummaged through the refrigerator. With hope, she’ll find something to eat that didn’t need cooking or heating up. She felt like doing neither. The less physical and mental exertion, the better. Her eyes caught sight of an energy drink she bought last week. That would do, along with some left buffalo wings in a foam container, courtesy of one of the cooks from The Pub. Not the breakfast of champions, but she didn’t feel or look like one right now.

There on the kitchen counter, she started into her ad hoc breakfast. Alone with her thoughts, she couldn’t help but think about Russ. Their interactions at The Pub. How he never tried to monopolize her attention. Get pushy. Never hitting on her. A lot of other guys were like that too, but it didn’t mean she’d get drunk with them. Then the regrets came. Not staying there yesterday morning and at least... at least what? Apologizing for her behavior? Cry some more? Revenge sex?

The urge was there. She couldn't lie to herself. Not about that. Get back at that jerk Jason. Or to forget the pain the alcohol didn't numb. Maybe both. Luckily, he hadn't indulged in any drunken decision she might have made. Once you cross that sex bridge, there's no

going back. If that had happened, how could they ever look at each other the same way again?

That's a dumbass question. She still can't look at him the same way. How she acted. Calling herself a loser. All the balling on the couch. She could remember all that. She just forgot how to be thankful the next morning. How can she face him? After how she acted? After everything she told him? Bits of her confession came through. Was it real? Did she actually tell him about that?

A knock at the door broke her mental flogging. Looking up, the front door swung open. A young man, whom she didn't recognize, came in carrying the front part of a bed frame. He smiled at her.

"Hi," he spouted. The other man holding the other end, whom she did recognize as living down the hall, swayed in. Both wore their ball caps backwards. The other man then gave her a 'Hi' as well.

"Got us Whitney's bed here," the first one stated. "Which bedroom's hers?"

A finger toward the open door opposite should suffice. The men looked over, then turned back and nodded with a smile as a signal of thanks. She stood by as the two manhandled the frame into the room. All the while, each directed the other on which way to turn the small structure to fit through the door. She listened to their 'Dude, turn it this way' and 'No, dude. Turn it

that way' until they succeeded in getting the bed frame past the doorway. Once placed on the floor, one of the men spoke.

"Hey, you think this bed sleeps two?"

"Maybe. I'll be sure to let ya know when I find out."

He gave his friend a punch on the arm as both exited. They were either oblivious to the fact she could hear them, or didn't care.

Leaning over the kitchen counter, she glanced at the ceiling. "This is going to be *grrreat!*"

A thought struck her, one that might put everything right. At least it just might make things less awkward.

#

Megan sat and waited for Russell to finish, but his dead silence made clear he was done.

"She just... left?" she asked, sitting on the futon, listening as he paced back and forth in the living room of her loft.

"Yeah. I just... I must have said... done something... it's the only explanation."

Megan returned late Monday night from visiting her parents. She called Russell after settling in, whereupon he gave a few details about him and Renee. Still flustered and feeling the effects of his hangover, he didn't go into much detail. They agreed to meet after work the next day. Being a Tuesday after a three-

day weekend, both had much to catch up on. She hadn't run into either Richard or Coleen all day, not wanting such an unwelcome reminder. The thought of what the two did over the weekend crossed her mind and her heart. But knowing something happened to Russell was a more pressing issue. He'd been in her loft for about half an hour, giving a full account. At least what he could remember.

She thought for a moment before responding. She'd seen Russell drink, and on occasion seen him in a not so sober state. But he never got to the point where he started acting like a leech. She'd fended off such men before. Never him.

"Maybe she was... super embarrassed." Megan hoped to ease his conscience.

"What? Why? She hadn't done anything wrong." He paced back towards the kitchen. "I mean, she probably didn't mean to drink that much. Probably just wanted to forget about Jason. There's nothing wrong with that. And I made sure she got somewhere safe." Stabbing a finger at the floor punctuated his words. "I just don't know why she acted that way. Got the feeling she never wants to... to look at me again... see me again... talk to me again. Damn it! I should have just..." He glanced up, fists clenched, as if the answers appeared on the ceiling. "Should a stayed with my

normal routine. Mixing things up. Pfft. What a huge mistake!”

The thought of Renee never speaking to him again is what hurt. That was obvious. She made out the confusion in his voice as he blamed himself for everything. So too the regret for the entire weekend.

He turned to her and went on. “I did everything like... a nice guy. A... a... gentleman. That’s what Renee would have wanted. That’s what all girls want, right?”

Remembering a few experiences in high school and college, she shrugged. “Well, yes. But...”

“But!” he spouted in confusion, stepping towards her. “What do you mean... but? It’s either yes or no!”

Turning on the futon, she faced him. “Listen. It may be some macho male fantasy to wake up with an attractive woman in their bed. The same isn’t true the other way around. Especially after a binge. In all probability, she was ashamed of herself, and most likely scared. You have to admit, Russ, that...” A pause, knowing he wouldn’t like it. “Before yesterday, you two really didn’t know each other. I mean... other than The Pub, you’re nearly a complete stranger. And now, she wakes up, hungover, and doesn’t remember a whole lot from the night before. Gets up, realizes she’s standing in front of a man she barely knows half dressed. Come on! Was she going to ask if you wanted

to start dating? You might have been her guardian angel, but think about it from her point of view.”

He hadn't. Until now. Whether Megan spoke from experience, he intended not asking. Regardless, she was right. How was Renee to know all he wanted to do was help, and that he would never take advantage of her? It wasn't as if they sat down and discussed the subject beforehand. Her comforting views didn't relieve all his anxiety, or how Renee might treat him in the future. At least talking to Megan and getting her perspective made him feel more at ease.

“Maybe... maybe you're right,” he admitted. “I just don't... don't know what to do next.”

Neither did Megan. She remained silent, thinking it better to let him get everything off his chest. Russell sat in the chair adjacent to the futon. Looking at her, she gave him a smile.

“She might even get mad at me for telling you all this.”

Megan chuckled. “Renee knows we're friends. And that neither of us are going to blab about it to everyone on earth or post it online.”

Russell let out a small laugh. She then noticed his smile disappear. His head hung low. She scooted to the other end of the futon. “Listen,” she began in a consoling tone. “I don't know what to do next either. Maybe we... you should just see what happens.”

He looked up, attempting another smile, then nodded. Fresh out of ideas too, he had no other choice but to wait and see. He still felt bad. Somehow, it had to be his fault. Worse, his friendship with Renee –real or otherwise– might be over. That meant he had no chance at all, regardless of what he did in the future. Getting off the subject may help. “I forgot to ask how your weekend was.”

Megan smiled, leaning back. “Was great. My old room... home-cooked meals... hanging with the folks. Helped keep my mind off...” A few jerking nods. “...other things.”

He knew what that meant. Tonight had been his turn to go on about regret, recalling their conversation over dinner at the Deli. In her case, it was inaction when it came to Rick. Now, for him, it been too much when it came to Renee. And here they were. Sitting there. Not knowing what would happen next for either. The still, lifeless air of an unknown future hung between them.

Shaping up to be a normal, all to routine workday, Russell and his crew went about managing an office building. This meant not only dealing with current problems –an inoperative AC unit here, an overturned trash can there, someone parked in my spot– but the ones left by the old management company. Like many of the buildings in the downtown area, the one their company took over was old. Designed and built in the late 1960s. And it showed. Some of the old paint still visible in the basement appeared put up by those returning from Woodstock. No doubt still under the influence of whatever drugs passed around there. Claustrophobic elevators, no bigger than a closet, took people up and down. Old fashion steam heaters still graced many of the old offices. Efforts at modernizing were in progress. It'll never be Class A office space. But they could try bringing it up to modern standards.

Russell strode into his small office right after one pm. He'd been out and about all morning, checking on things and assigning various tasks to those in his charge. Plopping into the chair behind his small desk, he noticed one of his crew in the hallway.

“Hey, Juan!” he bellowed. The middle-aged man turned and walked in. “You got that stuff finished in the lobby?”

“Yes, Russ. What’s up?”

“Need you to find Steve and get over to that one office on the fifth floor. You know... the one we need to get cleaned out.”

“Ah... yeah. But Steve is still working on that one busted pipe.”

He forgot about that not so small problem. He sighed. “Okay. I’ll meet you there in a bit.” A shaking head. “My God, that place hasn’t been touched in decades. There’s still a picture of Reagan on the wall!”

Juan nodded and left. Russell glanced at the desk phone and saw the message light blinking. Best to check them before leaving again. Might be awhile before he returns. After accessing the message system via the speakerphone, there were two. The first came from a vendor inquiring about a past due bill. No great shock. He sent all accounts payable to a regional office out of state. The company prided itself in being a multi-billion dollar *industry leader*. Yet, it had trouble

keeping track of and paying an invoice totaling about two hundred and fifty dollars. Next message. Silence greeted him. Most likely a robocall, trying to sell something no one wanted. When no one answered, the computer making the call would hang up. The message left behind consisting of ten seconds of static. Reaching over, his eager finger hovered over the delete button. Then a woman's voice chimed through the speaker.

“Ah... hey Russ... it's me... Renee. Ah... didn't get—”

He hit the speaker button to stop the message. More shocked than scared. Why would she...

Even with his workload, she consumed his thoughts. He hadn't seen her since Monday morning, not even venturing to The Pub out of fear and embarrassment. What should he expect in the message? The thought she may never want to speak again still haunted him. She must have called for a reason. This time, he used the receiver to listen. Apprehension and curiosity gripped him as he awaited her voice.

“Ah... hey Russ... it's me... Renee. Ah... didn't get your cell, so I figured out where you worked... you telling me all about it during our binge. Guess I'm not as dumb as I look. Ha, ha. Ah... anyway... sorry about... ah... bolting Monday. A little freaked out...

you know. It... it wasn't anything you did... you know... just... freaked out. Anyway... was wondering if you are up to... ah maybe... dinner with me and Whitney. She's mine and Chloe's new roommate. She's new to downtown and I... you know... want her to feel comfortable. Ah... we'll be at the Deli about sixish... tonight. If you can't make it... I understand. You might have... work and the like. Anywho... ah... hope to see you there. Kay? Bye.”

He hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair. An enormous weight left his heart. Megan was right. Renee was just scared. Freaked out. That's all. That she didn't leave a callback number was strange. But Megan mentioned they barely knew each other, and maybe Renee was the cautious type. No blame there. This was her way to correct that. With a friend there to make her feel more comfortable. He now had another chance. A better one than a few days ago, getting drunk. If they stayed sober, they could talk, whether Jason still came to mind.

He then remembered Juan. Get that out of the way. Then later, get back to his loft early enough to get ready.

Megan's day was no less typical. Old tasks to finish. New ones to start. Both awaited her and not enough hours in the day to complete them. Luckily, her

workload granted little time to think about Rick. This, and not running into nor seeing him since the workweek began, helped keep her mind on the tasks at hand. Returning to her loft was a different matter. The image of him and Coleen having a good time in Florida kept popping into her head. Strolling on the beach. Lounging on the boat and... and other things she didn't want to think about. Her solitude didn't help. Then there was Russell and his predicament. This occupied her mind as well. She felt bad for him. But who could blame Renee for what she did? No matter how many times she told him not to blame himself, he would.

Rising from her desk, a thought: They should visit The Pub tonight, the two of them. Renee and he might feel less awkward with a friendly face there. Then again, maybe she didn't want to talk about it, or see him again. Who knows? Another thing she could relate to.

She had to visit a fellow analyst on the floor above, but decided to hit the break area first. A caffeinated drink was in order.

Strolling down the hall, smile upon her face, she gave a hello to various coworkers passing by. The break room looked more like a kitchen minus the stove. Two vending machines sat therein: one for cold drinks, the other an assortment of snacks. Standing before the former, she fished some coins from the pocket of her

gray blazer. Why did a bottle of soda cost so much? Sliding each coin in, footsteps caught her attention. She turned. It was Rick.

Every muscle tensed up. Only the sound of the last coin jingling through the innards of the vending machine broke the silence. His very sight made her heart beat faster, as it always did when they met. She stood there. Staring at him. Watching as he cast a container into the microwave. She drew a breath, but didn't speak. He tapped away on the number pad upon the microwave, oblivious to her presence. She had to say something. To hear his voice. See his eyes.

"Hello, Rick," she said, a glowing smile on her face.

His head half turned. "Oh. Hello Megan."

That's it? Not Megs. No hint of enthusiasm. No emotion filled his voice. No smile or look of joy appeared on his face. He went right back to the microwave. Megan became suspicious. He stood there, as though she had said nothing. A slight hunch in his shoulders. His hair seemed to be less than perfect. Her smile disappeared. Silent seconds ticked by. Not a word came from him, as if she wasn't even there.

"How... are you doing today?" She forced a smile and took a step towards him. "I bet you have a lot of work—"

“Everything’s fine. Megan. Thank you.” The timer on the microwave chimed.

Speechless, she looked on as he pulled out the now hot dish. “Rick. Is everything—”

“Fine. Thank you,” is all he spat out, striding past her meal in hand.

She didn’t watch him leave. She couldn’t. Sadness flooded over her, mixed with a feeling of rejection. Part of her wanted to run after him. Find out what was wrong. Fling her arms around him and pull out whatever bothered him so he could be happy again. The thought of getting something to drink now seemed irrelevant, as did her work. She didn’t see Danielle come in.

“Hello Megan,” Danielle said, heading for the soda vending machine.

“Oh...” She crept out of her stupor, glancing at Danielle. Her face held that beaming, mischievous smile, as if ready to render some important news. “Hello.” That’s all she intended saying.

“I see you too have noticed Rick.” Danielle stopped in front of the soda machine. “Apparently... there’s trouble in paradise.”

Megan turned, fighting off the anger clenching her fists from clenching her face. Her mind groped for words. You... *bitch. The hell do you know!* Instead, “I’m certain Richard will be fine.”

She left, wondering what she should— No. *Could* do for him.

The Deli wasn't particularly busy. Tables still sat available, and only one patron occupied the small bar counter. Russell strolled by the salad and hot food bars, looking beyond to see if Albert worked tonight. He didn't see him, nor did he see Renee at any of the few tables occupied. Checking his watch, he was early. Only five till six. She and her new roommate might want to be fashionably late. Never knew what that was supposed to mean, but it served as a good excuse as any.

He walked up to the bar, deciding to wait there, passing by a young woman seated alone at a small table. Her attention focused on a cell phone. For the three men seated at a nearby table, she seemed to be the focus of their attention. The bartender put on a smile as he approached. "Evening. What can I get you?"

Russell looked over the tables once more. "Ah... just a soda for now. I'm supposed to be meeting some friends here. Not too sure where they'll wanna sit."

The bartender turned to get the drink. As he did so, Russell peered out the large windows of the Deli to catch a glimpse of Renee approaching. Not seeing her, he swung around, taking in his image on the mirror

behind the bar. Did he look okay? Before going out, he spent almost an hour deciding what to wear. Such an endeavor would take about fifteen minutes, if that. For tonight, he chose a white, long-sleeved, collared shirt. One with a little hole in the tip of the collar to button them up so they didn't flop around his neck. Even took the time to iron it, although he possessed no starch to add that special touch. This wasn't a real date. Far from it. He wanted to look his best. Such things were what women like.

"Here you go." The bartender sat an ice-filled glass of soda in front of him. "Who are the friends you're waiting for?"

"Ah... a lady friend of mine and her new roommate." Russell leaned over and took a sip. "She's... the roommate... is new to downtown—"

"Russell?"

Turning, the attractive blond woman seated by herself spoke. For a moment, he stood askance. Then he glanced left and right. Someone else with the same name might be standing nearby.

"Think you're looking for me," she said. Everyone seated gawked at either her or him. Their eyes felt like weights.

He straightened up and began a cautious approach. Stunned, he forgot his soda at the bar.

“I’m Whitney,” she said, standing to greet him. The reason she attracted the attention of the others loomed before him. An attractive, gold-blond haired woman. Her chest stuck out of proportion a bit with her slender frame. Not too much. Enough to draw unwanted attention from both sexes. The thin, snug, sleeveless turtleneck sweater fit her to a tee. Snow-white teeth behind her smile complemented her youthful facial qualities. He walked up and shook her hand, trying to keep his eyes on the face, not her other physical attributes.

“Hey,” he muttered. The unexpected joy of meeting such a striking woman didn’t cloud out other thoughts. “Where’s ah... Renee?”

“Think she got caught up at The Pub,” Whitney stated as both sat. Russell felt the eyes of those present bearing upon them. Exactly what he needed to feel even more uncomfortable.

“Oh. Well...” A hesitant breath. “I guess we can wait for a few.” A feeble smile.

The two remained silent for a few moments. Both stared at the objects on the table rather than each other. Whitney ended the awkwardness.

“So... how was your day? Renee tells me you manage a building or something like that.”

He eased out the answer. “Yes. Not too exciting, but it’s a start in life.”

“She’s told me a lot about you.” Her smile helped break the ice even more. The fact Renee thought of him was a plus, but he wondered exactly how much she told Whitney.

“Oh.” He loosened up. “Well... all the good stuff is true and all the bad stuff is mostly true.”

Both spat out a small laugh. Clueless on what to say next, he fell silent, then Whitney. He had no idea who this woman was. No inkling of what they should talk about. As another bout of silence came, he glanced out the windows to see if Renee approached. Whitney began talking about her new job downtown as a graphic design artist. Not really new, per se, but a transfer from another office doing similar work on the south side of town. He commented on how exciting it must be, and then his own lack of ability to draw, paint, sculpt or the like. She confessed her ability to do so was no better. But computers can do wonders for the artistically challenged. Imagination is what counts.

The two exchanged more small talk for about half an hour, all the while becoming more comfortable. He still wanted to see Renee, but the apprehension about meeting a total stranger, albeit a very eye-catching one, faded. Every now and then, he looked out the windows to see if Renee was heading their way. Whitney told him about her move into the loft, and how their neighbors bend over backwards to help them. That

between their complements and desire to be of further help. The mild sarcasm in her voice when describing said help stood out. Finished, her cell phone went off.

“It’s Renee,” Whitney chimed as she took the call. Russell hoped it a signal she’d soon be there. He sat without a word as Whitney spouted an occasional ‘Oh’ and ‘Great’ as she glanced at him with a smile.

“Tell her I said hi,” Russell said, hiding impatience at not knowing what was going on. Whitney relayed his salutation.

“Renee says ‘Hi’ too.” She returned to the phone. “Well... aha... yeah... sorry to hear that...” She again gave him a look and smiled. “I’m sure we will be fine. Besides, Russ is looking hungrier by the moment. Take care. Bye.”

Suspicious, he watched as Whitney put away her phone. Fear swelled up within him.

“Ah... Renee can’t make it.” She reached for the Deli’s menu from its holder on the table. “Got held up at The Pub. She said to go ahead without her. Besides, I am *sooo* looking forward to trying the food here.”

He now wondered if Renee ever intended on coming. A forced smile covered the pain of rejection. He’d been right and Megan wrong. Renee didn’t want to see him again. Then why the hell...

This was a date set up by Renee. The phone call, prearranged to come at a certain time, Whitney’s

opportunity to stay or leave. All depending on how the evening went. As she went down the menu, glancing at the one's hanging over the food bars, he didn't know whether to be saddened, angry or flattered. Part of him took comfort in the fact Whitney found him interesting enough to stick around. But this had all been about seeing Renee. That's what he wanted. Clenched fists moved over each thigh. His appetite all but disappeared. For Renee and food.

"Are the burgers any good?" Whitney asked, peering into his eyes. "I like the buffalo ones. I mean the meat, not the flavor."

There he was. A super attractive, super nice woman sat in front of him. He thought before answering. Not to respond to her question. Whether to end this now and go home. Try he may, deep inside, he saw Renee through rose-colored glasses. Despite his disappointment, he couldn't ever be mad at her. Disappointed... yeah. Angry... no. Under the table, his hands relaxed. The jeans wiped each sweaty palm clean. If he ended the date, Renee would be angry. That's the last thing he wanted.

"They are good," he finally said. Okay, stay and get his usual meal.

Whitney and he spent the rest of their time talking about various things. Life and work. Good and bad

movies. And, as Whitney noticed more than once, Renee. He discovered the two knew each other since high school. Even attended college together for about a year until Renee dropped out. Not wanting to be rude or seeming to pry, he didn't ask why she did so. Must be a good reason. After everything Renee and he talked about during their bender, he discovered more about her in the past hour than he knew since they first met. Once finished, he asked if she wanted him to walk her back to her new loft. Flattered, Whitney said yes, but back to her car instead. She had to go back to her old apartment and get a few odds and ends before going to her new home.

Walking along the sidewalk, Russell said little. Looking at the ground more than her.

“Just want to say I super enjoyed myself,” Whitney stated about a block away from the Deli.

He looked up and flashed a smile. “I did too. Hope this is a good start to your new life downtown.”

“It was,” Whitney responded with genuine enthusiasm. “I have people like you and Renee to thank for that. And I have to say, this is the best evening I've had in a while.”

His eyebrows shot up with his curiosity, casting her a glance. “Oh?”

“Yeah. I mean...” She glanced back. “Just kicking back, enjoying good old-fashioned burgers. Not so tense.”

“Tense?” Thought he was the only one tense the past two hours.

“Yeah. Like... we talked. Convos about various things. Other times... going out... some people spend more time trying to impress me or everyone else for that matter than... you know... just talk.”

The observation came as a revelation. “Well... thank you again.” Running through all the things he could impress her with would a been futile. And despite his disappointment, the compliment made him feel good. He wanted to hear Renee say those words. But such praise from Whitney brought him more than a little comfort. They walked a few more feet before she spoke again.

“Listen... don’t be angry at her for not showing. She’s a good person, you know.”

Whitney wasn’t stupid, despite the clichés about the intelligence of blonds. She figured out during their conversations where his interest lay. “I could never be angry at her. I’m sorry if I was a bit of a... a bump on the log. I know she was being nice... setting us up like this.”

“Bet you figured that out about an hour ago?”

A jerking nod. "Right after the bailout call. And... thanks for sticking around."

"I have to admit," she said, "I was a bit hesitant about this... at first."

"Understandable."

"But after what Renee told me about her weekend, I was less so. And... to be honest... I'm kinda surprised she told me."

"Oh." His interest peaked. "How so?"

"She... likes to keep things, how can I say, bottled up. When she told me what she did, getting hammered and all, and what you did to help her, and well... what you didn't do, I was shocked she was so open about the whole thing. Waking up. Wearing not much more than a hangover. Then again, might a done the same thing she did."

"Really?" Surprised again, he always saw Renee as an outgoing person. But, like others, would rather keep some things private. Especially after that morning's encounter.

"She's always been like that, since I knew her in high school. At least that's the way she was after we became friends." Her head shook slightly. "Boy, I still remember that fight. She doesn't fight like a girl... she can hit pretty hard."

That stopped him dead. He turned to her with both surprise and shock on his face. “No. Wait. You and Renee—”

“Yeah,” Whitney confessed as she too stopped. After casting an embarrassing glance, she continued walking. “After I, well... blossomed... I started getting a lot of attention. There was this one cute guy, Xander. We went out a couple of times, then started dating. Turns out he was still seeing Renee. She thought I was stealing her boyfriend. I wasn’t. I didn’t even know they were still dating until she cornered me in the hall. She was suspended for a few days.”

His eyes grew wide at the revelation. Renee had a mean streak!

“Afterwards, we both found out that this guy Xander had a few girlfriends. She was really sorry about what she did. So we became members of the scorned girlfriend club.” Whether Whitney saw the surprise still on his face or not, she went on. “Don’t get me wrong, she’s pretty mellow. She might get mad, but not physical. I guess that one time in high school was an exception.”

Speechless. He had no words. The image of Renee punching another person, let alone another woman, was one his mind couldn’t fathom. After a few more steps, they turned the corner and Whitney let out a sigh. She gestured at a blue two-door sedan.

“Well. Here it is. The Whitney-mobile.”

The pet name brought a smile to his face. “Again, I did enjoy this. Sorry I wasn’t more entertaining.”

“You were fine.”

The two hugged, but didn’t embrace. Done, he fished out a business card. “My cell number's on there. You’ve probably heard this before, but if there is anything you need...”

“Thanks, Russ.”

“I can’t promise I can do anything, but... I can sure try.”

“I know you will, Russ. Take care.”

He stood by as Whitney drove off down the street. His goodbye smile disappeared as the taillights of her car faded away into the night. He turned and headed back to the next street. Part of him wanted to go over to The Pub and thank Renee for thinking of him. Another part thought of doing so to ask what she was thinking. But she made it clear she didn’t want to see him. With hope, Whitney would tell her how much of a gentleman he was. How he treated women right. Renee would then become jealous. Perhaps...

He didn’t know what to think. Best to head home and call Megan. He let her know earlier in the day about Renee’s offer. Hopefully, he wouldn’t sound too much like a whiny bitch as he relayed his disappointment.

Concentrating on work was useless, and Megan knew it. The two most important people in her life were in pain, adding to her emotional turmoil. Staring at the computer screen on her desk, she felt helpless. The numbers she ought to be crunching stared back at her. Beckoning to be put in the right order. She could arrange the numbers to make sense of them. Make them perfect. Make them right. No solutions presented themselves when it came to matters of the heart. Hers or any others.

Russell called last night. The disappointment in his voice rang clear. But no anger. It came as no shock that he made excuses for Renee. Still thinking it was somehow his doing. He had more than a crush on her. It made no sense to bring up the fact. She thought about telling him about the run in with Rick, but decided not to. She had no clue about what might be bothering him.

And she sure wasn't going to believe Danielle. Besides, Russell had enough on his mind. She'd stop by his loft tonight and they could talk more.

She turned away from the computer, not wanting to look at the numbers anymore. Her work piled up, but the thought of Rick in some type of trouble consumed her. There was one other time he seemed down. When was that? Right after he called it off with a girl named Alison. They dated for about three months. He never talked about it. Seemed back to his cheery self soon after. The way he acted in the break room. How he didn't want to look at her. This was different. Big time.

Her real desire was to go to his office and find out. They were friends, weren't they? Even though still at work, what was wrong with taking a few minutes to find out about a coworker? What's the harm in that? She wondered what Rick would say, or do, if she appeared suddenly. Would he say nothing, like before? Tell her to mind her own business. Yell at her for wasting company time. The anguish of not knowing ached as bad as the agony over what might happen if she did something.

Do something or nothing. All or nothing.

She stood, straightened her skirt and headed upstairs. All she has to do is stop by, say hello, and... keep it at saying hello for now. Then stand there,

perhaps like an idiot, and see what happens next. Whatever happened, she couldn't be afraid. She had done that too often already.

Entering the floor where Rick worked, the door to his office stood wide open at the other end. What she couldn't see is whether he was in fact there. Either behind his desk or on the couch. Walking around some cubicles, she'd approach from the side, not straight on. She wouldn't know if he was there until all but standing in the doorway. Nearing his office, the apprehension came back. Part of her begged to turn around. The certainty of others on the floor wondering why she was there didn't help. Her pace slowed as the distance grew shorter. Was Coleen there also? She should have called first. No. Dumb idea. Would have tipped him off. Her beating heart sped up as a dozen 'what ifs' raced through her head. Now, only a step away from the open door, she paused. A silent clearing of her throat meant it was now or never.

Rick sat behind his desk. More hunched over the papers scattered in front of him. Not his normal, straight-backed self. At least his light blue shirt looked crisp and his tie fit around his neck with perfection. He didn't even look up until she spoke.

"Good morning, Rick." A smile may have been on her mouth, but apprehension filled her eyes. He looked

up. No smile greeted her hello. Only a confused face more than anything.

“Megan. Everything okay?”

A few tepid steps into the office, but no more. Her heart all but racing. “I was in the area... and just... just wanted to stop by and say... hello.”

“Oh.” His blank stare sent a chill down her spine. A few moments passed before more words came. “Thanks. But I have to get ready for... something.”

His head sagged back to the desk. An eternity passed by. Her standing there. Thinking of what to. What to say. His desire to say nothing more than a few words dug in like a knife. She wanted to ask what was wrong. How could she help? Was it that he didn’t need her anymore? Was it that? Despite her desire to move forward, she knew it best to go. Say nothing. At least not here. She turned to leave, dragging despair with her.

“Megan! Wait.” Richard’s voice boomed one step from the doorway.

She twisted back in an instant. He came from around the desk. His face expressionless. It bore neither anger nor joy.

“Yes, Rick?” Her answer shot from her mouth before fear snapped it shut.

“Please, come in.”

She glided back towards him with wary steps. He stood near the couch, saying nothing. His face morphed from one devoid of feelings to one of sadness. He lowered his head. "Megan. I'm..." A hand chopped the air. "...sorry. So sorry." Confusion fought with the dread still coursing through her. Both conspired for silence. He then lifted his head. A small smile appeared as he spoke. "I've been acting like a jackass, haven't I?"

"No, Rick," Megan said from behind her rose-colored glasses. "I... I just figured you had a lot on your mind. You know... work, your trip." Hope returned.

"Yeah... the trip." His paltry smile vanished. He stared at the wall opposite.

Megan didn't mention Coleen, nor intended to. She was as far away as the moon. This was about Rick and her. No one else. Turning his head back, his eyes locked straight into hers. "I'm sorry... about yesterday and... and just now."

She stepped closer to him. "Rick. You don't have to apologize... I'm sure you didn't mean it."

His reassuring smile brought one to her as well. Whatever ice he put between them melted.

"Listen." He again lowered his head. "I may need some more of your... advice. Things..." His head came up. "Things didn't go like I hoped... on the trip

and... things haven't been the same between... between Coleen and me since—”

Oh. My. God. “Of course, Rick.” Calming breaths. Calming breaths. “You can ask me anything. You know that.”

She moved to the small sofa, but his hand stopped her. “But not here. I mean... I have a meeting in about ten minutes. Some prospective clients. And besides, it may take a while... what I want to talk about.”

Containing her joy at the prospect of time with him required more than some effort. Something definitely happened on or since their trip. A thought flashed into her head. She stepped up to him and put her hand on his arm. He didn't resist her touch.

“I understand Rick. Why don't you come over to my place, we can talk then. You... you remember where it's at?”

A moment of puzzlement. “Ah... across the street from... your friend Russ... right? That night you threw that dinner party in his roomier loft. And I helped you bring back those extra plates.”

“Yes.” Subdued joy filled her voice.

A smile returned to his face. “Yes... I'd like that.”

She resisted the desire to start jumping for joy. Instead, she smiled back and contained her excitement. Now her heart beat faster for a different reason. “I'll be there right after work... okay?”

“Yes. And... thanks,” he said, punctuating his words with a gentle touch on her arm. His warm hand, more drugs for her once broken heart. He then leaned in and hugged her.

She wrapped her arms around him, putting every ounce of her strength into them. Pulling him in she could feel his beating heart over her own. The warmth of his body. His breath hitting her neck. Had not their pending meeting at her place not given her strength, she might have fainted in his arms.

The phone on his desk sprang to life. He turned. After a few seconds, back to her. “I’ll see you then.” He released her. With reluctance, she let go.

Rick strode back to his chair and answer the phone. She headed out, stealing a peek at him after a few steps. All the doubts disappeared. The thought of performing her duties at work vanished as well as she pranced back to her own work area. Rick needed her. That’s all that mattered. Something had happened and only she could help.

In the elevator, she fought off any semblance of joy, knowing Rick might be available. Happiness at the expense of others has always been anathema. Family drilled that into her. Never be happy at someone else’s expense.

That was Coleen's problem. Not hers.

—

Russell stood in the kitchen cleaning up from his simple dinner. It consisted of a roast beef sandwich and a bag of chips. No feast, but enough. Expecting Megan to stop by, she called earlier saying something came up, and she'd be busy. A bit of excitement in her voice too. Whatever it was, it was something good. She seemed more cheery now. Good for her. They agreed to see each other at The Pub tomorrow for the usual Friday happy hour.

Best she didn't come over. All he'd do is complain about himself when it came to Renee. Something she was most likely tiring of. The thought he'd never see or talk to Renee again consumed him. He wanted to go over to The Pub. Just see her. See if she'd even acknowledged his existence. Naked fear stood in the way. He didn't know what to do or think. Maybe, just maybe, it was all over. Their friendship too. Even before anything beyond that started. Tomorrow he'd feel more comfortable at The Pub with Megan with him. Then again—

A knock at the door broke his self-incrimination. He strode over. Megan must have changed her mind. Opening the door, his eyes grew wide. "Renee!"

Joy flooded his body. A mile-wide smile consumed his face. The sight of her standing there took a huge weight off his emotions. Her black, tight-fitting tee shirt bearing the logo of a local brewery. The usual

low-rise blue jeans punctuated his delight. She'd come to him! There was still a chance. All was not lost.

She walked right past, not waiting for an invitation. He closed the door behind as her voice filled the air. "Just finished my shift and decided to stop by and ask..." She swung around. "The hell's your problem?"

He tried smiling. A look of disgust on her face screamed at him. Words fumbled out of his mouth. "Ah... I... I don't know... didn't think... a... I had... what?"

"Treating Whitney like that. That's what I mean."

Confusion gripped him. His smile disappeared. "What do you mean... how I treated Whitney? What did she tell you?"

"Everything!" She turned and took a few steps towards the couch. "Russ... I thought you were... were a better guy than that—"

"Wait a minute!" Confused, he stepped towards her. "I don't know what she told you, but... I was a perfect gentleman."

She swung back around. "Gentleman! Bullshit! Treating her like that—"

"Like what—"

"Like she wasn't even there—"

"Not there—"

“I thought you were better than that, Russ. But you ignored her!” Her long, pointing finger punctuated the accusation.

They stood for a moment, glaring at each other.

“Is that what she told you, that... that I ignored her?”

The claim was bad enough. That Renee would believe it really disturbed him. She remained silent for a few eye piercing moments.

“Well...” she finally said. Her scowl abated. “She didn’t use that... those exact words but—”

“What exact words did she use?”

“But—”

“But what?” he asked, anger growing within.

“I know Whitney. I could tell.”

“Tell what?” A few steps toward her. “Please. By all means. Fill me in!”

“I asked when you two were gonna go out again. But to my surprise...” She reeled back. Eyes went wide. Palms in the air. “Said you two wouldn’t. Said you spent most of the evening talking about me.”

He now felt surprised and confused. “Did she say I was rude or a... a... ignoring her?” He tried hiding his anger. “And the hell’s wrong with talking about you?”

“Well... nothing. But there’s nothing wrong with Whitney—”

“And nobody said there was!” His turn to point. “She told you she was mad at me for that? That’s not how she acted when we parted last night!”

Crossing her arms, she turned her head away. “Like I said. She didn’t say she was mad but…” Back to eyeing him. “I’ve known her for a long time and I could tell—”

“And we did not spend all our time talking about you. In fact…” He drifted towards the kitchen, going around the other side of the couch, opposite her. “I know more about her than… than you.” He drew a few breaths, expelling any anger. Through his fury, he couldn't believe it. He was angry with Renee.

Eyes fixed on him, she pointed at the ground. “Well! When you’re with a girl, at dinner, on a date, you’re supposed to be focused on her. Not thinking of another woman like that dick Jason. I didn’t set you guys up—”

She stopped, never intending to reveal her hand at playing Cupid.

She caught the anger in his ever-narrowing eyes when he swung back around. Whitney’s description of his behavior, and glowing compliments, shot through her head. So too details about their conversations over burgers and their walk to her car. She lowered her hands and scowl, relenting.

His anger did the same. But not all of it. “Thank you for thinking about me. But...”

“But what? You said... you weren’t seeing anyone. And Whitney is a pretty nice girl.”

“She is,” he admitted. “But... I seem to recall you not wanting people to set you up. Saying you could find a guy if you wanted to and that you’re not that pathetic. Well...” He paused. A deep breath. “I’d like to think I’m not that pathetic either. Neither of us.”

She crossed her arms again, lowering and twisting her head to avoid his glance. Her hypocrisy lay exposed. “I was only... only trying to be nice. And maybe...”

“Maybe what?”

“Make up for...” She fumbled for more words. How to explain something she now realized wasn't the brightest of ideas? None came. Her plan had failed. Epic fail.

He walked up to the breakfast bar, leaning back against it. “Is this about Jason or me?”

Her head shot up. “He has nothing—”

“Then why did you say I should not be thinking of another woman when with Whitney, like Jason?”

She drew a breath. Then, “I didn’t... I... this is not about him!”

“Beginning to wonder.”

Her heart denied mentioning his name. Her head reminded her she had. She turned and took a few steps away from the couch. Anger gave way to regret. All last night and today, she couldn't wait to give Russ a piece of her mind. He was just a typical guy. Casting off women like a used soda can once done, or if the flavor wasn't good enough. Here and now, facing him, she didn't see Jason. Or those like him. Maybe it was all was about him. Or her own failed life. But he wasn't there to yell at. "You were... been nothing but..." she finally said, still not looking at him. "I'm sorry, Russ. I... better just go."

"No!"

She stopped. He said nothing. He wanted to run over to her. Wrap his arms around her. Console her and tell her everything was okay. But she might take it the wrong way. He remained next to the breakfast bar. "You don't have to apologize."

She turned back and let her arms fall to her side. "Whitney is... a pretty nice girl, don't you think?" She took a few cautious steps towards him.

"Yes... yes she is. No doubt." Whitney's incredible figure popped into his head, matching her incredible personality.

"You know, I can... can talk to her, you know."

Why was she trying so hard to hook them up? He began, "Renee. To be honest I... I thought about

leaving when Whitney told me you weren't coming. But... she's a nice girl, so I stayed."

Her eyes grew wide. "Leave? Why?"

"Because I—"

"She's got guys lined up waiting to take her out. Guys down the hall from where we live bragging about who's gonna bang her first. And... and you wanted to leave?"

"I didn't go there last night to see her, I..." he blurted out, frustration growing as she awaited an answer. "I wanted to see..."

He straightened up and faced the kitchen. The struggle between wanting to tell her how he felt and not being ready to do so grew stronger. Between the two stood the lack of courage to do so.

"You don't... want to... to see... Whitney?" Renee began. Not in an angry voice. More a confused one.

"It's not that. I... I just..." he spouted, turning back towards her.

She took a few steps towards him. Her arms held open. As if expecting his answer to come flying at her, and she would have to catch it. "Then what, Russ?"

"Because I... I don't want to... to date her. I want... wanted..." Fear of being honest now combined with frustration. Why isn't she getting it?

"Want what Russ?"

Say it. Right now. Get it over with. His mouth gaped open in anticipation of speaking. The words ‘You’ struggled to reach his lips. Fear prevented it from leaving. Finally, he turned, feeling like a coward in front of her. He didn't have the spine to say what he felt. “Forget it. Forget what I said. I... I... I just wasn’t thinking straight—”

“I don’t get you Russ. She’s got a college degree. Great career. Open to a guy like you. What kind of idiot would turn down—”

She stopped. Drew a breath. Eyes locked on the floor. Shock ran down her spine. The incalculable assumption all but befuddled her. But she now knew the answer.

“Me...” she muttered. Half question. Half statement. He was turning down Whitney for her.

Russell rotated back, half expecting her to be heading towards the door. But there she was, arms by her side and a blank look staring downward.

“What... what would be wrong with that?” He tried smiling. “You’re... you’re a good person too. I mean—”

“Russ...” She paused, eyes shifting around. Seeking her next words. “If this is about what happened last Sunday, I didn’t mean to give you the impression that—”

“It’s not about last Sunday... or yesterday or last week, or... to be honest... it’s... it’s been... a while.” He then stood speechless. Part of him relieved to have finally gotten this off his chest. Another sensing her silence as a bad omen.

“Russ... I... I don’t know what to say.”

“I know... I know I... maybe... should have said something... sooner. But...” There was no going back. “I didn’t want to seem like... I was hitting on you or... I was just another guy... trying to... to score. And... and besides, you were... seeing... and you just broke up...”

The urge to say goodbye and not deal with the revelation gripped her heart. She took a small step back, as if to turn and leave. Instead, she turned. Placed her hands on the back of the couch, propping herself up. She thought for a moment before speaking. The desire to flee annulled the part of her that felt... what? She couldn’t explain it. Not the first time some guy told her that. Russ wasn’t some guy.

He glided towards her. “I know... I know. Being a regular may not qualify as friendship or... but... we’re both good people. You’re a good person. I’ve told you that.”

“Russ,” she continued in a soft tone. “It’s not that. Not that at all. It’s... it’s complicated.”

“I know I’m not six foot something, and I don’t have a chiseled face—”

“Whoa!” she spouted with anger. Did he just...

She charged towards him. She didn't stop until her pointing finger stood inches from his face. “I am not shallow...”

He reeled back. Shock and awe on his face. “I didn’t mean to—”

“I am not shallow. Okay. I don’t see guys because of how they look. And it just goes to show you what little you know about me. How dare you even imply that to me! Already got too many people making dumbass assumptions about me without adding your name to the list!”

She drew a few breaths. His look of regret calmed her down a notch. But he had to hear what she said next. Without the finger in his face. “You're not the first guy to...” Give it to him straight. “You know how many phone numbers I get passed? Little... notes. Guys telling me how much they love me. I'm the most special person on the fucking earth and all that bullshit. How they're gonna leave their wives because I'm so much better. Take care of me for the rest of my life. Couples asking me to come home with them for a threesome because they think I'm into that shit! “His face fell flat. “Give me little gifts or big tips thinking I'm gonna fall into their arms or blow them because

I've never met anyone like them." He turned away from her. "Don't be like that. You're better than that. Have some respect for yourself."

His eyes snapped wide as he swung back to her. She went on. "Yeah. I remember you telling me that." Barely, but he didn't need to know. "So what's good for the gander is good for the goose."

Russell lowered his head in shame. Her anger abated. She took a few steps back and crossed her arms.

"You're right. I'm so sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to say that..."

She lowered her own head for a moment and drew in a breath before looking back up. "I... I know you didn't. I believe you but... it just goes to show that... that you don't really know me. What I have to go through."

The two stood silent again. Renee shuffled a bit and let her arms fall to her side. Russell looked up at the ceiling.

"Renee," he finally said, the silence killing him. "At least... at least tell me what you are thinking. What you think about..."

"Russ, it's not about... looks or..." One excuse after another rolled across her mind. Pick one woman. "I don't want to cause any problems between you... you and Megan."

“What do you mean? Why would you even think that?” he asked, confused by the question.

“You... you know... your friends... the benefits thing. Women can... can get real jealous. I remember this one girl—”

“What!” He cut her off, getting the implication. His mind went from confusion to anger. He raised his arm and pointed at the bed. “Megan and I... we’ve never...”

A look of genuine shock came to her face. “A... you...” she spouted, looking over at the bed, then back at him. “You guys... ah...” She looked at the bed again, then back at him. “Really?”

How could she even think that? About him! He lowered his arm. “Yeah. Renee. Really.”

He turned and took a step back towards the kitchen. “I like to think... Renee... that I don’t take advantage of people, and that last Sunday proved that. I did all that because I care about you... a lot. Megan too. I don’t do nice things expecting something in return... or to get laid. So I’m not being like all those others you have to put up with.” He turned to face her. “I’m not the only one who doesn’t really know the other.”

Now it was Renee's turn to lower her head in shame. Again, anger turned to regret. It was her turn to apologize. “I’m sorry. Kay? I just thought—”

“You thought wrong. And I guess I am the kind of idiot who’d turn down Whitney.”

She looked up. “Yes, Russ... I... I was wrong. You... you have every right to yell at me. But that doesn't change what I said. You know I think the world of you... who you are... what you did—”

He held up his hand to stop her. Between anger, fear, confusion and desire for her, his emotions begged for an end to the roller coaster ride. He cut to the chase. “If you’re going to give me the ‘you’re a nice guy but’ speech... really would appreciate it if you’d just come out and say it.”

Her eyes grew wide. Each deep breath she drew into and out her nose filled the still air. His next words broke the terrible silence. “I would like to think that... that you at least owe me that much.”

With steely eyes, Renee zeroed in on his. She then remembered telling Jason the same thing. Appreciating if he would come out and say it when he wanted to break up. The shoe’s now on the other foot. With superhuman control, she began. “If you were any other person, I would... One... Tell you I don't need to explain myself to you or any other person on this planet. Two... Tell you to fuck off. But...” She swallowed hard. Her voice became less harsh. “I respect you enough to tell you this, *since you asked!*”

You're a great guy. But drop any thought about us being anything more than friends.”

He stood silent as she turned her head to avoid his stare. There it was. The cold, God honest, horrible truth. In the past, the object of his desire tried their best to give him the speech. All the while without having to do so. He was supposed to get the hints. Renee was different. He was different now. Time to throw in the towel.

“Thank you, Renee,” he began, turning towards the breakfast bar, not wanting to look at her any longer. “Thank you for your honesty.”

He placed his hands on the bar, leaning on it. The weight of the knife required him to prop himself up. He had tried. He had failed. Nothing had been good enough. It had all been for nothing. Renee stood silent, awaiting his next words.

“You’re a good person. An honest person,” he said. “That’s why people like you.” Her words began sinking in.

An uncomfortable silence followed. He struggled to remain composed. She struggled to find the right words. To say something to make him feel better.

“Russ—”

“I can... can assure you,” he continued, “I will never try anything with you. I... I respect you... your honesty. No one can hold that against you.”

“Russ, please—”

“If you’ll excuse me... I... have some work to finish. And a... there's not much more to talk about.”

Renee knew it was an excuse for her to get out without him actually commanding her to leave. She wanted to explain herself. Tell him it wasn't about him and that there are others—

The ‘it’s not you’ and ‘fishes in the sea’ bullshit clichés. They didn't work on her, and it was the last thing he wanted to hear. Drunk or sober, they didn't work. She can understand that.

She took a few small steps towards him, his back still staring at her. She lifted a hand, wanting to place it on his shoulder. Console him. Wrap her arms around him and say how sorry she was. In the end, everything would work out. She stopped midway, drawing her hand back. He didn't want to look at her anymore. No sense making matters worse. The best thing to do right now... go. Put an end to the painful day. This pitiful week. She turned to leave. All they were doing was pouring salt into each other's deep, self-inflicted wounds.

The whole time, he said nothing. Nor turned to look at her. Halfway to the door, she stopped and turned one last time. “Are you... you going to be okay?” A dumb question, and she knew it. He was, of

course, not alright. She didn't want him thinking she was devoid of any feelings.

Russell thought before speaking, then lied to the woman he still cared for. "Yes. I'll be fine."

She opened the door and left. Once outside, she couldn't leave. Something held her there. Staring askance at the now closed door. One hand still on the doorknob. The part of her wanting to go fought with that demanding she go back in. Make things right. Have it out, so he understood what she meant and why. Leave with a clear conscience. Who was she fooling? There was no right anymore. Right, whatever that meant, was long gone.

She turned and glided away, heading down the narrow stairwell to the first floor. From there out of the building towards her own loft.

Russell didn't move the whole time it took her to leave. He stood there. Motionless. Arms on the breakfast bar. Head hung low. The pain of honesty crushed him. All he could think about was all the time and effort he'd put in. He enjoyed and hated every second of it. It had all been a dream. The words from that song popped into his head...

You are the one of my dreams, but are you only a dream?

A fool's dream.

Now what does he do? He had no plan B.

The wine was about the right temperature. Or so Megan hoped. Merlot. The type he liked. But she didn't open it yet. Do so once he gets here. No sense letting the wine breathe for too long. She even brought down from the cupboard two of her best wine glasses. Ones made of polish crystal. The type making a distinct hum when taped against another, similar glass.

This wasn't a date. Still, she wanted everything to be nice. Something bothered him. He's coming over to be consoled, not entertained. But what harm was there in having a little wine? He liked wine, and it would make him more comfortable.

In the bedroom, she looked over herself one more time. Beige slacks and white puffy shirt seemed a bit humdrum. She then strode to the closet. Thumbing through the garments, she stopped on one still encased

in clear, thin plastic. The black cocktail dress beckoned her, but... no. Not yet. She put it back.

Back to the mirror. Eyeing her clothes again, she wondered what had happened. The look on his face when he mentioned the trip spoke volumes. Whatever happened, they both got back okay. That was good. She had seen Coleen for a moment that afternoon before leaving work. Something happened. Did her parents dislike him? How could they? Rick. Hardly. Her parents would be more than happy to have...

She commanded herself not to think too much about it. Rick would soon reveal what happened. He needed her advice. That's what mattered. He needed her.

She went back into the kitchen, looking over the rest of the loft as she walked. Make sure nothing appeared out of place. Everything needs to be tidy. Standing over the kitchen counter, she looked at her watch. Almost six thirty. He hadn't called. So he wasn't canceling. Must be running late. Or caught up—

A sudden, yet gentle knock on the door snapped her out of her musing. For a moment, she hesitated. Not out of fear, but whether her blouse was perfect. She straightened out the slight ruffle in the sleeves and headed towards the door.

Richard stood there with no tie. Sleeves rolled up. One hand in his pocket and the other holding his blazer.

“Hey Rick.” She moved to the side and gestured for him to come in.

“Hey.”

He wandered more than walked in. She closed the door behind him, then proceeded back to the kitchen. “How are you holding up?” she asked. Despite the smile on his face, he was still not himself.

“Been better, Megs,” he answered, setting his blazer on the chair adjacent to the futon. “Hopefully... I’ll feel better after we talk.”

She hoped for the same. “I have some wine if you want some.”

He turned. She stood behind the kitchen counter, wine bottle and corkscrew at the ready.

“That actually... would be great.”

His face light up a bit. A cheerful, soft tone in his voice. Good. She smiled back and opened the bottle.

“Please, have a seat.” She started to pour.

He sat at one end of the futon. A few moments later she came around and sat at the other, then placed two wine filled glasses on the coffee table.

“Thanks for having me over, Megs.” He took one of the glasses.

“You’re always welcome here.” She stared straight at him, watching his lips as he took a sip of wine. When done, he smiled and turned to her.

“Merlot. You’re too nice.”

She reached for her glass. “I know it’s one of your favorites. I remember the Sip and Shop Tour here downtown last year.”

“Yes. That was a nice night. I think I was seeing...”

“Hanna. And Olivia and Martin tagged along too.”

“A... yeah. Nice of you all to make a great evening of it.”

“Always. Just like now. I wanted to make things nice because...” She paused, readying herself to take a sip. “...you seemed so down.”

He turned and stared at his glass. She awaited his next words. He was about to say something, then fell silent. She brought up the subject too soon. Should have let him get more comfortable first. Sip some more wine, and for the moment, stay quiet.

“I hope you’re not getting tired of me... asking for advice,” he stated. Apology filled his voice.

“You know I never do. And I’m cheaper than a psychiatrist.”

Both spat out a small laugh. Humor would make him feel more at ease. The two sat for a moment without a word.

He broke the silence. “Well, like I was saying this afternoon... things didn’t go as planned... on our trip.”

“Oh.” Stay silent. Let him do all the talking.

“I mean... it started well.” He took a sip, then sat his glass back on the coffee table. Looking at the floor, he rubbed his hands together. “And our day on the boat with her parents was... was great. That outfit she bought was... wow... amazing.”

“I’m... I’m sure it was.” Details about what Coleen did in or out of it were the last thing she wanted to hear.

“And the beach was great... the water was nice. Just the two of us... doing things... having fun...”

He went on for a few minutes, talking about the things they did while there. Described how he felt upon his first good look at the ocean. She wished she had been there. To share such a moment with him. Imagining the joy in his face. He spoke about the various boutique stores and restaurants they visited. Again, she imagined what it would have been like to be there herself, with him.

“At... at night,” he continued, downing more wine. “We kept the door to the balcony open. The sounds of the waves crashing against the beach was so... so relaxing...”

She took a good long sip. It should help erase the image of them lying side by side. Holding each other as they drifted off to sleep.

“I even brought her a single red rose... just before we went out that last evening...”

Glad to see he took her advice. Albeit with another woman. She smiled.

“We had a real good time... until...”

The meager smile on his face disappeared. She moved closer to him. “Until what?”

He turned back to her. After a short glance, his eyes returned to the floor. “Towards the end, we started talking about the future. I guess... we... Coleen and I... have different ideas about... what’s next.”

She moved still closer to him. The disappointment in his voice rang loud. His head hung even lower.

“How so?” she asked.

“I’m... I’m a grown man... I should know what I want.” He spoke as if embarrassed. “Coleen is a wonderful woman, and I...”

“You can tell me. I won’t ever judge you.”

He again reached for his glass and drew in a sip. “The trip back was... the most silent... coldest time I have ever known.”

He wasn't talking about the weather, and she knew it. He looked like a man on the verge of crying. She drew even closer.

“We haven’t spoken a word to each other since we got back. She won’t return my calls... look at me...” He seemed almost hesitant to speak. “I should have...”

I know I should have... and now it's all over. And it's my fault."

The words 'now it's all over' swirled around her head. She drew in a few breaths to slow her heart down, then sat her glass and shifted herself towards him. There, on the futon, they were now inches apart.

"You're a good man, Rick," she said as he continued sipping. "If Coleen can't see that well... that's her fault. Don't blame yourself."

"But I do."

He's hitting an emotional bottom. He'd need someone to bring him back up. She felt so helpless in the past when he seemed down. Afraid of what might happen. Not this time. She'd help him. She'd be there for him. Now more than ever. She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, the other on his forearm.

She mustered a voice just as gentle. "Some things... maybe aren't meant to be."

"But what if..." he said, watching Megan caress his arm. "Something tells you... this is not what you want, but... and you begin to feel guilty..."

She yearned to do something. Say something to make everything okay. What did he feel guilty about? What did he not want when it came to Coleen?

"Sometimes it's best to just... just follow your heart," she finally said. He stared straight into her eyes

as she continued. “And wherever that goes... I’ll be there with you.”

He said nothing. His eyes lit up.

“Yes... yes, Megs.” A smile returned to his face. “There is a part of me that... does want something else... something I wanted... I keep hiding it. Something different. And... I did it with all the others.”

“Don’t do that, Rick. We don’t have to hide our feelings.”

He broke into a wide smile. “You’re right, Megs. I know you’re here for me.” He took her hands in his. “Follow my heart.” He stood. So did she, holding onto his hands.

His eyes never looked so bright. A smile never so wide. His clean-shaven face never more appealing. He wanted something different. That he could give her. “I’m going right over and—”

She tore their hands apart, put one around his waist, the other behind his head. Pulling his head forward, she closed her eyes and kissed him. In that moment, she felt his warm hands on her hips, making no attempt to stop her.

A tingling sensation shot down her spine. The feel of his lips against hers was everything she imagined. Producing every sensation her mind dreamed of. She pressed harder against him, wanting to take in every

ounce of heat his body radiated. She could see them both, embracing each other, as if watching from afar. The few seconds their lips remained joined seemed like an eternity. Her mind filled with thoughts. It was finally happening, here and now.

He jerked his head away. She opened her eyes. A look of shock tinged with confusion held his face.

“Megan! What... what are you... we... doing?”

“Rick,” she said without releasing her embrace. “You’re right. I’ve always been there for you. You know that. And I’m here for you now.”

His mouth opened in anticipation of speaking. No words sprang out. He put his hands between them, giving her a gentle push away, loosening her hold on the back of his head.

“Megan... I... I didn’t mean... I’m not trying to take advantage of you... I—”

“Rick...” She placed both her hands on his chest, looking straight into his eyes. “I know that. Coleen hurt you, and... and I’ll never do that. I’m sorry it didn’t work out, but... but like I said... some things aren’t meant to be.”

He stood speechless, unsure of what to say or do. “Megan... I don’t... didn’t know—”

“Rick, you don’t have to explain—”

“I... I—”

“Rick—”

“I—”

“Rick... there’s nothing to worry about—”

“Ah... I...” He put his hands over hers.

“Rick... everything is going to be okay. You didn’t know how I felt... I understand. I know I should have said something. But... all that’s in the past now.”

They stood for a moment, staring into each other’s eyes. Then, “Megan... I... better go.”

“You... you don’t have to go,” she said in a gentle, inviting voice, caressing his chest with her hands. She looked down at his still covering her own. “You can stay here as long as you like.” Back into his eyes. “Tonight, if you want. And tomorrow—”

“Megs... Megan—” He stopped, looking over at the open bedroom door. She noticed him glancing that way. She could see the two of them waking up in the morning, still holding each other, feeling the glee of a night of bliss.

“Megan... I...” He finally spat out.

“Yes Rick? Just... just tell me what you want?”

She half expected him to pick her up with both arms. Carry her into the bedroom. Throw her on the bed. Then tear their clothes off, the garments a barrier between their passion.

“Megan.” He stared her in the eyes. “You’ve given me a lot... a lot to think about... you really have.” She couldn’t take her eyes off his. He tightened his grip on

her hands. “I need to set things right... follow my heart... like you said...”

“Yes... yes, Rick. Whatever you want. Just tell me.”

“I need to go... please believe me when I say that... that I need to do something... important... before... I can move on.”

Her smile abated. Why was he trying to leave? Her mind began taking control back from her heart. She lowered her head.

“Rick... I...” Grasping what she had done and said, she took a small step back. Stared at their still clasped hands.

“Please believe me when I say...” He paused a moment before continuing. “You’re a wonderful, beautiful person who has... said more... meaningful things to me tonight than a whole room full of experts.” He put his hands on her shoulders as she raised her head and looked him in the eyes. “I can never thank you enough but... I need to leave. Believe me when I say... thank you.”

He placed his hands on either side of her head. Leaning forward, he kissed her forehead. His lips against her skin once again sent a warm sensation rushing through her body. Releasing his hold, the smile on his face beamed clear, but his eyes showed something else. Fear? Confusion? What was it?

He stepped towards the chair and grabbed his blazer. Once in hand, he strode away. All the while, she beheld his every action without a word. He turned as he reached the door.

“I’ll... I’ll see you... tell you everything tomorrow. Everything is going... going to work out,” he said, then opened the door and left.

“I need—” She lurched forward, one hand reaching out as the sound of the closing door shot through the room. “I—”

The door closed behind him with a dull thud.

Her heart wanted to go after him. Her head realized she should think things through. The sensation of his embrace and kiss were now gone. It was odd. Now she felt nothing. Neither pleasure nor pain. Happiness or fear. She didn't know why.

After a few moments, she went to the door. There, she locked the deadbolt and put on the safety chain. Just like any other night of the year. Then stood there, staring at the locks. His last words. Everything is going to work out. What did he mean? Could she wait until tomorrow? Should she call him?

She closed her eyes. What just happened? Did she just...

The painful realization came crashing down.

Megan had a headache. Not a painful one. A dull pain nothing cures. Looking at the computer screen was the main culprit. The lack of sleep the night before had something to do with it. Last evening's activities didn't help either.

At least she finished the report Phil needed yesterday. Completing it required her undivided attention. A good thing right now. It kept her mind off yesterday. Everything that happened with him. Everything that didn't happen. Everything after he left was a blur. She spent the rest of the night in a daze. No different this morning while getting ready. Coming to work. Like she was on autopilot. At least here, she could take numbers and figures and make sense of them. Put them on paper. In nice neat columns. Understandable to even the most casual observer.

When it came to figuring out Rick, herself, her life, whatever, things refused to be so neat.

She sent the report to the printer room. Out of ink, it would take half the day to get tech support to come down and get her printer back up. She didn't mind. Getting out of the cubical gave her an excuse to move around. She moved with caution. Eyeing her route ahead. She tried not looking depressed as she greeted coworkers in route. Rick might appear at any moment. Once there, she waited for another analyst to get what he needed out of the way.

Now alone, she retrieved the report. Thumbing through the pages, she wondered why the company wanted a hard and electronic copy in this day and age. She gave it little thought. Must be some bureaucratic reason. She'd now get it to Phil.

With this task done, Rick came back into her mind.

She tried to think of something else, but failed. What to do next? Do nothing for now. Let him make the next move. What if there was no next move? What if he treated her as though nothing happened? Good Lord girl. You all but asked him to sleep with you! What if...

She once more thumbed through the pages. This time heading towards the door. If she was going to brood, she could think of better places to do it than in

the printer room. Nearing the door, she lifted her head. Her body and heart came to a dead stop.

Coleen stood in the doorway. Through black-rimmed glasses, her eyes appeared blank. Yet they pierced the air with a laser focus.

“You talked to Rick last night, didn’t you. He was at your place, wasn’t he.” Coleen spoke in a monotone voice. Couldn’t tell if she was asking a question. Making a statement. Hurling an accusation.

Megan gasped. Her eyes flared. Morbid fear ran through her. Rick told her everything. Every detail. A dreadful feeling came over her. She waited for Coleen to call her a home wrecker. Or a bitch. She’d seen what happened to other girls accused of poaching boyfriends. It was a heinous, unforgivable crime. The offended party acting as judge. Jury. Executioner.

She raised the report to her chest. Holding it like a shield with both hands, she tightened her grip. “Col... Coleen... I can... I can... explain...” she spouted, taking a step back. She could explain nothing. To herself, let alone Coleen. She’d lunge at her any moment.

Stunned, Megan stood motionless. She imagined what it would be like. Enduring blows from her fists. Thrown to the floor. Kicked by her pump covered feet until help arrived.

Coleen strode right up to her. Every muscle in her body froze. Icy fear churned her stomach. She closed her eyes. Next came the sensation of Coleen's arms wrapping around her. Her tightening grip. Then a head burying itself into her shoulder.

“Thank you. Thank you,” Coleen spouted.

The hug grew tighter. Confusion now added to the fear still seizing her. Megan popped open her eyes. There were no blows. No kicking. No insults. Coleen released her and stared into her face, all the while gripping her shoulders.

“I knew it was you!” A huge smile sprang onto her face. Her eyes on the verge of tears. “When Rick came over, I didn’t want to see him. Then, through the door, he told me about all the thinking he’d been doing, and told me a good friend told him to follow his heart. I knew it was you!”

“Ah... Coleen... I...” It’s all she could sputter.

“We've barely spoken a word to each other since getting back, but now... he was sorry. He said he should have done it in Florida.”

Done what? Morbid fear gave way to morbid curiosity. Coleen took her left hand and held it only inches away. The wedding ring sent out a sparkle as she all but shoved it into her face. Megan gasped.

“It’s... it’s not much,” Coleen boasted, turning her hand to look at it. “But it’s only an engagement ring.

He'll get something more... something better later. Isn't it wonderful?"

Megan couldn't think of one thing to say, and her face showed it.

"And all thanks to you!" Coleen's compliment came beaming out of her. She leaned forward and gave Megan another hug.

Rick asked Coleen to marry him. That was all Megan could think of. And all because of what she had said.

Coleen finally released her over affectionate hug. She took a step back and glanced again at her newly acquired jewelry.

"I... I was so mad at him," she confessed. "When he... he got defensive about where our relationship was going, when I asked him... there on the beach. But he told me he was just scared. But last night, he... gushed about how much he truly loved me."

She heard Coleen. The words. The over joyous tone. But her mind didn't register the meaning. In many ways, her brain refused to do so.

Coleen returned her attention back to Megan. Still as giddy as a high schooler asked to the prom by the star quarterback. "But... but don't tell anyone. You're the only other person that knows."

She turned to see if anyone had been listening or about to enter the room. Megan remained speechless as she turned back.

“We’re going to send an email later, inviting everyone to The Pub. We are going to have a... an informal engagement party. I’m *soooo* excited!”

Megan could tell, but couldn't react. Nor feel any of the joy gushing from Coleen.

“Ah... Coleen... I...” she again said, attempting to say something, but still in a state of shock.

“I know! I’m still surprised too.” Coleen let out a small, subdued giggle before continuing. “And then, after he asked me, we made up. *OH GOD* did we make up... but... but I better not kiss and tell!”

First, the news about Rick’s marriage proposal. Then word of awesome makeup sex. A left hook followed by a right. Her mind still not recovering from the first blow.

Coleen turned serious. “I need to get back to my office. We’ll talk more tonight. But please, don’t tell anyone. Please.”

“Ah... okay...” Megan spat out as Coleen headed for the door. Before stepping out, she turned one last time.

“I can’t thank you enough. You’re going to make a beautiful bride’s maid.”

Megan watched her leave. She didn't move for a few moments, attempting to register all that happened. A dozen thoughts raced through her head.

Rick... Coleen... me... wedding... bride's maid...

She eyed the mangled report in her hands. She'd have to reprint it.

Megan left out the front door of the office building an hour later. After presenting the report to Phil, she told him something had come up and that she needed to leave. Reluctant to let her go, she began suggesting she was not well. Her time of the month. Yada yada. Like most men, squeamish when it comes to the subject, Phil didn't want to hear the details and sent Megan on her way.

Her body functioned as if on autopilot. Her mind turned over control to the flesh. She wanted to leave. Needed to leave. Her body went through the motions. Doing that required to complete the task. Once outside, walking down the sidewalk, the random thoughts came again.

She showed Rick how she felt...

He was going to marry Coleen...

What did I do? What do I do?

Richard... Coleen... me... wedding... bride's maid...

"Megan!"

A familiar voice came from behind. She turned. Rick was running up to her. She didn't stop. She turned back and kept walking. Not until she felt his hand on her shoulder did she finally stop.

“Megan,” he gasped, all but out of breath. “Please... wait.”

She couldn't look at him. No. That wasn't it. She didn't want to look at him.

“Megan, please... let's talk... please?”

She relented, casting him a feeble glance, but said nothing. There they stood. The sullen air between them interrupted by the sounds of people walking by. Traffic on the streets. She'd never seen that look in his eyes. An indescribable mix of fear, misery, regret. His warm hand on her shoulder was only that. A warm hand. They gave her neither pleasure nor pain.

She ended the horrible pall. No emotions accompanied her words. “Rick... you don't have to... to explain... I... I understand.”

A lie. There was a time when lying to him wrench her soul. Now they came easy. And besides, she couldn't explain or comprehend anything right now.

He released her and looked around. “Why... why don't we step into Mama's, okay?”

Down the street stood an a-frame sign with the embolden words Mama's Java Factory. She remembered the times Rick and she went there for

coffee. Unable to put up much resistance, she nodded, but said nothing.

She walked in first. Not even lunchtime and the place bustled with those not receiving enough caffeine that morning. He motioned her towards a small table near the door once a couple vacated it. As the two sat, she moved like a body without a person within it. She then cast her eyes through the window and the sidewalk outside.

“Megan,” he began. She still didn't look at him. “I... I wanted to talk to you before... before...” She heard him, but her mind still tried to absorb the news. It mingled with the memories of last night. “I didn't think Coleen was going to... to hunt you down and...” he pleaded in all honesty. For all his experience, he didn't know women, or what they'd do upon a proposal of marriage. “I went to her last night... not long after... after we spoke... and...”

He fell silent. She turned to him and finally looked at his dour face. In the past, she couldn't have kept his eyes off him. Especially with him so near. And her heart would beat faster than normal. The struggle to keep her hormones in check. Here and now, she felt nothing. Said nothing.

He went on. “I bought the ring the day after we got back, but... I got scared... again. I wanted... I wanted

to tell you last night, but then you... we... after that, I knew I couldn't say anything... at least... not then."

She recalled their embrace and kiss. Her not so veiled invitation to spend the night. She spent the entire night alone. Every waking moment since, wondering why. Thanks to Coleen, she knew why.

Neither spoke for a few moments. Eyes locked upon the others. Although still mentally numb, she beheld the anguish in his face. His distress began to register. She turned her head to again stare out the window. "Rick. You don't have to explain."

"Megan... if you had just let me finish what I wanted to... to say..." He stopped. "Megan, I know now how much misery... pain I must have put you through. To watch me and... the others... and Coleen. It must have been painful."

You can say that again. Every excruciating moment pass by her mind's eye. Dragging behind them the pain of each memory. Through the numbness in her thoughts, he was trying to apologize. She turned back and looked on as he continued.

"And to be there when we... Coleen and I showed... affection. I can only imagine how you must have felt. I am so... so sorry. And to find out that... I asked her to marry me... I didn't want you to find out that way. I wanted to... to talk first... to tell you why.

Please... Megan... believe me when I say that. Please.”

Sincerity graced his face. She heard it in his words as he pleaded his case. Part of her could still not grasp the reality of it all. Ever since Coleen broke the news to her, part of her still believed there was a chance. She'd spent so much time, effort and emotions on him that her mind and heart couldn't turn the other direction. Now, listening to him, hearing it from his own mouth, another voice from within began speaking. A tiny voice shouting in the wilderness of emotions. Maybe, just maybe, it was over.

Then came more questions: Could she still be friends with him? With Coleen? Could she stand there in some ridiculous, horribly colored, oversized dress and watch him say 'I Do' to her? There were no answers. She didn't know. What she did know was he planned telling her last night. She didn't let him. She saw and believed what she wanted. That was her fault. Not his.

Rick buried his face in his hands.

“Rick,” Megan began in a soft, not too audible voice. “I'm sorry too.” He lowered his hands onto the table, exposing a cheerless face. “I let my... feelings... get the better of me. I should have just... let you finish. I know that.”

“You don’t have to be sorry for...” he began, then trailed off.

“Sorry for what? Falling in love with you?”

There, she finally said it. Those words had bounced between her head and her heart a million times. It always bypassed her mouth. She never uttered it to anyone. Not to her friends. Not even to Russell. No one. Until now.

His face fell flat. He answered her revelation with silence.

She put a hand on his. But she didn't grasp nor caress it. She allowed her skin to feel his one last time. He covered it with his other hand.

“I feel like a cad. Like I was... leading you on.”

She let her head swing with morose speed from side to side. “Coleen’s a good person. You never have to apologize for following your heart.” That's what she had done. Look where it got her. Becoming a victim of her own advice. “I need to go home. You’re going to be fine. I’m going to be fine. Everything will work out.”

Most of her didn't believe it. But right now, she had to face the fact that, one way or the other, it had to work out.

She stood and left, again walking around those coming and going into the shop. She never looked back.

Richard didn't follow. A few moments later, she was out of sight. He placed a hand on his forehead and stared at the tabletop. Not until one of the workers appeared did he move.

“Can I get you something?” the young lady said with a happy voice to match her smile. He looked up, stood and smiled back.

“No. But thank you for asking,” he said in a gentle voice. “What I need... want... you can't give me.”

Once home, Megan headed straight into the bedroom, sitting her purse on the dresser. The events of last night and the past few hours kept repeating themselves. As if doing so, a different conclusion would come about. A different outcome would result. Perhaps she missed something? Perhaps she should have said something? Said nothing? It didn't seem to matter.

Every scenario ended the same. No matter what twists her heart put on it. No matter how many ‘what if’ she injected. The same ending kept coming back. She and Rick wouldn't be a couple. He chose Coleen. Not her.

She began undressing, intending to put on something more comfortable. It was then she looked over and saw herself in the full-length mirror by the door. She recalled all the times she made sure she looked okay. Looked like a woman Rick would want.

Her time at the gym. The hair products. The time and effort. She walked over and turned it around. She didn't want to look at herself.

The sign read 'Authorized Personnel Only.' It hung with no practical use on the door leading to the roof. Renee knew people could find a way to bypass the old lock. Rig the door open. She found it that way that evening. Didn't even have to look for something to keep it that way. Someone had already used a small piece of wood to keep the door from closing. Empty beer bottles and fast-food trash left near the door indicated someone decided to have dinner on the roof. Then forgot to clean up after themselves.

She'd switched shifts with another girl this Friday night. She'd miss out on some good tips but didn't care. Not because Whitney was now there to help cover rent. Right now, things like money didn't seem too important. She never imagined herself believing that. But there it was.

A thin blanket wrapped around her kept out the cool night air. She stood near the edge. Looked over at the other downtown buildings. Took in the mundane rooftops. She then glanced up at the darkened sky. Looking into the heavens, tiny points of light hung visible through the glow the urban jungle produced. Between streetlights and those illuminating the

buildings, only the brightest of stars made it to her eyes. She knew that on a clear night, devoid of what light humans produce, one could see millions of them. Each its own sun. Some bigger, some smaller than ours. Most with planets of their own swirling about them. She'd never seen such a night sky, living almost her whole life within the city. But how beautiful it would look. And to behold such a wonder. Muse about what might exist beyond our lonely planet.

Here and now, it didn't matter. So what if anything existed out there? Her life, her misery, was right here. Right now.

She glanced down. Small hordes of people headed up and down the streets. All eager to enjoy themselves. She again looked at the other rooftops, trying to find a building near The Pub. For the first time, and after countless visits to the roof, she realized she could see the very building where Russ lived. Only part of the roof lay visible, and not much of the structure itself. She couldn't see any of the windows. Whether any of the occupants were home or not.

Turning, she slogged back towards the door. Was he home? At The Pub, expecting to see her? With another girl, using the time to forget about her? Was he sitting at home downing a bottle of bourbon? Sitting at another watering hole getting drunk? That never works. Booze only dulls the pain and makes you do

crazy things. Think crazy thoughts. But who was she to judge? What did she do when Jason said hasta la vista? Best not to add hypocrite to her list of talents.

She stopped and plopped onto a small AC unit, all while drawing the thin blanket tighter around her. What if he did do something stupid? Would it be her fault? No. It wouldn't. He's an adult. So was she. She had enough shit in her life. The last thing she needed to do was heap more on herself. Just... do what she always did. Avoid them. Like a spineless coward. Afraid of facing things. That or go off on them. Like that ass wipe Jason. But to do it to Russ...

Part of her hated him. Telling her how he felt. Why couldn't he have just kept his mouth shut? Can't people just be friends? Have a good time. Isn't that good enough! For Christ's sake. Why does sex and feelings have to get in the way? How many times must she go through that wrenching experience shooting them down?

Another hated herself. For the exact same thing. She should have kept her mouth shut. But no. Got drunk. Spilled her guts. And he listened. Isn't that what she wanted?

The crazy thing. Craziest of them all... If she didn't feel the same way about him as he did for her, why did she feel this way? Why did she care? Because she did. So much for letting feelings not get in the way.

The sound of the roof door opening caught her attention. It ended her self-incrimination. She readied herself to get up and leave. Some of her fellow tenants were here to party before heading out. But it was Whitney, dressed for an evening out. Her short, white dress showed the entirety of her legs. This and the black vest covering the dress fit snug around her body.

“Hey girl,” Whitney said.

“Hey. You look good. Forgot you were gonna head out tonight. Coworkers, right?” She'd get her first true taste of living and partying downtown.

“Thanks.” Whitney moved with ginger steps towards her. Given the material of the roof, loose objects and small bits of gravel scattered about, heels weren't ideal footwear for such a place. “You still a no for joining us?”

Renee shook her head and sat back down.

“How we holding up?” Whitney made sure nothing on the top of the AC would stain her dress. She then sat next to her.

“Alright... I guess.”

Whitney thought for a moment before speaking again. “Is it Jason?”

“Yes and no.”

Renee turned her head and stared at the nearby rooftops. “Part of it is...” She paused. “Russell.”

“Russell?”

"I was mad at him." Renee continued her haunting stare off into the distance. "I thought he'd insulted you... treated you like shit—"

"He never—"

"I know. God I know. For some reason, I was pissed because he... seemed like he wasn't paying attention to you. But... I went to his place... yesterday."

"You went over to his loft?"

"Ready to yell at him. Tell him what an asshole he was, treating you like that. But... I was really mad at... you know who. And me... my life, I guess. I felt so bad."

In shock, Whitney awaited more details.

"We went back and forth," Renee finally continued. "Saying things we both ended up... apologizing for. Then he... told me..."

"What?"

"He... wanted... always wanted... you know..."

Whitney let the not so unexpected revelation sink in. "How'd he take it?"

Renee shrugged. "No better or worse than others. I guess."

"Sucks us girls have to do that. 'Specially to people we really like," Whitney added. "You do you like him? I mean..."

How to answer that. She didn't know the answer. She did like him. Who couldn't? But not that way. The way he wanted.

"You're a great gal." Whitney broke the silence. "Not hard to see why guys like him would want you. Maybe..."

Whitney now fell silent as Renee waited for her to finish.

"Maybe what?" Renee asked, turning her head to face her friend.

"Just see what happens."

Renee returned to staring off into the darkened sky. "Why? Because he's not like the losers I've hooked up with?"

"No one said that."

"No one has to."

Whitney opened her mouth and drew a breath. She stopped, then put her arm around her friend and drew her in. Renee leaned her head on Whitney's shoulder. She on hers. They didn't speak. Didn't need to. Words would be hollow. And unnecessary.

The ice in the glass was all but gone. It swirled around in what remained of the bourbon. Russell rolled the glass between his two hands. Small bits of frozen water fought against the alcohol moving the other way. He took in the struggle. An epitome of life. Fighting against the tide. Knowing you'd done everything. Until there was nothing left.

The only light on in the loft came from a small one above the kitchen sink. The dim glow from the streetlights outside showed itself through the large windows. Shadows appeared like ghosts behind the objects in the room. Cast upon on the wall opposite and floor below. He sat on the couch. Hunched forward. Having done little the past few days, save work and think about his life. Didn't even bother to call Megan. Why should he? All he would do is bitch about his current situation. Getting tired of that no doubt. And

what could she do? Given her feelings for Richard, she didn't want the reminder about not getting what you want.

He stood as he took another sip, then meandered over to one of the windows. From there, he looked upon the bar crowd roaming the streets. He'd be among them, after visiting The Pub of course. Ever since his last meeting with her, he didn't feel like enjoying himself.

It all seemed so trivial. So senseless. Why go and do such things if there was no one there to enjoy it with? That special person who would appreciate the smile you put on their face. One who would laugh and joke with you. All the while holding your hand and giving you that special look. The one only they could give you. Then, at some later date, Netflixing and chilling, talk about how wonderful it all was.

He sighed and looked into his now empty glass. It ended up like all the other times. She ended up like the others. Try to be good. Let them know they're special. For what? To stare at an empty glass after everything was said and done. Yeah. That's his reward.

Digging up bones, the very first time he saw her came to mind. It wasn't desire. Not lust or love at first sight. Her hair was shorter then. She wore some faded jeans with holes in the knees and on the side. Black tee shirt. No more than a passing interest at first. No

different than other attractive women. Renee was no supermodel. No fashionista. Not that he wanted such in a woman. Just had that certain look that caught his eye. Not only his of course.

Time marched on. They'd talk and joke with each other while at The Pub. Ran into her a couple of times downtown. Always enjoyed seeing her smile and hearing her voice no matter the circumstance. Their friendship grew, albeit one as a regular and the occasional run in.

He couldn't pinpoint when he started to have other feelings. If one could call them that. It was, like their now defunct friendship, something that developed over time. He threw it all away. The night she lay in his bed flashed before him. A moment in time burned into his memory. He wanted so bad to kiss her right then and there. Feel every part of her warm, soft body against his own. Now, never again, would he be so close.

He didn't know whether to have another or go to bed. Then a thought hit him. It can be different this time. He shouldn't sulk. He looked at the streets below. Another thought hit him: She's not the only woman out there. Others would enjoy his company.

Yeah. That's it. Why let Renee get him down? Her loss, right? That chick at The Pub when holding the chair for Jason. Bet they'd a hit it off and—

He shouldn't think that way. Wasn't her fault. He should have waited. Should have told Renee he would see Whitney again. That would have made her happy, right? Spending time with Whitney he would see more of Renee. Maybe...

He walked back over to the kitchen and sat the glass on the breakfast bar. Could he have used Whitney to get Renee? The fact the thought crossed his mind reminded him he was human. In the end, no. If so, then he would be just like Jason.

The Blue Room held true to the name. Every light – over the bar, running along the support columns, illuminating the thin curtains hiding the brick walls–burned a surreal blue. It gave the entire area a calming intimacy to match the small size of the place. Only those lights at or near the cash register differed from the rest. All the furniture was modern, with plush seats, more like small sofas than chairs. Two-person love seats sat here and there for couples desiring closeness in such a public place. Of course, all blue.

Despite such upscale, chic décor, the humble mingled with the well off and fashionable clientele. There was no formal dress code besides the usual rule that one, in fact, be wearing clothes. But those frequenting here have standards of their own. It kept with the ambiance befitting such an establishment.

Jason and his friends were no exception. All looked their best for a night out.

They sat in the corner. Seated around a small round table. At ten o'clock it was standing room only. More would come for the popular late night happy hour. The Blue Room offered drink specials after nine pm, especially to the ladies.

"I feel like trying one of those chocolate martinis," Gina said, seated next to Jason and finishing her first cocktail. "Get the waitress."

He turned to look at her, but didn't respond. She's taking advantage of his offer to buy a round or two for all those present. The drink she now wanted wasn't the cheapest. Nor the one she finished. Even with the late-night specials.

"You know," he said over the noise of the crowd. "They have some decent shots too."

Gina sat her glass down. "I'll get some of those at The Pub later. Theirs are better. Plus, that one bartender's got the hots for me. He always put a little extra in—"

"Don't think we'll be going there," Felix commented. He sat opposite Gina and next to Jason. He turned away upon hearing The Pub.

"Oh... right. Sorry about that. Figure we can hit O'Kelly's instead." Gina said while shuffling in her seat. She recrossed her legs. Switching from right over

left to left over right. Doing so with deliberate care lest her short skirt revealed anything to someone looking at her for a cheap thrill.

Jason said nothing. Part of him felt like demanding a hiatus on any discussion about girlfriends. Past or future. He preferred a nonchalant pose. This hid any anger. At Gina or himself.

He reached for his drink on the table and took a sip. An evening out and alcohol would keep his mind off things. Some of his unintended words kept playing in his head. Like a broken record. Ones fading only with time no matter how much booze he had in him.

Vince sat next to Gina. He lightened the mood. “Taking advantage of bartenders, aren’t we Gina?”

“Got to know how to work it, dude,” she replied with more than a bit of pride.

Vince and Felix both chuckled. Jason looked on, knowing both hoped to be working it with her later on.

“What part do you work the most?” Vince asked, giving her a big smile.

“It depends,” she answered, leaning closer and looking him straight in the eye. “Guys have different likes.”

“Do tell?” he inquired. A look of hope beaming from his face. She might reveal some secret to increase his chances.

Gina leaned back in her chair. “I don’t know. Some like the legs, others prefer the girls...”

Jason turned away. Whatever Gina. Like you have to work it. Please. Show up in a potato sack and you'd still have the guys drooling over you. He people watched. Seeing who came and went. Any worthy of his attention. Part of him didn't want to jump back into any type of relationship. Even one with little or no strings attached. Despite wanting something more, to scratch an itch, he wished it had ended better with Renee. Gina was out. Too flaky. She'd be getting too much attention from his two friends.

He glanced at the narrow, winding staircase leading from the floor above. The primary customer access into and out of the Blue Room. A pair of perfect legs coming from under a short, blue cocktail dress make their way down the steps. A pair of slacks followed them. The two walked hand in hand. When her head came below the low ceiling, the next to perfect features of Jamie's face sprang into view.

He didn't react. He sat and watched. Oblivious to the overtly sexual conversations going on between his friends. Jamie looked perfect for a night out. Not a word from her since before the last holiday weekend. Nor any thanks call for his gift. Pissed about the blow off, he convinced himself it was the itch he had. A fling to get it out of his system. But a fling nonetheless.

The man behind her, holding her hand, then caught his attention. It wasn't Dwight. This guy was much older and carried more than a bit of padding around his waist. Right along with a receding hairline. The hell. Not exactly what he believed were her standards.

With a drink in her hand, the smiling couple headed towards the bar. The two drifted off to the other side of the room.

"Excuse me," he said and stood. His friends fell silent and watched him walk away.

Jason weaved around other patrons too late to find a seat. He approached Jamie and friend from behind. All the sudden, Chloe came up to the two and took his drink order. Forgot she worked tonight. Running into here wasn't high on his list. Hold up till she leaves.

She did. He tousled his way to her. Need to make this look like...

He brushed up against Jamie. She turned to see who lacked the sense to see where they were going. Jason did the same.

"Hey... Jamie," Jason said with feigned surprise. Jamie smiled.

"Hello there," she answered without a trace of anger or surprise. "Fancy *running* into you here."

He stopped. Prolong the conversation and find out what the deal was. He scanned the man next to her, who smiled back. A short, awkward silence followed.

“I hope you’re having a good time tonight?” He finally asked with a smile.

“We are. Thanks. This is Oliver.”

The two shook. “Trust the same’s true for you,” he said in a stern but jovial voice.

“It is,” Jason said. “You know, you’re the first guy I think I ever met with that name.”

Jamie and Oliver gave out a small laugh. Jason then let out one too. Keep up the act.

“My parents named me after Oliver Wendell Holmes. Maybe that’s why I became a lawyer!”

Another round of laughter.

“Oh,” Jason spouted. “He was a good lawyer I hope?”

Jamie glanced at him. “Justice of the Supreme Court. Brilliant jurist.”

She looked back at Oliver and gave him a smile and a nudge with her shoulder. Thanks for the clarification, but he still couldn’t figure out what she saw in him. Lawyers do make a ton of coin. If Dwight was not her sugar daddy, this guy might be.

“Ain’t she a smart one,” Oliver said. “Knows all the good spots in town. I’m sure glad she convinced me to come here.”

“The Blue Room is a popular place,” Jason commented.

“Oh... I mean the food. We're waiting for a table. Nothing better for a late-night diner than Italian!”

Both Oliver and Jamie let out a small laugh. Jason continued to stand silent.

“I never miss a chance to show Olie around when he’s in town,” Jamie said. She went back to Jason. “But I’ll need to get him back early.”

“Such a pity my flight leaves so damn early!”

Another round of chuckles. Jason did so more to cover the confusion now taking hold of him. Was this guy an old friend? Distant relative? The way they held hands might rule that one out. What if he...

Chloe reappeared with a tray full of drinks. She didn't see him right off, taking her time to smile and serve Oliver. Jason took a step back. When she saw him, her demeanor changed in an instant. She glared at Jason, who tried to smile back.

Jamie noticed the silent exchange but said nothing.

Jason drew a breath. Time to go. Jamie wasn't going to salve his curiosity. Being next to Chloe lowered the air temperature about ten degrees.

“Well,” he said, backing away. “You guys have fun tonight. Enjoy.”

“You too,” Oliver said as he fished out some cash.

Jamie cast him a smile and mouthed a simple ‘Bye’ as he left. She turned to Chloe. “An acquaintance of yours?” she asked.

“My roommate’s recent ex. She works The Pub,” Chloe said, but no more.

"The Pub. Hump. Small world."

"What's that?" Chloe asked.

"Oh... nothing." Jamie added, watching Oliver place money on Chloe’s tray. “Leave her a good tip, Olie. She and her friends work hard.”

Jason weaved around the other customers filling up the Blue Room. Gina, Vince and Felix didn't see him until he was next to the table. All had ordered another round of drinks. A chocolate martini sat in front of Gina.

“See another friend?” Felix asked.

Jason sat down. “No. Had to go to the men’s room.” He turned to Gina as she sipped her drink. “See you got your chocolate fix.”

“Sorry dude,” Vince said. “Didn’t want ta see her suffer.”

He looked back towards Jamie and Oliver, but could no longer see them through the crowd. What the hell did he just do? Pride? Curiosity? A sense of his damaged machismo? What is it that he felt? Inadequacy? A fun loving, gorgeous woman didn’t want him anymore? She was over him PDQ? Part of him felt like calling her a—

Then again, between the two of them, who was the real bitch? He picked up his glass and finished his drink.

"Hey!" Felix spouted. "Let's do a shot. Whatta you want, Jason?"

He turned at the sound of his name. "What?"

"Shots. Whatta you want?"

Looking back towards the bar, he answered. "Don't know anymore."

Russell stood at the corner of the street a block from The Pub, still unsure whether it was a wise thing to do. It beckoned him. The comforting regularity it offered. It always offered. Despite all the feelings being there may arouse—the good, the bad and the ugly ones— he enjoyed The Pub. Even before Renee had caught his eye and other things. She didn't work on Sundays. So he could at least enjoy some company without the awkwardness meeting her may bring out. Like putting your toe back in the water after almost drowning. After that...

Once the shock of his revelation wore off, the two could assume some semblance of normalcy. Yeah. Might be fooling himself. But there was always hope. Once she saw he wouldn't try anything, respect her decision as promised, she would see he was a man of his word. Then again, what would he do if she started

seeing someone else? And he came to The Pub? And the two showed affection in front of him? How would he react?

He turned away. One, half-hearted step later he stopped. The only thing waiting for him in his loft was himself.

Russell entered The Pub. Standing by the door, he glanced around. A thin Sunday crowd. He drew in a hesitant breath, as if the air contained courage and he needed another dose. Walking up to the bar he had his choice of seats. Bill stood few feet away talking with another customer when he noticed Russell. He excused himself from the other patron.

“Hey Russ. How we doing?” He slid a coaster in front of him.

“Good.” Russell forced a smile on his face. “And you?”

“Can’t complain yet. The usual?”

He thought for a moment. Couldn't explain why, but the urge for a change hit him. “You know... I like to try a pint of the local stuff...”

Renee stood in the kitchen, finishing what constituted her lunch. She loved the steak quesadillas. One of the simple joys that currently remained in her life. Most other things –hanging with friends, visiting other places downtown, living the life a young person

could— held little or no pleasure anymore. Nothing seemed to have worked out. What she wanted is for everything to be alright. Get back to normal. Would that happen any time soon, if ever? Eating, she kept telling herself there was no use dwelling on it. If the future's gonna suck, gonna still suck after work. Tonight. Tomorrow. Unlike last Sunday, the small crowd today matched her expectations. Good. With luck no asshole will show up and ruin everything.

Finished, she headed back out. Check on the one table in her section now occupied. Emerging from the kitchen she strode towards it. One of her customers did need a refill. So, with a fake service-with-a-smile on her face, she told them she'd be back.

Not a big beer drinker, preferring distilled spirits as his vice, Russell tried one of Bill's suggestions. Will have another. Funny. The last time he had more than one beer was—

Yeah. With her. He let out a small sigh, unable not to think about her. Would it ever again be the same. Feel the same. With or without her. Another swallow would keep his mind off such things.

The brew wasn't bad. Dark color. Light taste. What type of bourbon might go good with it? A shot was in order. Talking about booze provided an excuse for some more conversation with Bill. Better than sitting alone. After another swallow, he sat the pint back

down on the counter. He looked over. Renee popped behind the bar.

He tensed up. Looking slack jawed on as she approached, all the feelings came back. Like a tsunami. He drew a breath. Should he speak? Say nothing? Fear, apprehension and the desire to hear her voice fought each other.

She fetched a glass and turned towards the taps. He couldn't help but look her over. Her hair stood out a bit frazzled. Her face a bit pale. She still looked perfect. Dark black, skin tight jeans. A snug, red tee shirt. What should he say? What should he do? The part of him refused to believe all was lost. An uncomfortable friendship was still possible.

“Hey there,” he whispered loud enough to be heard. And there it was. So it begins.

Finished pouring the beer she turned. The sight of Russell sitting there stopped her dead. A few incoherent thoughts went through her mind as their eyes remained locked. She let her mouth hang open. Not her normal workday, so this was pure coincidence. Exactly like last Sunday. Fate can be a one big mother—

“Hey... Russ,” she muttered more than spoke then looked away. She needed a towel to wipe away the foam making its way from the top of the glass towards her fingers. All the fear and doubt came roaring back.

He didn't seem mad. There was no anger in his voice. None on his face. Still, she kept her eyes on the pint in hand.

An awkward, soul killing silence came between them. After a few moments watching her clean off her hand and glass, Russell decided to break through the invisible wall.

“How've you been?” he asked, looking right at her.

She put a smile on her face, but didn't raise her head. “Ga... good. You?”

Acknowledged his question at least. This alone made him feel better. She wasn't treating him like a leper either. He stared at the beer in front of him. “I've been doing okay,” he said looking back up. “Felt like—”

With a determined stride, she headed away, beer in hand. With little enthusiasm, she placed it in front of a patron at a table. Next, she bolted back into the kitchen area. Never once looked at him. Then came the mental questions. She had to fetch a food order? Didn't have enough time to let everything sink in? Didn't expect to see him today? Maybe...

No. Those weren't the reason. He didn't know why, but they weren't. Stop making excuses for her. He was tired of doing that. After all he did for her, tried to do for her, *this* was her answer.

He took a long drink from his beer. Struggling not to show it, anger now swelled up within him. What a huge damn mistake this was. Everything. Trying. Hoping. Believing. What the hell good did it do? Thank God there's a chalkboard behind the bar and not a mirror. He might have thrown his beer at it, cursing his own reflection.

A few calming breaths. If he was going to explode, best he do so back at his loft. There the only person he'd humiliate himself in front of would be himself. Best he leave. Never come back. Ever. It was over. He was tired. Tired of the emotional, physical, whatever torture he put himself through. All for what?

Bill returned. "You know Russ," he said, wiping his hands with a cloth. "I'm surprised I didn't see you and Megan here last Friday for that party."

It took a few seconds for him to react. He looked up at Bill. "What..." He cleared his throat. "What party?"

Bill began making a drink. "Those two I see you all with sometimes. Didn't really know their names till last Friday. Richard and Coleen. Right?"

His emotions over Renee abated. Ignorance and curiosity took hold. "What about 'em?" he asked, leaning in.

"They had a spur of the moment engagement party right here," Bill continued, motioning towards the

middle of the room. “Must have been over forty, fifty people from their work here. That Coleen lady was showing everyone her ring. Even me. Gave me a hug and all, and I didn’t even know her!”

Bill let out a small laugh as he finished preparing the order. For Russell, the words began sinking in. Richard. Coleen. Engagement. He turned and looked at the tables as though the party was still going on. “Right here? Last Friday?”

“Yep.”

Back to Bill. “And Megan? She wasn’t there either?”

“Nope. Not that I recall. Did real good that night. Was able to unload some of that leftover champagne I had sitting in the back. You ‘all missed a real good time.”

Bill headed towards the other end of the bar, not catching the look of astonishment on Russell’s face.

“Oh my God,” he said aloud, never realizing he’d done so.

The thought of Megan shot through his head. Shame came over him. So consumed with Renee, wallowing in self-pity, he had forgotten about her. She hadn't been there either. She must... Oh Megan!

He whipped out his cell. There were no missed calls. He found her number and called.

Renee headed back towards the kitchen after delivering her order. But she didn't stop there. She went straight to the storeroom. And there she stood. Hunched in front of the old, broken mirror.

She'd did it again. Running away like he had the plague. Afraid of... of what? The part of her not wanting to deal with it took over.

A wave of shame drenched her. After all the thinking, the doubting, the second-guessing, she didn't know what to do or how to act. Even the spectacle she made of herself hadn't diminished his view of her. Nor her rejection. Others she'd rejected acted as though she'd shot down the greatest man to walk the earth. Ready to show their displeasure by being rude, sarcastic or plain vengeful. Not Russ. She put a hand over her mouth. Silence the inner voice scolding her.

She took in her own reflection. You can face horrible customers. Tell latches to shove their hands up their own ass. Yell at bastard boyfriends. But couldn't utter more than a few words to him. Then run away. Real good at that. Her hand fell away.

“Grow a spine, woman,” she mumbled.

Better compose herself. No sense looking like a supplicant. Going back out to strike up a conversation with the man she treated like shit. Once ready, she walked back towards the bar. Face the music.

Russell tapped his hand on the bar, waiting for Megan to pick up. Each ring took forever. The image of Richard and Coleen, standing at the altar, with her sitting and crying in the pews, ready to object, flashed through his mind. Like some bad rom-com.

What was she going through right now? Finally, her voice mail picked up.

“Hey! Megs here. Can’t come—”

He ended the call. It took a microsecond to decide his next course of action. Fishing out some cash, he cast it on the counter. He shot out of the barstool before the last bill hit.

Renee emerged from the small hallway. The hello from a regular seated next to the server’s station caught her attention first. Then Russell as he headed her way. She thought of something nice to say. It’ll help break the ice she allowed to build between them. Show him she wasn’t some stuck up shrew. Then she’d apologize.

He neared. She drew a deep breath. Put on a smile and stepped out from behind the bar. “Hey, Russ. You aren’t leaving so—”

He blew right past. Their eyes never met. He never slowed or acknowledged the attempt at conversation. Stunned, she stood there, watching him all but flee out the front door.

“What a dick. That was rude of him,” the regular said in a gruff voice. Having seen the whole thing, he thought he’d render his unwanted opinion.

Renee lowered her head. A heavy, sinking feeling came over her. She turned and stepped back behind the bar. The urge to go after him, to ask what was wrong, to say how sorry she was, came over her. Then left. He’d answered all her questions.

“No Frankie,” she said, staring at the counter. “I guess... I kind a deserved that.”

“Bullshit. No one should treat you like that.”

Good point. Worse when we treat ourselves the exact same way.

Russell jettied down the sidewalk. All the while wondering what, if anything had happened to her. His heart pounded against the muscles in his chest as hard as his feet upon the concrete.

First, he checked the lot behind the building. See if her car was there. She might a went home, believing some time away might help her lovelorn heart. He surveyed the small parking lot. Was that it? A blue, two-door sedan sat therein. Striding towards it, he needed confirmation. He found it. A necklace of green and silver beads hung from the rear-view mirror. She wore them during the last Fat Tuesday Pub Crawl. He headed back around to the front of the building.

Once there, he bounded up the steps to the second floor. Within moments, he stood at her front door. Without thinking he pounded on it three times. Pausing for only a moment, he leaned forward. Ear near the door. Hoping to hear Megan approaching to let him in. No such sounds. He pounded three more times. Again, silence greeted his ears.

“Megan,” he said in a loud voice. He didn't care if he disturbed the neighbors.

Still no answer. He waited for a moment. She was busy, or—

Impatience got the better of him. He knocked on the door once more.

“Megan,” he spouted. “I know you're in there. Listen... I just found out... about...”

He paused. Did she know? He didn't want to be the bearer of bad news. No. She had to know. How could she not. He stood for a moment trying to think.

“Megan... if you don't open up,” he finally said, ready to render an ultimatum. “I'll... I'll stay here until you open this door. And if you don't I'll...”

He'll what? Start singing tunes from the Eighties until she opened up? Good chance she wasn't there. Working. Working out. He lifted his hand to pound on the door one more time. Give it one more try.

The jingle of the safety chain hitting the door stopped him mid swing. Next came the dull thud of the

deadbolt. He lowered his arm and took a small step back as the door crept open.

At first, he saw no one. Like it had moved on its own accord. As the wooden door came to a stop, the half-lit interior of the loft came into view. So too the shadowy figure behind. He stepped beyond the threshold, almost hesitant to do so. There many times before, at this moment, given all he knew, an odd feeling came over him. Like a stranger in a strange land. After a few more steps, he stopped, listening to the door close behind him. Megan shuffled by him into the living room. He stood silent for a moment before speaking.

“Megan,” he began. “I just... I just...”

She plodded her way towards the futon. Once there, she turned, giving Russell his first good look at her. Clad in a bathrobe, her hair lay flat above a face showing no trace of makeup. She didn't have her glasses on. Her eyes weren't as blue, so she didn't have contacts in either. He couldn't tell if she had been asleep or awake for the past two days. Stunned, he'd never seen her like this.

“Hey,” she said. A feeble smile appeared. He couldn't return one of his own even if he had tried.

“I... I was at The Pub and... Bill said—” He stopped, still unsure if she knew. Given how she looked, she had to. Once again, he had no clue what to

say or how to deal with this. All he could do at that moment was stand there feeling like an idiot.

Megan shuffled over to the far end of the futon and plopped onto it. “The engagement party?” She looked up at him, still trying to smile. “Did Bill say how it went?”

Russell walked over to the chair next to the futon and sat, still not knowing what to say. He sat there. Looking at her. Desiring the right words to spring out his mouth. He felt stupid. Staring at her with his mouth open, he lowered his head. “I’m... I’m sorry. I just found out. I should have come sooner but...” Don't talk about Renee. She didn't need to hear about that.

“You don’t have to apologize,” she said in a low voice. “I understand. This is something I... I have to deal with.”

A feeling of helplessness came over him. “I could have... been here for you... I could have—”

“Have what, Russ?” She let out a small laugh. “Invent a time machine, so I could go back before she came along.”

He raised his head, knowing who ‘she’ was.

She rubbed her forehead and closed her eyes. “It’s... it’s my fault. I know.”

Not again. He recalled Renee doing the same thing. “Don’t blame yourself, Megan.”

He wondered if it was as pointless to tell her that. Just as pointless as it had been Renee. But it was all he could think of. This time, however, he was sober.

She didn't lift her head as she spoke. "I know, Russ. But if I had just... at the dinner party."

"Did what?" Russell asked, recalling the party and how cheerful she looked and acted that night.

"When we came over here to drop off all that stuff... I... wanted to tell him... right here. I... I tried..."

He remembered the two leaving. Richard helped her take stuff back here. But he thought nothing of it. He wanted to tell her the pointlessness of regret. He didn't. Doing so would have made him a hypocrite.

"Coleen... maybe is..." she spouted. He remained quiet as she went on. "You know, I should have gone with them to the mall that day..." She put her hand on the armrest. Her eyes narrowed as she stared at the floor. "And helped her pick out a bikini, like she asked me to." Tapping the palm of her hand on the arm of the futon, sarcasm and anger tinged her voice. "I could have said... Hey... Here's one... It adds twenty pounds and ten years... This would be perfect!"

One thought passed through his mind: What! Then, "Don't say that—"

“WHY!” Megan shouted as she swung towards him. “Why can’t I say it! Because I am a... *good little helper. A good little girl!*”

“No!” He retorted, taken aback by her sudden outburst. She'd never uttered a bitter word against anyone. He came to her defense. “Because you are a good person. And if Rick or this Coleen—”

“*Good person!*” she shot back. Anger and sarcasm now rang clear. His eyes grew wide. “Maybe that’s my... *problem!* Maybe—”

“Come on Meg—”

“You’re one to talk!” Her outstretched arm and finger punctuated the accusations. “The hell did you do most of the time with Renee. Huh! Sit there drooling over her. Trying to act all cool. Yeah. I saw that. You weren’t fooling anyone! Waiting for her to say ‘*Hey. You’re such an awesome guy. Wanna be my boyfriend?*’ Where did that get you? Acting like some lost puppy! Then she all but asks you to sleep with her and you couldn’t seal the deal!”

He was speechless. Her mocking tone. He didn’t know the person sitting in front of him. She was going off on him. Her tirade went on.

“Maybe if I had paraded around in a short skirt... dressed like a hooker... came on to him sooner maybe—”

“Megan... please—”

“It would have been *ME!*” She pounded her fist with each ‘me.’ “*ME* on that beach! *ME* listening to the ocean with Rick! *ME* meeting his parents—”

She stopped. Her eyes swell with tears. Her body began shaking as her head fell in shame. He looked on as she buried her head in her hands and began to cry.

Without thinking, he leaped towards the futon, kneeling in front of her. He wrapped his arms around her. Her body throbbed and shook. Listening to her gasp with each breath she drew in. There was nothing he could do but hold her, hoping his display of compassion would carry her through. For a few moments, neither spoke.

“*Russ... Rus...*,” she finally spat out. “*I... I... don’t know... what to... to do...*”

Nor did he. Once again it came over him. A feeling of helplessness. Maybe just say nothing. Hold her. Maybe that will do it. Tears began swelling within his eyes. He fought them back. He needed to be strong. For her.

Megan went on, moaning between her sobs. “I did... I did... everything... *wrong!* I... I... came on to him... too... too late... made a fool... fool of... of myself...” He tightened his embrace. She moved a hand from her face and wrapped it around him. “He didn’t... *need me... anymore...*”

There it was. The awful truth sinking in. Despite trying, neither could make someone feel for them the same way they felt for others. Renee. Richard. Whoever. Neither one of them knew what quality, what spark, what element they lacked. Both ignorant as to what would bridge the gap between their hearts and another's. Whatever it may be, it couldn't be bought, borrowed, bargained for or faked. One had it, or they didn't. Whatever it was, they didn't have it.

Megan savored his embrace. The touch of another human began to comfort her. She'd imprisoned herself. Her emotions. Her body. Both within her loft. She wanted neither the world nor anything within it to come in. It no longer held anything she wanted or desired. But here and now, a good part of her small corner of the unfair world was there to help.

"Thank... thank you... Russ," she uttered as the tears began to abate.

He said nothing. Turning his head towards the small table next to the futon, he rested his head atop hers. Feeling his embrace was working. Best not to screw things up by putting his foot in his mouth. He glanced over at the small table adjacent the futon. Upon it sat a photo of her and her parents. A white hand towel stretched out over the top next to it. He reached for it. She could use it to wipe away the tears. Removing it, his eyes grew wide.

Megan felt his embrace slip away as his words echoed through the room. “What’s this?”

With her puffy, reddened eyes she gazed up at him. The brows above his eyes pointed up in puzzlement. She glanced down. He held a pill bottle. She gasped and turned to the table. A small bottle of red wine lay on its side. The small towel once covering it and the pills lay upon the floor.

“Ah...” Her mind fumbled for an explanation. She wiped tears off her cheek before looking at him again. “There... there for my...” She moistened her mouth, then swallowed. “My... my headaches.”

The look of confusion on her face said it all. She reached for the bottle in an attempt to pry them out. He pulled it away before opening up his fingers. Containing half the letters of the English alphabet, he couldn't pronounce the name. Twisting it, orange plastic revealed a half–full bottle. Back to Megan. Fear replaced sadness in her eyes. She made another attempt to take the bottle away. This time, he used his other hand to stop her.

“I get... I get... these headaches,” she pleaded. He glanced at the wine on the table. It was unopened.

She looked also, then back at him. “Its... it’s not... not what you think... Russ... ah...”

He couldn't believe it. Refused to believe it. All he'd seen and heard since coming. How unreal it all

seemed. The surreal. The sublime. All blurring and crossing over one another. Now, seeing this, how could she... liar. He wanted to yell. Scream. Demand she not lie to him. It was what he thought.

He turned and strode away. Megan stood and followed.

“Russ?” He entered the bathroom and turned on the light. “What are you doing?”

He said nothing, lifting the toilet seat. Then he opened the pill bottle. At that moment she entered.

“NO!” Her shout didn't stop him. She attempted to do so herself. He used his free hand to keep her at bay. For the first time, he got physical with her, pushing her back behind him. Given her weakened state, she possessed only a fraction of the strength needed to stop him. “*GIVE... THOSE... BACK! I SAID IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK!*”

He emptied the pills into the bowl.

Stunned, Megan glared at him as he flushed the pills. She raised her arm and hit him on the back as hard as she could. “GET OUT!” she roared. “GET OUT OF MY LOFT YOU... YOU...”

He turned. Seething anger radiated from her face. The look he bore back not much different.

Megan shouted right into his face. “YOU HAD NO RIGHT TO DO THAT! WHO DO YOU THINK YOU

ARE! Huh? Don't you *EVER* treat me like some... some HELPLESS GIRL!"

"You're not helpless. You're just acting that way!"

Her eyes grew wide. She drew back, readying herself to speak. "GET OUT... GET OUT! YOU... YOU HAVE NO RIGHT—"

"But you have rights!" Russell shot back. "A right to stay here all alone?"

"YES!"

"A right to blame yourself for everything?"

"YES!"

"A right to kill yourself?"

"YES! I mean... *NO*.... I—" Both hands shot to her mouth. A vain attempt to unspeak her last words. Shame and shock threw her backwards. The words had finally passed her lips. He knew. She could hide the fact no longer.

Shameful fear took over her looks of red anger. Turning back, she all but stumbled towards the living room, still holding her hands over her mouth. Remorse now replaced the fury once burning within him. He let the bottle fall to the floor and went after her.

"Megan!" He came up behind, stopped her and turned her around, placing his hands on her shoulders. Her eyes. Once again swollen red with tears. Hands still clasped over her mouth. "I'm sorry," he said.

Regret took over his actions. Justified they were moments before.

Megan moved her hands from her mouth and placed them flat on his chest. Her mouth opened up as if to speak. Through the despair, pain, anger, fear, shame and remorse, all going through her at once, she could say nothing. She closed her eyes, lowered her head and once again began to cry. Russell embraced her.

“It hurts...” she said through her sobbing. *“It hurts... so bad...”*

“I know... I know...” Her warm breath beat upon his chest.

“I’m sorry!” she cried out. *“Forgive... forgive me!”*

It took an hour. An hour full of sorrow. Apologies for her behavior. Small fits of anger mixed in. But she finally fell asleep. Most of the time he said or did little. Best he just listen. Her pain and suffering took out whatever energy her body possessed. Her mind begged for rest only sleep could bring. He didn’t leave her bedside until he knew she was asleep.

He closed the door behind him. Wandered into the kitchen. Thirst clenching his mouth, he needed water. His mind was numb. Detached from the goings on around him. Some type of coping mechanism. Something he heard psychiatrist and other mental

health know-it-alls talk about. He didn't know. The more he did or said only added to the problem.

He took a long drink of water. What a god-awful seesaw it's all been. His doubts. Seeing Renee. Watching her run away. Finding out about Megan. Seeing her like that. The fact she even thought about... it was still inconceivable. Then again, didn't he also feel a part of him died when Renee rejected him? Thank God he came over. What would a happened if—

He shook off such thoughts. Looking around the small kitchen, he noticed she hadn't bothered cleaning up after preparing some food. Empty yogurt and fruit containers sat on the counter. Eager for a distraction, he busied himself cleaning up. It didn't take long. From the looks of the trash bin under the sink, she'd done some house cleaning sometime during her time here.

Then he called his boss. Realizing it best not to leave Megan alone, he told Andy a personal emergency had come up.

Done with the needful lie, he went back into the living room. The table next to the futon caught his eye. The bottle. An unwelcome reminder of what could have been. He strode towards it and picked it up. Back to the kitchen. Lucky for him it was a twist cap instead of a cork. It be easier to get rid of. Felt like having a drink himself. Alcohol would ease his mental anguish.

But he had no bourbon and doubted she did either. About to pour out the wine into the sink, he paused. He was no wine drinker but...

He lifted the bottle to his mouth and took in a long pull. The semi dry taste wasn't much to his liking. He hacked out a few errant drops into the sink. Kinda sucks. But it's all he had right now. Part of it escaped his mouth, dripping down his cheek. Downing about a quarter of the bottle, he wiped his mouth then walked back to the chair next to the futon. The fatigue grew stronger. But as he sat, his mind refused to be still. Again, all that happened this day came calling back. The curse of the mental contemplation began pushing against his mind and tug at his heart.

He took another drink. What was it Renee said? Wondering if it was worth having feelings? Maybe she'd been right.

The questions came. One after another...

Why feel. Why care Why... love? Whatever the hell that is. Look where it had all got them. Nowhere. Cursed with a thankless job. Renee would rather date someone else. Megan almost killing herself over... over what? And here he is. Alone.

"I have no life either," he said as though she was there. "Maybe none of us do." How could he accuse Megan of acting helpless? He felt the same, and he knew it.

Just a week ago. Seems like a lifetime. They all seemed happy. Living in blissful ignorance. A normal life full with the hope they'd one day get what they wanted. Fear prevented them from expressing their desires. But they pressed on. Part of him yearned for a return to that time. A return to some chaotic, unrequited, unknowing normalcy. That wouldn't happen. Ever. It was gone. Fear and anxiety over exposing how they felt towards those they pined for had been a shield. A blessing and a curse. The shield was gone. They wanted it gone. Now the arrows of reality pierced their imperfect flesh. One no longer able to hide the scared, imperfect, helpless being within.

An urge to cry came over him. His emotions sought an escape. But something within him said men don't do that. Hoping the wine would give strength to his creaking manhood he took another long drink then buried his head into his other hand. A hand slid to his mouth. He let out a small cough, trying to keep the wine from coming back out.

The wine proved ineffective. He began to weep. The bits of wine passing through his fingers mingled with the tears streaming from his eyes.

lukewarm water lapped over his feet. The receding seawater left clumps of foam bunched up around his toes as he walked. Looking up and to his right, he took in the view of the ocean. A small mass of land jutted up from the sea within the tropical bay. Lush, green foliage covered the top of the rocky feature. Gulls swept over the light blue water, the ocean clear enough to expose the sandy floor a few feet below. He glanced down the beach, following the white sand where it met the water line. Palm trees stuck out over the other green trees dominating the background beyond the beach.

Renee approached, strutting along the water line. A jet-black, one-piece bathing suit hugged her slender frame. The sides rode high on her hips. One strap held it up over her left shoulder. She walked with grace. One foot planted in front of the other. Her hips swayed

from side to side. Hair flowed out behind her as she neared. The smile she held beckoned him closer. Drawing nearer, she stretched out her hands to welcome his impending embrace. He did also, awaiting the same. The sounds of water lapping against the beach grew louder as they drew closer. Louder and louder the water became as he began feeling detached from the scene. Louder and louder, the sound of running water—

Russell awoke. The ceiling above stared back. It took a moment. He was on no beach. No Renee. He still sat in Megan's loft. Registering reality, he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. The stiff muscles in his back told him he had been there for a while. Glancing at his watch, it was early Monday morning. He'd been asleep in the chair for a while.

What a dream. Renee in a bathing suit. He leaned forward, put his head in his hands, certain he was now awake. But the sound of running water remained. Like a... shower?

He stood. The bedroom door was open. Her unmade bed lay empty. The bathroom door was closed. He stretched, then went to the kitchen.

It took him a few minutes to get the java going, all the while still trying to wake himself up. The sleep remaining in his eyes caused him to pause once or twice and rub it out. He also got himself some water.

Thirst part of the reason. The wine and not so good taste it left in his mouth the other. Between all this he kept remembering the dream with Renee. How real it felt, knowing the two would never do such a thing.

Megan emerged from the bathroom as the coffee pot finished bubbling and hissing. Damp hair gave her a fresh appearance. So too her eyes. No longer puffed up and red. She cast him a smile.

"Hey," she said.

"Morning. Made some coffee. Didn't know if you wanted some."

"Yes. Please." She went to the futon, fishing out her glasses from a pocket on the robe, then sat.

A few moments later he appeared with a cup. "Here you go. A little cream and a little sugar, just the way you like it."

"Thanks." She grasped it with eagerness. Clasping the cup with both hands, she held it a moment in front of her lips, taking in the aromatic steam coming off the top. The normal morning routine felt good. She took a sip.

Russell stepped back. She finished her first taste then gave him another smile. The empty bottle of wine lying on the other end of the futon caught her eye. He saw it too.

"Oh." Embarrassed for not picking up after himself, he feared it might bring back memories. He

stepped over and picked it up. "I... I know I should have asked."

Megan watched him pick it up and place it on the counter behind the futon. Back to her coffee. "That's alright. With all that you went through... you deserved it."

He sat back in the chair. His bed the night before. Meagan fell silent, staring at the small table next to the futon, now devoid of wine and pills. He stayed quiet. The displays of either sadness or fits of anger he hoped were now over.

"You know," she finally said. "I looked at those for nearly two days."

Russell said nothing. She went on.

"I couldn't decide whether to go on, or end the misery. But... I couldn't do either." Still nothing from him. "I was looking at them when you knocked. And now that I think about it, I... I can't believe... I ever..." She stopped and drank up some more coffee. "I never hated someone that much in my life. Taking him away... from me. The only thing I hated more was... was..." She turned to him. "I'm so ashamed of myself. You must think—"

"I don't think," Russell spouted, then paused. He leaned back in the chair. Stared at the ceiling. "In fact, I'm tired of... of thinking. Maybe... maybe I do too much of that. Thinking. Hoping. Trying. Dreaming."

She let him go on. It was his turn now.

"Funny how... things felt better before all this. You know. The pining. You know. The..." He let out a sigh. "Wanting. Almost like a... a drug. Something you needed. Looked forward to. The only thing keeping you going. Fool yourself into thinking you wanted it. " His head moved back and forth. "You needed it. The hoping. The trying to win them over. That's what she was. She wasn't better. Or worse. Just got hooked on her. Like before. When I needed a fix, I'd go to her. My dealer who didn't know she was one. And you get so..." He raised a fist in the air as anger sprouted onto his face. "*Pissed* when it doesn't work. But you need that... that fix. Keep you going. Make you feel better before you feel like shit again. Wondering what it would be like when they finally came around to seeing things your way. That... that last dose." He relented.

Megan said nothing. He struggled to hold back tears.

He continued. "And then you won't need it anymore because... they'll always be there. For you. The way you want them." He shot her a glance.

She remained silent, sipping the coffee. Guilty as charged. For the same crime. Receiving the same punishment.

"I don't think any less of you Megan. If that's what you're thinking." He leaned forward and stared at the

floor. “No one has a right to judge you. Not me, Richard, Coleen. Yourself. No one.” Tempered anger filled his voice. “Just because she told you she didn’t feel the same way about you doesn’t mean it’s all over.”

She caught the misuse of the pronoun. It didn’t matter. He. She. Them. He couldn’t get Renee out of his head any quicker than she Rick.

She took a few sips. Then, “I’ve been so wrapped up with myself, I forgot to ask about...”

He sat for a moment. “She gave me the ‘I’m a nice guy but’ speech.”

“I’m... I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’ve heard it before. I should be used to it. It’s cold turkey with her now.”

“I didn’t even get that. I wonder...if he told me that long ago, I wouldn’t have.. have fell so far. Cold turkey would have been better than a... an overdose.”

They sat without a word. Both expended enough energy, emotions and words. This is where it got them.

“We’ll... we’ll be okay,” she finally whispered.

He nodded. They had to go on. To move on. If not today, then tomorrow. Or maybe next week. He didn’t know.

“Yes, we will,” he said. “And if you ever... ever feel like... like that again, you call me.” Still ashamed of her actions, she lowered her head and stared at her

cup. "I don't care if I am on the moon... you call. Because... because... and this is a dumb sounding cliché but... my world's a lot better place with you in it."

At that, she looked back at him. A small smile appeared on their faces at the same time. "Thank you, Russ. I will."

She took another drink. "I hope you aren't getting into trouble... missing work today?"

"I told Andy that something came up. That building is not going to fall down because I'm gone for one day. Besides, you are a lot more important to me than that."

Again she smiled. "I called work late Friday. Told them the same thing. But... I needed more than a day."

A sense of ease fell over them. That they will be okay. Neither could shut off their feelings like a valve. But they had to move on. The only other choice was staying where they were at. Their emotions frozen in this moment of time. Locked in desire for which they'll receive no reward. They didn't want that. Another drug they didn't need.

"Well then," he said after a few moments. "If we are gonna be spending the day together, we'll need to eat."

Standing he stretched. Doing something besides talking about the past might be a good thing. Yearning

for a chance to do something normal. The simple things they used to do before all this. “I’m going to head to the Deli.” He headed to the door. “I’ll pick up something from the breakfast bar, then get some stuff to make us lunch later.”

Megan couldn’t argue with a desire for food. “Sounds great. Didn’t know you could cook?” she asked. A hint of joy returned to her voice.

The big smile on her face caused one of his own. “I can’t really. But I can make a mean roast beef sandwich. And watch what I do with a can of ravioli!” They let out a small laugh.

About to open the door, he paused and turned back. “Oh... by the way. When I was cleaning up yesterday, I noticed what looked like a black... a... dress next to the trash can under the sink. Didn’t know if you wanted to keep it or not.”

Her smile melted away. She expelled a small sigh. The Friday before came back to her. Venturing to the closet in her bedroom. Rifling through all the garments hanging therein, she found the dress. One she’d worn only once— to try it on. There it hung. Covered in a clear plastic bag. Awaiting the night Rick would come to her bearing the single red rose.

She took a sip, then spoke without looking up. “Leave it. Doesn’t fit anymore.”

Renee stood at the server station hoping things would pick up. So far, the usual crowd hadn't appeared. Must a found pressing business elsewhere. She'd be working another double today, as she'd done the past two. This time because another server, including Tammy, came down with a cold. No sense spreading it around. She was thankful for the work. As mundane as working The Pub may be. At least here she found comfort in a normal routine. Something she got very used to before the world changed.

Things were returning to some semblance of a routine. Work. Life. Chloe, Whitney and she even went out last Friday after her shift. It had been a while since she hung out with the girls. An evening unencumbered by worries. Free of hassles. Free of boyfriends. Exactly

what they needed. The beginning of things getting back to normal.

Normal. Hell. The word now defied definition. What was normal anymore?

To pass the time, she stared at some of the etchings on the counter. Most were incoherent. Consistent with an individual who'd been drinking. One caught her eye: a heart with the words 'A luvs A' etched within. Never noticed it before. Looks like it been there for a while. She ran her finger along the edges of the crude figure. Did the human heart really look like that? And who were these 'As?' A young couple fresh in love? Wishful thinking by some unknown person hoping someone would grant them their wish?

A wish for what?

Russell crossed her mind. The one part of her life that hadn't returned to normal. Two weeks. Not a peep or sight. Avoiding her, no doubt. Who could blame him? Wasn't she planning doing the same thing? She so wished their last meeting had gone much better. Once, last week, she started towards his loft. Make amends over coffee or something like that. Halfway there she turned around and went home. Still afraid he would slam the door in her face. That struggle within her, making her feel helpless. One wanting to avoid him. The other wanting everything to be like it was

before. That comfort of normal life. She hated the feelings both brought up.

The sound of the front door opening caused her turn. Thank God for the impending distraction of a new customer. The young woman approached with calm steps.

“Hi!” she said with a smile, greeting the new patron. “What can we... do for...”

She stopped. The woman stared back with a smile of her own. For a moment, her flat hair and round glasses threw her off.

“Hey girl,” Megan said with a cheery smile.

“Hey you,” Renee said, ecstatic to see her. The two gave each other a hug. “Almost didn’t recognize you!”

The two released and Megan sat next to the server station. The bartender approached, also thankful for some more business.

Megan situated herself on the barstool. “I normally don’t wear my glasses outside the loft, but I didn’t feel like messing with my contacts today.” Or any other day for some time. The same went for her hair. But she decided not to bring up the subject of female grooming.

“Definitely look different, but not bad at all,” Renee added.

“What can we get for you?” the young bartender asked.

“Just some cranberry juice if you could. Thanks.”

The man smiled, gave her a nod and then fixed her drink.

“So, how have you been doing?” Renee asked, leaning on the bar. She placed both her elbows on the counter. Her chin in her hands. The bartender gave Megan her drink. “I haven’t seen you... you guys in a while.”

Megan thanked the bartender and took a sip. “Oh, we’ve been busy. Work, you know. Work. Life.” she answered.

Silence. Renee tapped the counter with her finger.

“I guess Russ told you about... about...” she began in a gentle tone, eyes on the counter as she spoke.

Megan nodded. “Not everything. But enough.”

“He doesn’t... doesn’t talk about it... about... me?”

Megan shrugged. “He figures... there isn’t anything more to say. I guess.” She let it sink in. “And I can tell you he didn’t mean to leave like that the last time he was here.”

“I figured... after all but blowing him off he—”

“He came to give me a hand. I had an issue he helped me with. And, he was pretty focused on that.”

“Good ‘ol Russ. Helping people.” Renee took Megan in as she worked on her drink. “I never told you this but... I’m a bit jealous... of you and him... I mean... as friends.”

Megan's eyes widened a bit. "Jealous?"

"Yeah... I mean..." Renee paused, finding the right words before she spoke them. "You and him seem to be able to talk about things... things in common... hang out... not worry about whether or not he's just trying to... you know... or want—" She stopped.

Megan said nothing. Renee jealous of her? A more than mild surprise.

"I mean... I have friends... but..." Renee continued. "I don't really... I mean... have anyone like that..."

"Except... maybe someone like Russ?"

Renee just stared at her. "I just wish... sometimes... I could have... said things differently. You know. Maybe... maybe..."

"Maybe what?" Megan asked as her voice trailed off.

Renee rubbed her forehead. "If I had just told him a different way... maybe I wouldn't have... made him feel so bad... made me feel so bad."

"How else could you have done it?" The memories of how she found out about Rick and Coleen flashed before her. All her own regrets came pouring back. She took a sip and tried not thinking about it.

"I don't know," Renee answered. And she didn't. She had to admit that if only to herself.

“You said what you had to say. He told you how he felt. You did the same. He knows you were being honest. And I can tell you that... he’s not mad at you. I can’t read his mind, but... I get the impression that he doesn’t blame you.”

Renee let out a quaint sigh. "If that's how he feels, why... avoid me. He doesn't have to, you know."

“Nor you him.”

Renee flashed her a wide-eyed glance. She was right, but turned her head to avoid Megan's 'know what I mean' eyes. A few moments of silence. She turned back. “How... how’s he doing?”

“He’s okay.” About as truthful as she could be. Unable to read his mind, she could only judge his emotional state by his actions.

Confusion filled both Renes’s voice and face. “He’s... he’s over it? Over...”

Megan smiled. “Over you? No. It’s more accurate to say he’s... he’s dealing with it.” Aren’t we all.

Renee glanced over her section. The two groups seated at the tables nursed their beers. All consumed by either conversation with each other or their cells. Confident no one needed her services she again placed her elbows on the bar and rested her chin in her hands.

“Besides,” Megan said to break both the silence and the news. “Russ' been busy planning my going away party.”

Renee bolted up. Shock sprang from her face. “Going away?”

Megan took another drink then let out a small laugh. “Temporary going away party. The firm is opening a new office in Chicago. They asked for volunteers. Should take about two or three months. Thought some time away might do me some good.”

Renee caught a hint of sadness in her face despite the small smile she had on. “Everything... okay?”

Megan drew a breath before speaking. “Let’s just say that... broken hearts seem to be contagious.”

A cold, revelation inducing fear spread over her. “I hope... Oh God. I hope it’s not because of... of me and Russ?”

Megan almost choked on the juice making its way down her throat. She wiped her mouth with the bar napkin. “No... no. God no. It’s a... it’s not. Russell is a great guy, and great friend, but that’s it. His heart’s been one-hundred percent in your camp for a while. Not mine. At least... not that way.”

Renee looked relieved. Megan found the insinuation a bit humorous. She continued. “Suffice it to say that someone had to give me the ‘you’re a nice girl’ speech, although not in so many words.” Too bad it hadn't been that simple. “Russ was there as a good friend. He helped me through some rough spots. He

has a habit of keeping people he cares about from doing... doing stupid things.”

“Yeah. He's got a bad habit of doing that,” Renee said. The two let out a small laugh.

“Besides, I'm looking forward to a working vacation,” Megan said. “The firm's setting us all up in a hotel near downtown. And in my free time, I'm going to do all those things I've been wanting to do for so long.”

“And that is?” Renee asked.

“I'm going to read some books, learn Italian, conversational at least. That's something I've always wanted to get back to doing since college. Work out at least four days a week. Going to shed a few more pounds, find that perfect swimsuit, work on my tan—”

“Oh Megan,” Renee stated. “You're fine just the way you are. You don't have to do that to attract guys—”

“I'm not doing it for that.” She smiled. Peered straight into Renee's eyes. “I'm not doing it for that or for...”

The front door swung open. She turned that way. Her smile disappeared. For a moment, she saw Rick coming in. Running up to her. Saying what a big mistake he had made and for them to run away together.

"Doing it for..." Renee's questions brought her back to reality. There was still a part of her who would say yes to such an invitation.

Back to Renee. Her smile returned. "I'm doing it because... I want to."

Renee smiled back. Pride filled Megan's face. She didn't know who the man was shunning her affection. Whoever he was, he must be a big asshole. She kept that opinion to herself.

Megan put down some more juice. "I've been so busy... expending so much effort on... I think I need some me time. Don't you think?"

"Damn right! You do that girl!" Renee shot out.

The two laughed as Renee looked over at her section. Yet another reason to be jealous of girls like Megan. Great job. Benefits. Opportunity to travel. Get away from all this. Would she ever have any of that?

"So what's... what's Russ going to do without you?" Renee asked without facing her.

"Don't' know. But I'm certain he'd like to come here."

Renee lowered her head. A thought came to her. Back to Megan. "Why don't I... I give you my cell to give him." She produced a pen from her pocket and began writing on a bar napkin. "Tell him not to be afraid... he can call me and—"

“No,” Megan spouted, her gentle voice tinged with firm determination. Renee showed a bit of surprise. “Not to be rude but... it would mean a lot more if you gave it to him.” She placed a hand on Renee's arm. “He’s not going to yell at you, or get down on one knee and propose marriage.” At least, she didn’t think he'd do that.

Renee crumpled up the napkin. Megan was right. More cowardice. Asking her to do something she lacked the balls to do herself.

Megan looked at her watch and finished her drink. She retrieved some cash from her pocket and left it on the counter. “I need to head out.”

Renee looked on as she got up. “Thanks for stopping by. And... tell Russ ‘Hi’ for me.”

With that, the two gave each other a goodbye hug. Once done, a beckoning patron caught Renee’s attention. She grabbed her tray and readied herself to get back to work.

“Have to head over to the Deli and talk to someone there. Let them know about the party,” Megan said as she meandered towards the front door. Per Russell’s request, Albert was on the unofficial guest list. She didn't object.

Renee took a few steps towards her section, then stopped. “By the way, when’s the party?”

Megan turned and smiled, but didn't stop, continuing to walk backwards. "Ask Russ. He'll tell you."

All Renee could do was watch her turn and head out. She then strode towards the table needing her service. Her head rebelled against her heart, but knew what she had to do.

Russell busied himself preparing dinner. Wouldn't be much: a simple meal thrown into the microwave. Waiting for the timer to announce the less than healthy dish ready, he looked over a small 'To Do' list for Megan's party. The past few weeks were tough on them both. At work. Their private lives. She caught up from her absence. He became the full-time manager of the new building the company took over. Between all that... deal with their self-imposed letdowns. Both wanted things back to normal. The party would be a welcomed distraction both wanted and needed. And the booze he planned having would aide in such a goal.

He did feel a bit sad. He couldn't help it. But he understood why she wanted time away. Out of sight. Out of mind. He might do the same thing if the opportunity arose. What would he do if Megan decided

to stay there? Looking for a fresh start? Rick and Coleen were going to get married and Megan would have to work with them. A daily reminder. He couldn't do that if it were Renee and he. Hell. He can't even find the courage to go to The Pub. He missed that too.

The timer going off broke his train of thought. So too a gentle knock on the door right after it.

"It's open," he said without looking up from the notepad. The creaking sound of the door echoed through the loft. "You know, I should be a party planner. Who'd a thought putting together something like this would take so much—"

"Hi," Renee said in a gentle voice.

His head shot up. She peeked in from behind the door. Her face bore a wide grin.

"Ra... Renee," he responded, half shock, half surprised. She entered and closed the door behind. Then there she stood. Hands in her pockets. Rocking side to side. Eyes at him. He stood speechless.

"I know I am probably the last person you wanted to see," she said, breaking the awkward silence.

"No. You're.... you're always welcome," he responded.

With a hesitant gait she moved towards him, glancing around. "Wow. This place looks a lot different when I'm sober or not pissed off." She stopped next to the bed. "How you've been?"

“Okay. Work, mainly. You?”

“I’m doing okay. Yeah. Work too.”

The awkward silence returned. He sat the pen down and moved from the kitchen, taking a few hesitant steps of his own towards her. His dinner, cooling in the microwave, forgotten.

“You haven’t...” Renee started. “Haven’t been by The Pub lately? Is it... is it because of me? Because of us?” Her face turned serious.

“I’ve... been busy. There’s this new building I’m now managing, and... it’s taking a lot of my time—”

“God Russ! Be honest with me. Please. Okay. Don’t... you say you’re different. Well act like it. Don’t be like others and tell me what they think I want to hear or... what I think I want to hear.”

He turned back to the kitchen, half mumbling. “A little... maybe a lot... I don’t know.” Back to face her. “The funny thing is... we aren’t even dating and... we needed time apart.” He paused, allowing the words to sink in. “And besides, you didn’t try to get a hold of me, or want to talk so... I figured... that’s... that’s the way you wanted it. And I... I understand.”

She couldn’t argue with that. Her head fell in shame. “It’s not, Russ. I know it’s the way I acted. But... but it’s not what I wanted. I know it seems that way but...” A frustrating huff. “Sometimes I... I don’t know what I want.”

“For what it’s worth, makes two of us. I don’t blame you. And I’m not just saying that. Maybe it was for the best. Give me... us... time to think.”

She nodded. Leaned against the back of the couch. Settling there, she crossed her arms and drew in a breath. “Yeah. Yeah. Been doing a lot of that... too. Thinking. About a lot of things.”

“Oh.” This piqued his curiosity.

“Yeah... about all sorts of things. Life. Work. Me... you...”

The admission made his still heavy heart a little lighter. Believing she wanted to forget about everything that happened between them. Might a included forgetting about him. She went on.

“Russ... I don’t want you to treat me any different now... than you did before. Okay. I’m still the same person, you know. Okay. You saw a lot more of me than I wanted to but... clothes on or off, I’m still me. I never wanted you to stay away, but I guess I can understand why. I said things... did things... that hurt. I’m sorry.”

“You were just trying... trying to be honest. I’m sorry too... if I said... did things that upset... or hurt you. Believe me, it was the last thing I ever wanted to do.” He lowered his head and let out a sigh. “But... Renee... come on. Things are different.”

There was no going back. She knew that. Couldn't look at him the same way again either. Any more than she looked at herself the same way.

"Sometimes," she said. "Things happen for a reason. Good things. Bad things. As cruel... as screwed up... as unfair that may be."

"People do crazy stuff to escape reality."

She nodded. "Yeah. Like get drunk. Set people up thinking it'll make up for stupid shit they did. Yell at friends. I know I'm not perfect... far from it."

"None of us are. But I meant what I said... you're one of a kind. Even with everything I know... I wouldn't want it any other way."

"Thanks... again." She lowered her head once more. "And... who knows. If we ever did... date... I might end up disappointing you." A small laugh. "As you well know... I can sometimes be quite the bitch!"

"No. You aren't that—"

"See. Right there." She bolted up, staring right at him. "You're doing it. You're putting me on this... this pedestal. Treating me like an angel who can do no wrong. That's not what I want. I have faults... issues. Remember? I spilled a lot of them right here. And I'm not saying this to be mean but... I am sure you do too."

Her honest words stung him. He felt bad. Again. Said the wrong thing. But's that's what he felt. "Well.

I still think you are a good person, worthy of being treated like one.”

“Goes for both of us.” She groped for words. Then. “Listen, I don’t want a knight in shining armor. I’m not some damsel in distress. It’s dawned on me that... with all the thinking I’ve been doing... although I’m sometimes unsure about what I want... I don’t want that. Or needy men, or one-night stands, or...”

He looked her over. Her standing there telling him like it is. That glow he thought gone came back. That indescribable aura he alone could see. Attracted like a fly to the flame. But this time, with the rose-colored glasses shattered by reality, he could now have a real conversation with her.

“You’re right about one thing,” he said. “I did... put you on a pedestal. I thought, all I had to do is show you what a great guy I was. Impress you with how different I am and... you’d just fall into my arms.” He lowered his head. “To be honest, I’ve never been really... in a serious... thing with a girl... I mean...” Eyes back at her. “I’ve been with... I’ve had... you know...” Part of him wanted to shut up. The other... better to let it out. There was no chance with her, so it really didn’t matter.

She cocked her head. “You realize no man in his right mind would ever admit to a woman he’s never been serious with a girl.”

He shrugged. "Sanity seems to be in short supply these days. And you did ask for honesty."

"Ture. You not sucking up to me is... I appreciate it."

Neither spoke as honest silence held each in place. Their eyes locked onto the other's. Each gave the other that certain look. One meant to cover the flurry of thoughts, counter thoughts, ideas and debate running their heads. Crying uncle first, she lowered her head and stared at the floor. His clearing throat brought it back up.

He stepped closer to her, but kept his distance. "So I guess... the best thing to ask now is... what do you want? What do you want when it... it comes to us? I mean... I know we're not going to be... I accept that. But if me even being around is... uncomfortable... just tell me."

Confronted by the most difficult question one can ask a person, she thought for a moment. It was uncomfortable. On the one hand, him being around. On the other, because he wasn't. "Don't hate me but... I don't really know... right now."

He nodded. "Honest answer. Dido."

"Maybe what I want... we need... maybe... if we just... try to get back to normal... I mean... the new normal... who knows... what might... happen." The blank expression on her face matched his. "I... we

shouldn't promise anything to each other. Don't ya think?"

Another nod. "I think you're right."

The slight, tender smile on her face got her ready. Might as well go for it. They had nothing to lose with the new normal. "I do really... really like you... Russ..."

The hesitation in her voice gave him pause, readying himself to once again hear how great of a guy he was. Better prepared to hear it this time, he ended any potential misery. "You don't have to—"

"And I have this wonderful, crazy stupid idea."

He froze. "Oh?"

"Yeah. It's like... why don't we start from square one and..."

Did he really want to hear it? "Go on..."

"Like I come in, arms full of Chinese take out and say... Hey! Wanna kick back and chill. Watch a movie and chow down?"

The idea had its appeal. "Then what?"

"Well. We laugh. Eat. Then when it's all over I get up, leave with my pants on and virginity intact!"

His gape spoke volumes.

"Okay." She let out a laugh. "That's long gone but..."

"Square one's fine for me."

Now it was her turn to freeze. "Warts and all?"

“Yes. Warts and all.”

“And you’re not just trying to get into my pants?”

“If you thought I wanted that, you wouldn’t be here.”

She broke into a wide smile and stepped towards him. “You know Russ. Sometimes you’re just a little too damn smart for your own good.”

“I reckon you’ll be the judge of that.”

She cocked a smile. “You fuckin’ a right.” A deep breath, as if needed to expel all the anxiety. “Thank you, Russ. For everything.”

He smiled in humility. “You’re welcome. For everything.”

She took a few small steps backwards, twisting her body to point her fingers at the door. “I’m gonna go back and finish my shift. When I am done, I am going to come back. If you’re not into Chinese, pizza’s cool with me. Ask Megan to come if she wants.” She turned to face the door. “We can just... you know... be normal... ourselves.”

The days of pretending, of hiding, were over. He was glad. “I’d like that too.”

She stopped, then strode back up to him. Her face inches from his, a huge smile beneath wide, comforting eyes, she leaned in and gave him a peck on the cheek. “See you then.”

She pranced away, giving him a small wave before the door closed behind her.

He didn't move for what seemed an eternity. His blank mind fixed on the now closed door. How odd. No excitement or apprehension. No pleasure or pain. A sense of... peace. Peace of mind. Something he hadn't felt in quite a while. A sudden calm came over him. The tempest of human emotion eased by some unknown hand. The possibilities of the future stood before them. Unknown and uncharted. One all three of them would move towards. Away from a past, as crummy as it was, they should never forget. They might repeat it. Find a new drug.

A smile sprang onto his face. His head knew it may not work out, but within his heart, the optimist held out hope.

“I'll be damned.”