

Charm City Killer

A Novel by

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Chapter One

Moe Steadman had never seen himself as either male or female. He despised both genders equally for different reasons. In his internal war he knew one gender would prevail in the end. In any war there are always casualties.

Moe sat waiting in a tiny lobby on a wobbly chair that barely contained, what he knew all too well to be, his grossly obese body. He held a black binder and a yellow pages tightly on his lap and made himself relax. Only one other chair separated him and Miss America with her silky long blond hair and big brown eyes, tapping at a laptop making the sound of psychotic humming birds.

He couldn't help but appreciate her picturesque legs climbing out of her skirt. He'd always appreciated such things as much as he hated the beautiful people. She suddenly stopped typing, perhaps alerted by his stare.

"Yellow pages, huh?" She asked. Her tone and expression were sympathetic as if consoling him after a cancer diagnosis. The last thing he wanted was her sympathy.

"Internet Marketing, huh?"

She nodded with a quick cute smile and went back to her laptop. He wanted to scream.

"Nice shoes," Moe said with as much sarcasm as he could muster.

"Thank you." She didn't catch that his comment was back handed. The unintended compliment seemed important to her. "My mom hated them when I bought them. My roommate too. I think they have a kind of contemporary charm. Do you really like them?"

Moe wanted to tell her everything that was wrong with her loud hot pink Barbie Doll shoes and her lazy misguided generation. Instead he let her have it with one word.

“No.”

After a look of disgust Miss America returned to her typing. Soon a disinterested staff member peered over the counter.

“Moe, go on in.”

“Good luck,” she said smiling as she typed.

His meeting took less than five minutes. Even though yellow page advertising had declined drastically over the years in 2008 it was still a viable means of advertising for the dollar in the home service industries. Mike’s Plumbing could have benefited from a drastically discounted full page ad program. Instead the owner decided to follow his competitors’ lead and abandon the medium completely.

When Moe returned to the mini-lobby the beauty queen was still typing.

“Enjoy your close,” Moe said.

“I will. I’ll spend my commissions on more shoes.”

“Please don’t.”

Miss America got up abruptly, avoiding eye contact.

Moe was glad he affected her, a small consolation to make up for the thousands of commission dollars he wouldn’t be putting toward his past due mortgage payments.

Moe left the business and was hit with whipping snow. He waddled across the busy street, blatantly disregarding every law against jaywalking. Horns blared.

In his car he slammed his fist into the steering wheel.

His latest failure at the hands of a twenty-six year old beauty queen was a reminder of every failure and disrespect he'd endured since childhood. His weight hadn't been as debilitating as his other deformity as far as Moe was concerned. His mother had reminded him of his ugliness as often as his classmates. He had always guarded the emotional scars as well as the physical ones. Self inflicted burns and cuts were easy to hide during a youth without any real physical or emotional contact with anyone.

The silence in his car tasted like oil. The slow descending flakes outside looked like rapid burning meteors. It all piled up on Moe's psyche – his mortgage nearing foreclosure, his credit card debt, his mother, his second grade classmates, high school, college, and beyond.

Moe suspected that when most people turn fifty they decide to make some life change – quit smoking, lose weight, take that cross country road trip they wished they'd taken at twenty-one. Five years earlier Moe's mid life crisis yielded the most drastic of changes. He rid himself of fear and decided to command respect. In a focused conscious effort he stopped beating around the bush in confrontational situations. His superiors were not his bosses. He was theirs. Respect for him would exist. If it did not exist he would take it.

Now a young beautiful person compromised that. It wasn't the first time Moe and every other print advertising sales rep had been kicked in the teeth more often than not since 2000. Moe dug his index finger nail into the cuticles of his thumb and drew blood. There was a labyrinth of pain derived from a hundred different sources leading to a hundred different paths.

Moe suspected his torment would have been coming at some point just as it had as a teenager. There had to be a source to blame for it. Revenge had to be exacted on something.

Moe was calm now. The silence in his car began to taste like sugar. He got out, retrieved a large gold metal flashlight from his trunk, and threw it in the passenger seat. Next he grabbed a hooded sweat shirt from the back seat and put it on.

Moe had never physically assaulted another human being. In years past he had assaulted and mutilated himself. He hoped he'd be able to draw from those moments and seamlessly translate the violence.

An hour later he was still in his car watching the business he'd left. He had assessed his opportunities. Like many Baltimore city business districts there was street parking with meters and a nearby parking garage.

Moe hoped his adversary was parked in the garage. The street would be impossible. If she had a meter he could only follow her in his car and hope for another opportunity. Complications could multiply as would risks.

Finally Miss America came out.

She walked west toward the parking garage. It was on. He pulled the hood over his head and face obscuring him from any parking garage security cameras. His hand shook as he picked up the metal flashlight.

He followed Miss America with a satisfied gaze. His eyes darted left and right, adrenaline assessing the streets.

For more than ten years the internet along with the economy had stolen his livelihood and in turn his self worth. Every swing of the gold flashlight would make

yellow pages more relevant and Moe more relevant. It would symbolically restore some of Moe's bank account. It would also represent revenge on the beautiful people.

In addition to being a violence novice Moe had never planned a crime or a strategic means for getting away with one. As he neared the garage with bludgeoning weapon tight in hand he pondered just that.

He'd wait until she almost reached her car. One hit on the head would drop her. Then he'd drag her into the obscuring shadows between two cars and finish the job. It was three o'clock in the afternoon on a Tuesday. There was a high probability that no bystanders would be in that particular part of the parking structure at that particular minute.

Moe couldn't believe his own thoughts. He suspected he wouldn't go through with it but his mind couldn't let go of the fantasy.

After the deed Moe would calmly walk to his car, drive home, and burn his blood speckled clothes in his fireplace. He'd clean the flashlight and, not knowing what kind of forensic magic the cops could utilize, he'd dissect it, drive thirty miles from Baltimore, and throw each individual piece of the weapon deep into the woods, miles apart from each other. The body would be discovered two hours after the murder once work let out, long after Moe had left the scene.

There would linger the possibility that the cops might deem Moe a person of interest considering their interaction one hour prior to her murder. This was the most disturbing part to Moe. After Mike the plumber and his secretary, he'd be the next logical interview. It would probably be more like an interrogation considering their adversarial exchange witnessed by the office staff.

Moe would create a reality in his mind that placed him somewhere other than the crime scene during the murder. He'd memorize it and it would become truth.

Miss America entered the elevator near the garage entrance. After the doors closed Moe watched the elevator gauge stop at 2. He tackled the steps to save time.

The flight was more challenging than he expected. By the time he reached the second floor he was already a sweating tired mess. She was there, only ten yards away but he had to rest. The window of opportunity was closing by the second.

She suddenly stopped walking and searched her purse.

Moe wiped the sweat off his brow and caught his breath.

She found her keys but dropped them. It was the perfect delay. After a quiet deep breath he walked toward her calmly and quickly.

The moment arrived and he realized he was going to go through with it. Maybe he was an animal after all, just like his mother.

She was at her car fumbling with her keys again. Moe was literally swinging distance from her. He caught a profile glimpse of her eyes. She blinked frustrated. It was a slow calm motion. Both layers of lashes met their partners and then separated slowly. The blink might have represented anger or sadness. Moe saw only vulnerability. It was a level of vulnerability that existed only in truly feminine creatures as far as Moe was concerned.

Instead of lunging forward and swinging the flashlight into the back of her head he kept walking.

He had thought of his father. He was the softer sweeter consoling parent. His mother possessed the masculine traits of aggression and hostility. He could not become

his mother, just as he could not destroy anything that paralleled the peaceful femininity of his father.

Even though Miss America represented the medium that had helped to destroy his life he could not hurt her. In spite of the callousness of her job, she possessed that femininity, a femininity he cherished, a femininity he could seldom resurrect in himself.

A masculine being would have been an easier kill for his conscience. He suspected his conscience wouldn't allow that either. Perhaps he had more of his father in him than he realized. He hoped.

Chapter Two

In 2008 Moe was to his utter amazement a thirty-three year veteran of the yellow page advertising industry. A thousand years ago like most people fresh out of college he had no idea what he wanted to do. His Uncle Jack, a corporate big wig out in California, a man he barely knew secured him the job. Typically they required at least two years of professional sales experience before they even talk to you, unless you knew someone. Or unless you're one of the beautiful people. Most managers hired just for the scenery. It didn't matter what they had between their ears. Beauty queens and pretty boy bimbos came and went who could barely spell let alone tap dance with objections in front of a hundred-thousand-dollar client.

Moe was not one of the beautiful people. Though polite society tried, it was impossible to ignore the large mole above the left side of his mouth. It was a Cindy Crawford beauty mark on steroids. In high school his two acquaintances called him Moe. Everyone else called him Mole. In college they were a little more creative. He was affectionately dubbed Shit Face. He didn't go to many class reunions.

His weight issue exacerbated with each year. Based on his five foot six height and his age of fifty-five a healthy weight was around one hundred fifty pounds. One hundred eighty was considered obese. Two hundred was grossly obese. Moe hated that terminology. At a cool two hundred nine and a half pounds he considered himself... just gross.

It was 7:55 on a Monday. Moe was a little hung over from the gin and tonics he had while watching the Sunday Night Football game, just like the Monday before that and the Monday before that.

He parked his Acura which had magically transformed into a Corolla three years earlier and neared the back entrance of the office passing by a dumpster. The lingering Gin made his senses somehow more acute. The cold wind stung his face a little more. The normal slight unpleasantness from the dumpster now smelled like horrid rotting meat.

He wobbled as quickly as possible and got inside. The sales floor was just like every one of the previous three locations they'd leased over his thirty-three years of service. There were rows of desks with plenty of space in between. More open space existed in the front to enable the managers to pontificate on occasion. In the back of the room were more private cubicles for the most successful and more seasoned reps, a spot Moe had earned back in '88.

Photos of mountain climbers and whales leaping from oceans with inspirational messages such as "Perseverance" and "Fortitude" were everywhere.

Moe got to his cubical and stayed there. His station lacked family photos and certificates of achievements which existed in the other reps' spaces. Such things were useless as far as he was concerned.

While most of the others hung out in the kitchen getting coffee and complaining about the horrible calls made by the referees on Sunday, he stayed at his desk waiting for their 8:00 am delivery of bullshit.

One thing he liked about the younger generation was the invention of energy drinks. Caffeine was as easy as cracking open a can. Moe hated going into that kitchen on Mondays to get coffee before Red Bull came along, mostly because he hated people – especially sales people.

Moe saw varying levels of dishonesty among sales reps ranging from selling someone an ad they suspected probably wouldn't work to those guys that got fired out in Chicago who went through the obituaries and forged the signatures of deceased business owners. Talk about taking initiative.

He saw that most extremely honest people didn't make it in the sales world. If they weren't willing to dirty their soul a little they probably didn't have that thick skin required to get through rejection and failure. Loose morality and fortitude seemed to go hand in hand.

Another reason he despised his co-workers was because they looked down at him. For some it was in the form of simply ignoring him. Others covertly made fun of him. Often this was the ex-college football player whose Daddy bought him a Porsche when he turned sixteen or the beautiful gifted sales guy who figured it all out in his first year of employment – always hyped up about his latest sales success, always seeming to have too much time on his hands. It wasn't like high school when someone would openly insult him to his face. It was inside jokes that suddenly ceased to be funny when Moe walked into a room, or code words that elicited hysteria as he'd pass by a cubical.

Even if he'd been a more sociable person he had nothing in common with the rest of the sales floor. The experienced reps in their thirties and forties were in diapers when Moe was graduating high school.

There was old Phil who'd been with the company even longer than Moe. Phil stole a sale from him back in '92. He'd barely spoken to Phil since then. Phil was pushing sixty-five but he looked a hundred. Every hour he had a ten minute phone conversation with his wife during which he said "yes, dear" at least thirty times. From overhearing pieces of conversations Moe learned that he had all his life savings in high-tech stocks – internet companies that thrived in the false prosperity of the nineties. When those types of investments plummeted so did his life savings. Instead of retiring in the next two years Phil learned he'd be working for another fifteen. The market and his wife had drained Phil of all life. He was one of the zombies just waiting for his turn to get axed and collect unemployment for a while. Moe suspected his day was coming soon. It seemed Phil was even more miserable than himself. Karma for stealing that sale back in '92.

Eight o'clock. Time for the weekly delivery of bullshit. Kenny O'Neal became their Regional Sales Manager the prior year at the age of twenty-nine. Moe couldn't take too much away from the guy. He suspected Kenny worked hard to get where he was as fast as he did. He heard a rumor once that Kenny slept with a VP to move up. So what if he took advantage of his attributes. If Moe was good looking he would have done the same thing. As far as he was concerned it was no worse than Moe accepting the job out of college due to his Uncle Jack. There were probably more qualified candidates. Nepotism is on the same moral level as prostitution as far as Moe was concerned. At least people get laid in the latter.

In his Monday meetings Kenny subscribed to some of the management techniques you get from motivational speakers. All Moe wanted was a five minute breakdown of the previous week's results and then go sell. Instead Kenny came out and howled at them.

“How’s everyone feeling?” He screamed at the top of his lungs. Sue White an ex-cheerleader, recent college graduate in one of the front desks loved it as did some of the other more youthful reps. It made Moe want to shoot himself... No, first shoot Kenny, then himself. Moe looked over at Phil. He was sleeping.

Moe was a member of a dying breed in a dying industry. It was all starting to pile up on him. Electric bill was up. Gas prices were still high. Making less money. Until the last five years he was always able to pay off his credit card bills in full. Now he was behind by fifteen grand and counting. Plus he was running two months behind on his mortgage. So much for being responsible as his father had always preached in his drunken stupors.

Moe wished he could have gotten married. His spouse might have worked and been able to pitch in. In reality if he could have found someone willing to marry him he would have insisted they not work. He’d let his angel sit around and watch TV all day. When he got home he’d cook a gourmet dinner, clean the house, and provide as much sex as desired until they both passed out.

It wasn’t in the cards for him like a lot of things. Moe pondered the degree to which we are a looks-conscious society.

“Guys,” Kenny began. “I know it’s been tough lately but I assure you the economy’s not as bad as people think. It’s gonna’ rebound soon. Businesses still need to advertise. Stay tough out there.”

Not as bad as people think? It was only the worse economy since The Great Depression. Even the positive, impressionable kids in their twenties looked at Kenny as if he had two heads.

“Before we let you go out and take over the world,” Kenny said. “It’s my pleasure to introduce the newest member of our family.”

Moe wished Kenny would get a life. No one was taking over anything. And this miserable assembly of YUPPIE pricks was the furthest thing from a family.

“Premi Algoto, why don’t you stand up and tell us something about yourself.”

Moe wasn’t surprised. Another beautiful person. Moe guessed he was from South America. Maybe he was just a white guy with a good tan- not many Hispanics with eyes that light. Moe could see the blue even from fifty feet away. What a freak. Premi stood up.

“As Kenny said, I’m Premi Algoto. I’ve heard great things about this office and I’m honored to now be a part of it. I’m gonna’ do my best to pitch in and try to sell lots of stuff.” He ended with a smile.

No accent. Maybe he was just a white guy. Moe suspected he’d do just fine at the job. His bullshit humility actually sounded sincere.

As with all new employees the office clapped for the son of a bitch. Phil was still sleeping.

Kenny ended the meeting with his usual sign off.

“Go fight the good fight, gang!”

Eat shit, Kenny.

Chapter Three

After the soul draining Kenny meeting Moe couldn't just jump on the phone and start attacking. Twenty years before he had that energy but not now. He had to unwind a little, ease into it.

Even though the internet was the enemy Moe used it all the time, sometimes to look up the football scores and stats but mostly to surf for coin information.

He'd been a collector since he was a kid. His old Cousin Terrance taught him the ropes. His dad used to drink beer with Terrance at his house. The men talked while listening to old timey music. Moe would look through Terrance's vast coin collection in his den on the other side of the house. He remembered being escorted out of the living room where the music blared. Half way down a long hallway the music faded and by the time Terrance and Moe reached the den it was silent. In addition to allowing him full access to his thousands of coins, Terrance carefully laid out coin books that applied to each era and each country's mint.

Moe took in everything. As he read each book he tried to find the coins that were being referenced. He could match a lot of them to Terrance's collection. Looking back he suspected Cousin Terrance had a couple hundred thousand dollars worth of coins. The size of his house indicated he could afford it.

Most nine year old kids would have gotten lonely, bored, or scared all alone in that huge dingy room. Moe didn't mind it. He wasn't alone. He was hanging out with Ben Franklin, Abe Lincoln, and the Duke of Windsor.

The one golden rule Cousin Terrance explained to Moe was to never touch the sides of the coins. Always hold the edges to preserve the faces of beauty. Faces of beauty. As a mole and pimple faced fat ugly kid his words further engrained in Moe the universal value of pretty.

What amazed him about Terrance was how he allowed Moe to take coins worth hundreds of dollars out of their protective cases and hold them. It was a gesture of confidence Moe had never enjoyed before or since.

Moe learned his father and Terrance were gay lovers when he was sixteen. His mother told him in her own unique way. Maybe if he were a lot younger it would have bothered him more. At sixteen it gave Moe a little something more to feel sorry for himself about which was always good from a teenager's perspective. It's not like his parents had a loving relationship anyway. The affair was like a mosquito bite on a burn victim. Moe was too hung up on more drastic problems like his own non-existent prospect of having sex with another human being.

As Moe looked through one of his staple coin websites he thought of Cousin Terrance who died in a car accident back in '98. He wished he were still around. He would have loved to call him up and talk coins as he'd done up until his death.

"Indian head pennies," a voice sounded commenting on Moe's monitor. "I have every wheat penny from 1909 to 1959, except for the 1909 S, VDB."

Moe turned around. It was the new beautiful person, Ziggy Lopez.

"Hi, I'm Premi." He introduced himself with his hand out as if Moe owed him something.

Moe returned to his computer.

“You think you know coins, Flemie?”

“Um... It’s Premie.”

“Oh.”

He stayed there for a long time. Finally he left.

The newbie triggered thoughts about his mother. She was thin, one of the beautiful people. She loved her body but hated her soul. When Moe was nine it was evident he was to be ugly – the mole, the weight. His mother gave up on Moe even before he gave up on himself.

In the ten years between adolescence and young adulthood he never had a real conversation with his Mom. It had to be some kind of a world record. She never asked about his grades, never probed about his friends or interests. She never even asked how he was doing.

The only time she spoke was when his Dad came home from work. It wasn’t really speaking though. It rang through Moe’s brain all his life.

“You useless drunk Mick faggot!” She got right in her husband’s face. Moe saw horror movies less frightening.

Moe’s father backed away into the bedroom. His mother followed him in and the door closed behind them. The screaming continued.

As nasty as his mother got Moe never heard his Dad yell back at her. He’d just take it. Moe always wanted him to stand up for himself. He wondered why he didn’t. Maybe he was just scared of the bitch. Moe certainly was. Then there was the possibility

that his father felt guilty about his sexuality and it killed his confidence. Back in those times such guilt could destroy a homosexual forever. There were no support groups, no “Queer Eye For The Straight Guy” programs bringing gay to the mainstream. Moe could only imagine what his dad went through.

His dad was almost as invisible as his mother a lot of the time. When he did get something out of him, they were often life gems Moe could live by. Just as often they were not. Between alcohol induced black outs they’d talk at length sometimes. Moe could tell what stage of drunk or high he was in by how much he’d communicate. If he was really high he’d ramble incoherently from one subject to another. Moe didn’t mind it though. It was still the best conversation he’d had all week. They’d often talk about the Colts who were of course back then the Baltimore Colts. In both their eyes Johnny Unitas was a God.

Moe’s father died on May 18th, 1978. It wasn’t a surprise to Moe. He’d been preparing for his demise mentally and emotionally for ten years.

When Moe told his mother the news it had been the first time they’d really spoken in half a decade.

“Figures,” his mother responded. “I knew he’d drink himself to death.”

Moe had inwardly entertained the same thoughts for years. He could never be callous enough to verbalize it to anyone, and certainly not with the heartless tone implemented by his mother.

Casket choices. Flower choices. Biblical passages. In the middle of it all Moe’s mother decided to take a sudden bizarre road trip to South Dakota to see Mount Rushmore, leaving Moe on his own for the funeral.

Moe wished he would have confronted his mother in years past about her abusiveness. Most of the time he just avoided her. She scared him and angered him that much. He suspected all the conversations in the world wouldn't have changed her. Through the draining process of arrangements, funeral, and wake, one thought domineered Moe as he remembered his father. Femininity. Gentle, kind femininity.

Chapter Four

Moe noticed in between coin websites that Kenny had called Phil into his office. Phil slumped over to the office like Droopy Dog. One of the District Sales Managers followed Phil in and closed the door behind them. It reminded Moe of a mafia hit.

All conversations stopped on the sales floor. They all watched through the office window as Bob escorted old Phil to a chair and then closed the blinds.

Minutes later the office door opened and Phil came out. He walked down the long hallway running the stretch of the sales floor faster than Moe had ever seen him move. He was crying.

Phil was sixty-some years old. In a sales world that coveted under forty and attractive, he'd never work in it again. He'd lost his life savings and had a wife who would now hate him even more. Within the next year when his unemployment would run out he'd be reduced to stocking shelves in a Wal-Mart with teenagers trying to save money for the latest iPad.

As Phil left the office he stumbled a little on his way out. It appeared as if he'd been hit in the belly with a two-by-four. He contained himself a little as tears flowed.

Moe forgave Phil for the sale he stole back in '92.

Then Moe's legs just started walking. He didn't even think about it. By the time he got outside Phil was halfway down the parking lot toward his eight year old Lexus which he would never again be able to afford.

"Phil," Moe said. He kept walking.

The newbie Premi followed Moe out.

“Phil, I want to help you.” Moe said louder. He kept walking. Premi passed by Moe and ran in front of Phil forcing him to talk. Moe watched from afar. After a few seconds Phil stopped. Soon his sobbing stopped as well. Premi talked to Phil with empathy and hope in his freakish sky blue eyes. Premi gave him his business card. He patted him on the shoulder and left Phil with a smile and a handshake.

As mesmerized as he was by Premi’s kindness, Moe couldn’t stop wondering if he would be fired next.

When he got home that night Moe assessed his finances. It was time to face reality. If Moe lost his job there would be nothing out there for him. Retail sales? Clerk? Bartender? Whatever employment he’d find would be half his current income at best, unless he wanted to work twice the hours.

The other option was to give up his luxuries completely. He’d already downgraded from an Acura to a used Corolla. Now he’d have to sell the three thousand square foot house. He’d move into a one-bedroom apartment and get to listen to the rap music blaring through the paper thin walls from the recent college graduates next door.

Moe walked around his house and began to appreciate how much the print advertising industry had afforded him over the years. There was the crystal chandelier in the dining room he purchased back in ‘86 compliments of his end of year bonus. Commissions on the Atright Dentistry sale paid for the hardwood floors throughout the first floor. Had he known the upcoming economic climate he probably wouldn’t have redone his kitchen back in ‘05. But how could he regret those beautiful granite counter

tops, the sleek tile floor, and of course the new cabinets that ascended to the ceiling met with thick intricate crown molding.

Moe's favorite part of the house was the family room in the finished basement. What irony. Family room. The sixty-inch flat screen HD TV was the perfect image to watch football on Sundays or movies on Saturday nights. He'd purchased a very impractical gigantic sectional sofa. It could have fit a grossly obese family of eight. Moe didn't know why he bought it since it was always just him. Wishful thinking maybe.

He enjoyed the family room sometimes during the week but mostly on the weekends – old episodes of *The Sopranos* and lots of movies. His favorites were the old black and whites. He was in love with Bogart. Loneliness wasn't so bad when you knew you could hang with Bogey any time.

Moe's most prized possession wasn't an electronic or home improvement. It resided in a frame on his bed stand. He looked at it every night.

One of the great thrills of coin collecting was putting together a set, looking for coins in crevasses of the world – a flea market in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a coin show in Vegas, a yard sale in small town Pennsylvania. Even more thrilling than that in Moe's opinion was watching a coin appreciate in value.

That's why he loved his 1920 S Double Eagle gold piece. When it came out of the mint in San Francisco it was worth its face value of twenty dollars. When Moe bought it back in 1986 he paid seventy-five hundred dollars for it. By the turn of the century it was worth over ten thousand. Recently it was up to seventeen five. As he stared at it from his bedside he felt a sense of pride. It was rare to have a coin that old, that had once been in

circulation, and still maintain Extra Fine condition. It was beautiful, more beautiful than any human that had ever lived.

Chapter Five

It was time to start buckling down. Moe had been coasting in his job for so long he forgot what it took to excel at it.

For years Moe had been arriving just prior to their 8:00 a.m. Monday meetings. He almost always arrived on time. Unlike poor Phil he'd been smart enough to stay under the managers' radar. That Monday he shot for 7:00 a.m.

He turned on the lights to the sales floor, booted up his computer, and cracked open his first Red Bull.

Moe and all the reps dug for leads to get sales everywhere and anywhere- advertisements in newspapers, Penny Savers, business cards on convenient store bulletin. They were all potential prospects because they were businesses that already knew they needed advertising. After a half hour of keying in phone numbers of potential leads to assess if they were current or past advertisers he got bored and decided to browse the coin sites.

Soon another sales rep arrived. It was Premi. Moe looked at his watch – 7:30. He was obviously more dedicated than most. The rest of the herd usually didn't start trickling in until closer to eight, just like Moe had always done.

Premi booted up his laptop and settled in. After a minute of ignoring each other Moe could see out of the corner of his eye that Premi was perplexed about something. He walked over to Moe.

“Excuse me, Moe,” he said timidly. “Do you have a quick minute to answer a question?”

“...Sure.”

“I was wondering. My head’s just spinning. It’s not exactly like what I learned in training. Do you have any advice for a rookie?”

“No, not really.”

Premi turned to leave.

Moe suddenly stopped his browsing. His eyes stayed on the monitor but became lost.

“I have a question for you,” Moe said.

“Sure.”

“Why did you go after Phil when he got shit canned last week?”

Premi’s gaze went to the floor, equally lost.

“I don’t know. I guess I couldn’t help but wonder if my hiring had something to do with his firing.”

Moe finally turned to him.

“Hmm. I do have advice for you.”

“What’s that?”

“Lose the conscience. It’ll do you no good in this job.”

Premi laughed. It was a cute little explosion of a chuckle that told Moe he had a lot of little boy in him.

“You were raised Catholic, weren’t you?” Moe asked.

“It’s that obvious, huh? I need to get more devious, I know.”

“Cursing would help.”

“Fuckin’ aye’.”

This time he made Moe laugh.

“It’s nice to see I’m not the only coin collector left this century,” Premi commented on the monitor’s website. “You have a favorite in your collection?”

A twinkle entered Moe’s eye and a smile teased his lips as the Double Eagle infiltrated Moe’s mind, body, and soul.

“A 1920 S twenty dollar gold piece.”

“Are you kidding me? What condition?”

“Extra fine.”

“What’s that worth, around twenty grand?”

“Something like that.” Moe feigned modesty.

“Wow. So what got you into collecting?”

“I don’t know. My cousin collected. I wanted a hobby that if I lost interest and stopped I’d have something of value from it. That’s the best part about collecting anyway – the value of it, watching your coins appreciate year after year. It’s kind of like a stock market that never goes down.”

“Really? Not for me,” Premi said. “For me it’s about the history of a coin, most of which we’ll never truly know about.”

“What do you mean?”

“Unless you’re buying uncirculated coins in a set you have no idea whose hands touched it or where it’s been. Think about it. I have a 1802 fifty-cent piece. When I look at it I don’t care about how much money I could get for it. I imagine it passing through the hands of a blacksmith in a town in its infancy. Maybe later it fell off some horse drawn carriage and landed on a cobblestone street to be picked up by a child who would

be the great grandfather of a dozen great grandchildren, all of whom died two generations ago.”

Premi was more than just a nice guy. He reminded Moe of something he'd loved about his coins that years of life had erased. Premi was a true renaissance man, a man with wisdom beyond his years, and an appreciation for true beauty. To Moe true beauty was something beyond fashion trends and perfect skin, something that transcended time and generations.

In one short conversation Premi had sparked in Moe a tiny little faith in humanity. He felt like he owed him something.

“Interesting perspective,” Moe said. “You always talk like that?”

Premi's head dropped.

“I don't know. Maybe just when I talk about coins.”

As much as he liked Premi he suspected he couldn't provide any advice that could help him. He knew the cream puff had no chance of surviving six months. Still he had to try. He owed him that.

“Premi, don't worry about the job. You got what it takes. Just work hard every day and you'll be fine. It's that simple.”

“Thanks, Moe.”

He couldn't believe he delivered the advice with a straight face. Sounded like something out of a bad Hallmark Movie of the Week.

Moe knew the rookie's destiny was sealed the first time he walked onto the sales floor and smelled the ugliness of petty callous real world competition. He was a kind gentle soul and unfortunately fortitude and loose morality go hand in hand.

Chapter Six

Moe had an appointment with Sam's Tree Service. The owner was a gypsy. The gypsies were usually alien run unlicensed fly by night businesses that would place ads in the book and, outside of a deposit, not pay one bill. They did shoddy work at best. Most consumers didn't know the difference at least not immediately. Six months after the job molding seams would begin to separate. In the case of a tree service company, trees supposedly treated for disease would mysteriously begin to deteriorate the next season.

Moe sold the gypsy an eight hundred dollar a month new sale. He walked into the office later that day with the calming knowledge of fifteen hundred in commission. Hard work seemed to be paying off.

It wasn't long before he realized something was very wrong. Sue White, the early twenties ex-cheerleader was crying. Three horny males were consoling her. Most of the other reps sat at their desks, immobile and silent. Kenny's office had the blinds closed. Premi approached.

"Did you hear?" He asked.

"No, what the hell happened?"

Premi couldn't say the words.

"What the fuck?"

"Phil died two nights ago."

"What? How?"

Premi took a breath and forced the words.

"He committed suicide."

He wondered if Kenny was going to come out and make an announcement. He suspected not. He suspected they'd handle Phil's death in much the same way they'd handled reps that left for medical sales, pharmaceuticals, or other industries- pretend they never existed.

Much like the moment Phil had walked out crying the week before, Moe got out of his seat and started walking, as if his legs had an agenda all their own.

He knocked on Kenny's door, waited a few seconds and knocked again louder. Moe wondered if Phil's wife was ok. Did he have kids somewhere? Did he have an aged mother mourning alone in some old age home?

Moe was done wondering and waiting. He opened the door and charged in. Only a moment into the office the door stopped, crashing violently into something. Kenny screamed. As Moe strolled in Kenny pulled his hand from his face to reveal a bleeding nose. He kept talking into the phone.

"No, nothing's wrong. I just tripped. Someone just came in. Gotta' go." He hung up.

Kenny grabbed some tissues to stop the bleeding.

"Shit." Moe saw his career flash before his eyes.

"What the hell, Steadman?!"

Moe closed the door behind them.

"We have to talk," Moe said indifferent to his career and Kenny's nose.

"Apology accepted."

"It's about Phil."

Kenny calmed down and went into sympathy mode. "Yeah," he responded.

“He wasn’t just another salesperson. I don’t care how much he coasted over the last few years he put most of his life into this company.”

Kenny stared at his desk.

“He was a human being for Christ sakes. You have to go out there and say something to us.”

“I did.” Kenny looked up. “Fifteen minutes ago before you got here.”

“Oh.”

Moe collapsed into a chair. His ears felt submerged in ice cold filthy pool water. His eyes became irritated as if it were allergy season.

“It’s a tough day for all of us,” Kenny said with surprising grace. He looked at his bloody tissue. “Mine just got a little tougher thanks to you.”

“Sorry,” Moe said.

“You know that’s the longest conversation we’ve ever had,” Kenny said.

Moe nodded, stood up, and left the office.

Stupid move. Even though Kenny played it cool the scene certainly didn’t help his chances of staying employed. So much for staying under the radar.

Moe sat down at his desk and stared out the window. He imagined Phil sitting on a couch in a museum-like living room after he got fired. He’d finally got up the nerve to tell his nasty wife. She screamed at him while some yelping rat dog chimed in. Moe thought about Phil’s life savings being gone, his manhood gone, his pride.

As much as Moe always tried to forget his younger years, Phil’s suicide forced him to reflect. Before his mid-twenties Moe had reached the breaking point many times. The first time he was twelve.

His mother kicked her Dad's incapacitated body in the hallway. He was curled into a ball, hands over his ears and face.

"Mamma!" Moe screamed.

She turned to him.

"And you."

By that age Moe had developed a shield against his mother. He was afraid but wouldn't show it. She'd become a disease he couldn't catch. She approached him as if she wanted to kill him but he didn't flinch.

"Why are you like this?"

Moe knew what she meant by "like this" all too well. The cheerleaders, jocks, band geeks and every other kid had reminded him every day at school.

Then in an instant her demeanor changed. She suddenly became human. Her voice softened as if to begin a heart to heart.

"There are places I can send you that can help you lose weight..." She was nearly crying. Emotions to his mother were like waves to a surfer. Take what comes and ride the hell out of it.

"And your face. I can get surgery to remove..."

"No!" Moe screamed.

His mother's unpredictable demeanor took another abrupt change. She stared at him as if he'd just desecrated her own mother's grave. Her face distorted, resembling a snarl.

She stampeded out of the house and slammed the door behind her. Moe went to his father. No real damage this time. He'd be fine. There had been a dozen less fortunate beatings.

As her father laid there whimpering it all suddenly became too much to bear. The room collapsed. Then it reassembled itself and spun faster and faster until Moe could hardly stand. He went to his bedroom, slammed himself onto his bed and screamed. It provided little peace. He got up and paced. He hyperventilated. It all had to stop or he would either go insane or die.

He went into the bathroom to find Mother's little helpers. He imagined swallowing every pill in the bottle, dying and his spirit watching Mother having to identify his ugly body. It encouraged his morbid agenda.

As he hastily reached for the pill bottle his hand scraped against the sharp tip of scissors. Moe pulled back from the cabinet. It didn't quite draw blood but it hurt. With the physical pain he felt calm. Soon the pain from his nothing wound subsided and the hysteria stormed the shores once again.

Moe went back to the cabinet and pulled out his father's straight razor. Little thought went into the placement. Luckily it didn't hit any major arteries. Suicide was officially dismissed. Moe had discovered a much more practical way to combat the torment. He didn't mind the blood. He was used to seeing it courtesy of his mother's spousal abuse. As he slowly sliced the meat of his hand he looked to the heavens and smiled.

Through junior high, high school, college, and early adulthood Moe cut himself when the torment arrived. The cutting was just a temporary band aid. He remained shy and miserable, lacking confidence.

When he got his job at yellow pages he knew he had to either change who he was or fail. So almost overnight he created a person that he'd never been. He studied the top performers in the office. There was one single common trait. They were ridiculously confident.

So he chose to be confident. It was that simple. As he closed sales and moved up the ranks of top performers that confidence grew. Soon the torment stopped completely. As much as he'd complained about his company over the years, in many ways it saved him.

Moe thought about his confrontation with Kenny. Damn temper. Even though he handled more revenue than anyone in the office he knew he was expendable. The only way to become irreplaceable was to continue to work harder.

Life was getting strange. Only a couple weeks earlier he felt the torment he'd eluded since young adulthood. It came so brazenly that it incited a plot to kill a woman. Now he was improving himself by the day. Life was a see-saw, not knowing what exactly he was or where he was going. The thread was tightening by the minute.

Chapter Seven

That night Moe thought about Pemi as he paced in his family room, providing him a sense of peace for the first time all day. His sky blue eyes forced Moe to the couch. They were everywhere - the floor, the walls. Moe sat and folded his fingers into his hair with enough force to break bone. Before he could wrap his brain around Premi's eyes and why they haunted him they were gone. He fumbled with ice and alcohol. He chugged a sloppy Gin and Tonic and settled down a little.

When Moe got to the office the next day he began to realize just how stressed he really was. As always he avoided the managers like the plague. Every rep was equally repulsive.

Then Premi appeared. Sue White walked up to him and began flirting. He obliged her graciously as he had everyone who'd ever interacted with him. Charles Manson would have been smitten with him.

Moe squirmed in his chair as he watched them. He couldn't understand his sudden loss of mental and emotional sinew. It made no sense on many levels.

He tucked jealousy deep into his psyche behind anger, fear, and sexual desire and went to his desk to start his day as best he could.

Moe's fingers were a hundred pounds as he tried to key in his username and password to log onto his computer.

"Hey, Steadman." The way Premi addressed him was in a way an indictment of intimacy. He'd called him Moe every other time they spoke. "How about another piece of advice? Your last one has been doing me fine."

“What was my last one?”

“You don’t remember?”

“I’m old. I don’t remember my name most days.”

“You told me to just work hard every day. It’s worked. I’m doing Ok.”

“I saw the Performance Ranking Report. You’re doing more than Ok. Number six already.”

“I want to get to number one.”

Moe pondered what helped him when he was a new hire a thousand years prior.

“Lyrics,” he said.

“What?”

“You need lyrics in your arsenal. Listen to old timers like me. Listen to your manager. When you hear a great lyric to overcome an objection or a lyric to close a business owner write it down.”

“Why?”

“Because unless you’re a genius you’re not going to remember every word of every training session. Write down the most compelling things you hear along the way, put them on a notepad beside your gearshift and read them twice a day. This will ensure you incorporate them into your presentation. Otherwise they’re lost forever into the chaos and stress.”

“Is this job stressful?” Premi said sarcastically.

“You’re doing all the right things. Keep it up.”

“Thanks.”

Moe couldn't believe his own words. He was evolving right before his own eyes. Premi was now his friend he guessed. He couldn't dispel the raging desire for him to be more than that.

On the drive home after work Moe found himself admiring shapes in the clouds while stopped at a light. Premi had somehow eliminated the stress from his existence that controlled him that morning.

After a couple Gin & Tonics Moe went to bed early. As he closed his eyes and neared sleep Premi remained in his thoughts.

Moe forgot to set his alarm. The next morning he didn't wake up until 9:00 am and didn't leave his house until 10:00 am. So much for his newly improved work ethic.

As guilt poked needles into his brain the car radio's newscast came on.

"In economic news after another announced increase in unemployment the NASDAC dropped four hundred points. The DOW fell six hundred twenty. It's the worst stock market decline in eight months."

He turned it off and prayed none of his customers were listening to similar newscasts. As if it mattered. They were feeling the worsening affects of the economy on their bottom lines without the news telling them about it.

He got to the office and settled in at his desk with an energy drink and a computer that booted up at a snail's pace. He thought back to the seventies and eighties as he waited. Typewriters and pay phones ruled the world then. Nothing was instantaneous. Now we expected everything to be just that. Moe preferred the slower world.

Moe's intentions were to quickly check the e-mails he neglected for three days, assess the prior account status of a new sale appointment he had at noon, and leave the office without any interaction with anyone.

After deleting a couple junk e-mails Moe clicked on the first real message which was from customer service. He read and slammed his fist onto the desk.

Pepper Glass had been his largest customer for twenty years accounting for one fifth of his yearly revenue. The last two years he'd tap danced to get them to maintain their current spend. This year he convinced Beatrice Pepper to keep eighty percent even though she was originally intent on cancelling everything.

The customer service e-mail explained that Beatrice from Pepper Glass called in and cancelled her recently signed contract. The entire account was gone.

Moe was tired of fighting. Instead of using a tourniquet he just wanted to let his wounds bleed and slowly die just as his industry was doing. This cancelled account could literally be the end of his career. His beautiful Golden Eagle was slipping from his grasp.

Moe stared at his computer. Suddenly his pencil snapped between his thumb and index finger. His career and his financial stability were entering truly uncharted waters.

Chapter Eight

After the Monday morning meeting Moe cold called almost the entire day. Out of thirty doors he set one appointment, one fifth of the meetings he would have set fifteen years before. At 4:00 Moe got in his car, reclined the seat, and closed his eyes to recharge. He thought about Premi.

In years and only months past he would have ended such a day of rejection at 2:00 and retired to his patio with Gin & Tonics and *The Baltimore Sun*. That was the old Moe. Instead of going home he detoured to pound the phones in the office.

As he drove he hoped he would run into Premi at the office. In another moment he hoped he would not. The commute went from pulsating roar of the city to the grind of beltway traffic and finally to the relaxing tranquility of trees and acres of grass intersecting business parks in the suburbs.

Moe entered the office at around 5:00. Empty. No surprise there. Any time after 4:00 pm might as well be midnight. Three quarters of the sales force had cut out two hours earlier, drained by pressure and rejection.

A sound came from the kitchen area. Another rep remained, perhaps driven like Moe by desperation. Maybe it was Premi trying to get ahead and win President's Club and that coveted number one ranking. Maybe it was Kenny working late after receiving a threatening e-mail from corporate about declining sales.

As he neared the kitchen he soon realized there were two people. But they weren't having a conversation. The kitchen light was off.

It seemed strange, the quiet, the darkness, the sounds and movements without speech. Moe peeked in and a part of him died in an instant.

It was one of those moments, like the first time Mom called him ugly, like the first time he saw Dad passed out drunk on their dining room floor. Moe's high school and college nicknames rushed him as did the venom that regurgitated from the beautiful people who spoke them.

His face melted into the doorframe as he watched Premi make out with Suzy White. It was delightful as much as it was painful, each tongue softly caressing the other. Hands on breasts. Hands on ass. Moe wished he was in the middle of the whole naughty embrace.

He turned and left as quietly as he could, his body trembling. He went right to his car and touched himself. It took all of fifteen seconds.

Ecstasy became exhaustion. Exhaustion became misery.

He hit the steering wheel so hard it hurt. No broken bones, but painful enough to calm him down.

He sat in silence watching the cars speed by on York Road, husbands on their commutes home to see their families, singles driving to happy hours to meet all their friends.

Moe's stare became more and more intense, as if trying to study the eye color of the model in the digital billboard across the street, and then trying to count the pixels within the eye.

He popped his trunk and exited the car. He came back in with the gold colored steel flashlight he nearly used to bludgeon a woman only weeks before.

His look was more timid as he slowly raised his left hand onto the top of the steering wheel. He started breathing heavy like a linebacker psyching himself before a game.

Moe lifted the steel and slammed it down onto his pinky and ring fingers.

During the three hour wait in the Emergency Room Moe saw gun-shot victims come and go, a couple patients with stab wounds, and an apparent domestic violence victim- a frail man in his fifties whose three hundred pound wife had passed out on him after sex and crushed a couple ribs. Isn't love grand? The Baltimore Police Department sure had their work cut out for them.

The only thing worse than the waiting room was having to explain the ridiculous tall tale of how his drunk friend accidentally hit his hand with a bat after a bad called strike during a softball game.

Moe had only bruising in his pinky finger along with the shattered finger nail. His ring finger was broken in two places. The doctor told him he wouldn't be able to wear a ring for a while, as if that mattered.

Moe got home at 10:00 pm. He poured an extra large Gin & Tonic and just sat in dark silence. He thought about looking at his coins or watching a *Sopranos* episode. Neither were as appealing as drinking in the dark.

By hour three and gin number who knows what, Moe saw people walking through his back yard, lots of people in white pants, just walking. Then they began dancing.

The liquor, pain medication, and his imagination were becoming one. The people in white were certainly having fun. He wanted to invite them all in for a drink but he

couldn't move. As quickly as they appeared they were gone, off to a new party where the air was sweet and the grass was green as Christmas trees.

Chapter Nine

10:50 a.m. So much for early starts. Moe gravitated toward no start at all.

Moe couldn't help but ponder the scene in the office kitchen. Beauty was still everything in his world. He wished he could have resided in the old Twilite Zone episode where ugly faces were beautiful and vice versa.

Moe studied his splinted left fingers. They didn't hurt. He was tempted to smash them again. Instead he poured a Gin & Tonic. It was officially a day off.

Moe went to his bedroom and sifted through the mail that had been neglected for days. Amid the junk mail and coupon packets one envelope had a big red stamp-
FORECLOSURE ALERT.

He curled into a ball staring at his Double Eagle, still smelling the moth balls from the closet in his old cousin Terrance's coin room.

It was a brief distraction. It was time to face the pain and open the foreclosure letter.

As he read he chugged his G & T. "...*Because you've neglected your financial responsibilities..*" "...*Your lack of communication indicates that you haven't taken your obligation seriously.*" Moe deserved every condescending accusation.

It was official. Unless a miracle sale came along he would have to sell his house. The visions came back. A one bedroom apartment with paper thin walls through which he'd be tortured with the latest rap music by DJ EZ Sleaze. He thought about waking up in a twin bed that barely fit in his tiny bedroom and barely accommodated his obese body. His window would overlook nothing except other apartments and more apartments

beyond those. It would be like some insane Dr. Seuss illustration with hills of apartments and other apartments upon other apartments. No space. No privacy. No sanity. Rap music. Moe wanted to pop a cap in his own ass.

The morning buzz became full on drunk by mid afternoon.

Moe saw more people dressed in white out the French doors of his family room. It was a mother, father and two daughters walking hand in hand enjoying the taste of the spring air and smell of freshly cut grass. He stumbled out of his chair to say hello but once again they were gone just as quickly as they appeared.

Moe's enamored expression became a dark sulk.

His mind swirled. He began to think of all sorts of things –the threat of terrorism, Christian extremists, and how both groups shared the same brain. He wondered if his hero Ray Lewis ate nails for dinner the night before games. He wondered if Bogey had those bedroom eyes when he was at the DMV renewing his license. He thought about society's norms that suddenly seemed insignificant in light of his lingering inevitable depravity.

A hundred urges rushed his mind and body, mostly sexual. Then suddenly a twinkle crept into his eye.

He retrieved his wallet from the nightstand and counted his cash. He looked at his Golden Eagle and winked.

Ninety-two dollars. Not enough he suspected. He hoped they accepted checks or credit cards.

There was a reason yellow pages required Escort Services to pay the entire year of advertising up front. They appeared and disappeared as much as the gypsies. From what Moe surmised they were good at making illegal transactions look innocent and legal.

He leafed through the book and called the first ad under the heading. After some initial feeling out he got into his real agenda.

“So will my escort stay with me longer than the allotted time if we’re hitting it off?”

“Yes, but anything beyond the allotted four hours you can negotiate with your escort.”

“And what if I want my escort to be more than a date?”

“Amber’s Escorts does not allow any kind of sexual encounters with our clients.”

He’d never heard a company policy delivered with less enthusiasm.

“And if I want to maintain your escort’s services beyond the four hours will you accept a credit card payment for that?”

“...Once your contracted hours are done, we aren’t involved in any further communication... but I suspect your escort might accept cash or check.”

Moe gave her his address and the deal was done.

He showered, brushed his teeth and tried to spruce himself up the best he could.

He paced around the house. In the two hours since the phone call he stopped drinking so he could perform if it came to that. More than anything he hoped the person they sent would be accepting and easy. Easy was critical. He’d never paid for sex. Easy was the whole idea, after all.

The door bell rang and with it a completely new world. Moe's fear ceased. He was met with a perfect smile, energy, and a genuine interest in him.

"Hi, I'm Michael," the boy toy said. "You must be Moe. You look hot tonight."

"Already?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just have a drink."

Michael liked Rum and Cokes. Moe made them extra strong.

It wasn't long before his beautiful guest was actually willing to kiss.

It was a far more powerful indulgence than the one his mind created during masturbation. This was reality. Unlike beautiful people, who could be with someone all the time, Moe truly appreciated and cherished intimacy. For Moe the touch of a hand, the taste of sweet bitter alcohol on lips was a miracle of life, like the birth of a child would be for new parents.

As the possibility of sex neared, Moe already quivered. Michael took charge but gently. In less than a minute Moe climaxed in a shaking screaming mess of flesh and sweat.

After three more sessions and a nap Moe sat up beside a sleeping Michael. Through the curtains a full moon gently terrorized the earth. As Moe sat on the edge of the bed a staring contest ensued with the bright sullen orb. Moe won.

Chapter Ten

The next morning Michael was long gone as was Moe's thousand dollar check. A shower seemed like a pleasant start to the day but Moe couldn't move.

The Double Eagle never looked more beautiful.

Moe's birth given name was Maureen Steadman. She was born a female but no one ever treated her as one. That first five year old boy she met in kindergarten had it right. He saw her lack of soft femininity. Not long after she could say her actual name Maureen, she was nicknamed Moe.

As her childhood sense of femininity stalled, confusion and frustration about who she was grew, as did her lack of confidence.

Michael made her feel like a real woman for the first time in her life. She wanted more.

Maureen slithered amid the sheets amazed that Michael wasn't disgusted by her body.

Through her bedroom blinds she could see the people in white running through her back yard. She wanted to go out and introduce herself but thanks to Michael she was paralyzed. It wasn't a debilitating condition. It was empowering, almost spiritual. She was an angel on a cloud bathing in the sun. She didn't want to move.

Maureen decided not to work that day, just like the day before. The universe or God or whatever decides fate had beaten her. Perhaps she had beaten it. She'd officially given up on trying to keep her remaining belongings, including her house. All she needed was the Golden Eagle... and something else.

Maureen showered. She studied her body and decided her large breasts were a positive and that some men could overlook the flab that surrounded them. Cup half full.

She dried herself in front of the mirror and analyzed further. She flung her hair back and forward and then back again. Pretty was nowhere to be found. That damn mole.

She threw her hair forward again. It was the perfect camouflage. The wet made her locks look like black whips. They obscured the mole enough to imagine some resemblance of a woman. Her hair was longer than normal. No time for a hair cut when working to save one's home.

Maybe with some make-up. Just maybe.

She searched the bottom cabinet drawer and pulled out eye shadow and mascara that had expired in 2002, an apparent gag gift from a co-worker in the nineties.

After applying the make-up she stared into the mirror. Better than Tammy Faye Baker anyway.

Maureen pondered why she suddenly felt feminine. Was great sex the answer to hers and all the world's ills?

She decided it wasn't just the sex. It wasn't about the make-up itself but what its application stood for. It was about taking charge of her femininity and sexuality. It was about control. Michael had been her pet, her slave. She had broken society's ethos and paid for sex. Could she take it a step further?

Maureen descended the steps into the family room. The previous week she had sold much of her furniture. Before Michael, seeing the floor without the sectional would have crumbled her into a depression. Her new femininity didn't care. She was evolving toward something great. She just didn't quite know what it was.

She was still only wearing a towel as she made a drink and pondered what she could do and what she would become.

Between the curtains Maureen saw the dancing white garbed strangers in her backyard again. Perfect timing. She was in the mood to dance. She brushed away the curtains and opened the sliding glass door. They were gone.

She closed the door and decided not to care about the apparent hallucination.

She turned on the portable stereo, turned up the volume, dropped her towel, and danced around the room naked.

As she danced her mind soared with an epiphany. She stopped dancing and began to pace. Her mind's processing created a wide indelible smile. She couldn't believe she'd conceived it or that she was actually considering going through with it.

To take revenge on an industry and fulfill her deepest sexual desires at the same time. It felt right and she didn't care about the consequences. As the plot developed fully in her mind Maureen realized that she was still more masculine than feminine. She knew she was like her mother- a monster.

The internet had been taking from her. It was time to take from it.

Chapter Eleven

Maureen had always heard others say that the city of Baltimore is much like a small town in that it seemed everyone knew each other. She'd never experienced it herself since she was long forgotten by everyone she'd known. Still she thought it wise not to take her revenge anywhere near her home turf. So she placed her ad in the Frederick Times, forty miles outside Baltimore. She bought a disposable cell phone. She paid for the minutes with a money order, an old trick she learned from the yellow page gypsies.

Her yellow page experience contributed far more to her mission, such as her knowledge of tactics sales reps used to qualify potential leads. Start-up businesses were the most attractive because they had no word of mouth customers or repeat business. They had to advertise.

She presumed the internet companies' sales job at its core was just like hers at yellow pages. They got their leads anywhere they could find them, business cards off bulletin boards in gas stations, signs on the side of contractors' vehicles, newspaper advertisements.

As far as The Frederick Times and all of Frederick County knew there actually existed a Grand Opening for Delila's Cleaning Service.

Her ad read:

GRAND OPENING DISCOUNTS

Delila's Cleaning Service

"We're Not Happy Unless You

And Your Home are Happy”

She thought about the \$400 cost of the advertisement. She thought about how insane her whole twisted plan was becoming. She contemplated backing out. It wasn't an option. She was too mentally and emotionally invested to back out. Now she was financially invested too.

Maureen visualized that thin-walled apartment with rap music blaring from the neighboring unit. She envisioned prison. It didn't effect her. Her life had already been a prison far too long. It was time to break out.

After the newspaper published she received a couple calls from people wanting their homes cleaned. Then a salesman called in. He was a shy humble recent college graduate.

She answered her new cell phone as she had in the last couple days.

“Delila's Cleaning. How may I help you?”

“I'm John from the yellow pages. I didn't want to take any of your time today but I was hoping I might be able to schedule an appointment another day to go over some of our specials we have for advertising.”

The poor son of a bitch. He was entering the wrong industry at the wrong time. His voice had an apprehension that indicated he knew it. He'd somehow gotten a job in an economy that didn't allow recent college graduates to get jobs. His voice told her he knew he might not find another if he didn't succeed.

In months John would begin to default on his college loans as he neglected to meet quotas. Then eventually he'd lose his job with yellow pages. He'd work at a

Starbucks or a Chick-fil-a and wonder why he spent so much money to go to college. Along the way John would leave his two bedroom party palace apartment he shared with his college buddy. He'd move back in with his parents and what confidence the yellow page industry didn't drain from him would gradually dissolve each morning with his mother asking him if he wanted Frosted Corn Flakes or Cocoa Puffs. Drug abuse, alcoholism, obesity. John was to be just another example of what was becoming the anti-American dream in the twenty-first century.

Maureen thought about her own place in the world. For once in her life she liked who she was- a woman that wanted, a woman that took.

She let John continue his pitch. As he babbled about her cleaning service industry being one of the primary headings in the yellow pages he pressed on about setting an appointment. As cute as he sounded he wasn't part of her target. Her vengeance was to be upon internet sales reps only, those who perpetuated the plague.

"John," She said. "I'm going out of business."

John stayed positive and persistent.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Do you know of any friends who own a business that need to advertise?"

"No, I'm just an old lady. I don't have friends or connections or anything else."

"Oh." He was silent for a long time. "Sorry I can't help you..."

The defeat and desperation in his voice were too painful to ignore.

"Wait. John."

"Yes."

"How old are you?"

“Twenty-two.”

“I have over thirty years on you. John. I’ve dealt with a lot of sales people.

You’ve got something. Stick with it.”

“...Thanks.”

They hung up.

John seemed like a nice young man. She hoped he wouldn’t end up a fat drunk drug addict living with his parents.

Twenty minutes later she got the call she’d been waiting for.

Chapter Twelve

He was smug, bragging on about search engine results and how nobody ever uses yellow pages anymore. He was perfect. She let him pontificate and pretended to buy in. She told him she was very interested and set the appointment.

His name was Jake. Over the phone she gave him the impression that she was a big player –fifty employees, hundreds of established clients. The “grand opening” in the ad just represented her penetration of Frederick, MD. It was the only way he’d agree to meet at 6:00 PM in a hotel room. She had also come up with an elaborate explanation about living in D.C. and being in the process of setting up her corporate offices in Frederick. She had been working fourteen hours a day so she’d just been staying in Frederick during the week until the corporate offices were completed.

She paid for the room at the Frederick Holiday Inn Express in cash, used a fake license as identification, and used a random car she’d seen in the parking lot as her license plate for the hotel registration information.

She turned up the thermostat in the room. A hot Jake was a thirsty Jake.

Her face was made up nicely. She dressed into her finest slacks, blouse, and suit jacket, sprayed on some perfume, and set up her illusion. She placed her premium stock custom printed Delilah’s Cleaning business cards in a messy pile on an end table. She’d paid three hundred dollars for a couple vehicle sign magnets she left on the room’s center coffee table.

Maureen took a Gin from the mini bar and made herself the old stand-by. It relaxed her a little, but excitement was still screaming through her pours.

A knock.

She looked around. Everything was set. Delilah's Cleaning was real. All that was left was her mind set. She chugged her G&T. She'd manufactured relaxation and confidence during the last thousand sales calls over the last thousand years. She took a deep breath.

He knocked again.

She completed her illusion with cell phone to ear. She answered the door while feigning a conversation with a distributor.

"I'm on hold. Nice to meet you, Jack."

"Jake, actually."

His beauty and confidence was exactly what she expected. No twenty-three-year-old should be that confident. She suspected he'd never had to struggle in that category. Rich parents. Great schools. Athletics. Mental anguish for young Jake had been deciding which doting teenage beauty queen to take to the prom. She hated him.

As she pretended to listen on the phone he made himself at home on the couch even though she hadn't invited him to do so. He pulled out a lap top and placed it on top of her vehicle signs.

Jake's disregard for Delilah's Cleaning magnetic signs only confirmed that Maureen was doing the right thing. She suspected he parked his car in the handicap zone.

She turned up the volume of her pretend phone call.

"Ok. Ok. So when will it be there? ...Two weeks? Is that a joke? Are you trying to be funny?!"

Young Jake kept his disciplined typing, pretending she wasn't there.

“As soon as you can get it there? Here’s my concept. You get it there by Friday or I find a new supplier!” She hung up her flip phone with as much violence as possible and threw it on the bed.

“You got ten minutes, Jack.”

“It’s Jake. No problem.”

He was as full of shit as anyone. No internet program could be presented that fast. It’s all too technical and complicated. He started in.

“Delilah,” he said with a wonderful smile. “I wanted to start by asking you a few questions about your business to determine a program that matches your needs. Then I’ll let you know how we can help you and finally I’ll provide you a recommendation based on your needs.”

He set the agenda flawlessly right out of sales 101. He actually had some skill.

“Sound good?” He asked.

She nodded.

“First off, are you doing any other types of advertising?”

He was sweating and so was Maureen. As designed, the temperature in the room was becoming unbearable but he kept his suit jacket on.

“Well, I’m looking into a few things but I haven’t committed to anything yet.” She gave him nothing. She was enjoying watching him sweat, figuratively and literally.

“Excuse me,” she said, enjoying his discomfort. She went to the refrigerator and was careful to grab the correct water bottle. She opened it and drank. A satisfied sigh left her after the gulp.

“Would you like a water also?” she asked.

“Yeah.” He added under his breath, “Jesus, yeah.”

She reached into the fridge again. Top shelf. Top left corner.

“Here you go.”

Jake took the water, cracked it open, and drank. She sat on the couch relaxed and excited. It was like that peak at the beginning of a roller coaster ride just before falling into a speedy organ churning descent.

She was already enjoying the control, playing the role as business owner, being the sought after instead of the desperate hunter. Soon she’d have the ultimate control over this young beautiful enemy.

The love, lust, or whatever feelings she’d had for Premi seemed like a faded memory.

“Where were we?” She asked.

“Other advertising.” His eyes were blinking quickly. He was sweating more and looking disoriented already.

“Is it too hot in here? Let me turn down the thermostat. Drink some more water.”

She turned down the heat, took off her jacket, and sat back down.

“So, you’re switching your corporate offices to Frederick?” He slurred.

“Yeah, I like the beaches up here.”

It took Jake a few seconds to realize they were at least three hours from any beach. He laughed at the silliness. He kept laughing.

“Would you like a drink, Jake?”

“Yeah.” He got suddenly excited and tried to jump up and join her. Instead he fell back into his chair. “Maybe I shouldn’t. I’m feeling... weird.”

“I like Gin & Tonics. How about you?”

“Okay.”

He was Maureen’s muse -incapacitated and about to get worse.

She looked him over and thought about his parents. Even though he had an easy path it was still a path. He was a human being with a mother and father who perhaps loved him. For God sakes. She had to stop this. But she couldn’t.

She gulped down her drink and poured another. She unbuttoned the top three buttons of her blouse. She guessed that at least her cleavage might be appealing to him in his new state.

She went back to him. Her breasts and lace bra handed him his drink. His head bobbed as he stared at her chest. He drank and smiled.

She sat back down but only for a second. Maureen was enjoying his stare too much not to get closer. She kneeled on the carpet and put her hands on his knees, providing him an even better birds-eye view. Her blouse’s fourth button accidentally came undone. She rubbed his legs. His eyes indicated he wanted more.

He tried to say something as his drink fell to the floor. His Chinese was rusty but it sounded like he wanted to play basketball with the Queen.

Maureen took off Jake’s shoes and then his pants. Soon they were both naked. Jake had no idea how successful the appointment was about to become.

Chapter Thirteen

Maureen had purchased herself a four-season box set of *The Sopranos* for Christmas. Since football season had been over for two months and all television had to offer were singing contests and other horrifying reality TV, it was the only entertainment she had outside of Bogey and her new found extracurricular activities.

As she watched Tony Soprano discussing his life with his therapist Maureen's thoughts drifted. She closed her eyes and breathed deep. Her breathing accelerated. Like a sling shot Maureen leapt from the couch and entered the bathroom. She vomited. The source of her illness hadn't been from a stomach virus or alcohol. In fact she hadn't had a drop since she'd been home from the hotel the night before. She just wasn't in the mood. A drink might just be the remedy now though. She made a G & T at her makeshift egg crate mini bar and forced it down.

Her father had raised her too well. In between blackouts and disappearing acts he had said the words. Integrity. Kindness. The Golden Rule. She'd gradually disobeyed each word more and more over the years as she became tainted by the world and the beautiful people in it. Now she realized more than ever that the words were engrained in her core. Damn him. An inept conscience would have been far more easy to control. None at all –even better. Instead she was who she was- resulting in a puking incapacitated mess.

She acknowledged that she might die right there in her living room. Her body was that numb and her mind was that domineering, throwing daggers into her self-worth and sanity every minute.

The guilt ridden torment was racing at her. But this was a different beast than before. Somehow she knew self mutilation would not combat her guilt. There had to be a way to overcome it.

Then she saw his face. Tony Soprano. He was smiling. Just minutes earlier on the screen Maureen saw an enraged gangster. Now he was calm, kind, charming. For Tony it was never obvious or easy in any of the episodes but ultimately therapy worked for him. She did not want to feel this horrifying guilt again. She knew the hotel crime was a one time event. She would never take again.

Yet that surrender did not do anything to quell her guilt now. Tony Soprano's therapy again entered her mind. She was once again about to enter uncharted waters. She had to try something.

She arrived ten minutes early for her appointment with the therapist. It was like a medical doctor's office without the glass partition and without the hassle of sitting among other sick people. She was alone in the waiting room. Four chairs surrounded a table with magazines like *Men's Health*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Time*. After reading about the hold outs of NBA millionaires Maureen was greeted by a short skinny Middle Eastern man. His mouth didn't smile but his eyes did.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Aumora."

He spoke perfect English. Thank Christ. He was slightly younger than herself, perhaps fifty. A small scar painted his otherwise bronze skin above his left eye. She guessed he was too small and frail to have been in a street fight. Then again he could be retired special ops. The scar might have occurred during a mission in the Middle East as

he single handedly incapacitated three Saudi operatives. It was possible that beneath his loose fitting golf shirt was bulging biceps and ripped abs.

“Please come into my office.”

She'd seen the cliché images of the patient on the couch. In *The Sopranos* Tony always sat across from Dr. Melfi, both in chairs, more like a normal conversation. Dr. Aumora's office had both options. There was a long couch with an inviting plush pillow that appeared to be silk. She could smell the leather emanating from the couch suggesting it was new. A chair with adequate cushioning rested near the couch behind the pillow. A modest desk with a computer was at the back of the office near a window that looked down at the trees and other office buildings of Hunt Valley. On the other side of the desk were two chairs facing each other emulating *The Sopranos* office.

“Where should I sit?”

“Wherever you'd like,” he said.

She assessed the options and the fact that he gave her one at all. She strolled by the couch and brushed her hand against the pillow.

Maureen had never been to a shrink. She could only surmise based on her TV watching that they had to be in control of the sessions, much like she always had to be in control of a sales call. Dr. Aumora's blatant surrender of control must have been a ploy to analyze her in some way. If she laid on the couch would he surmise her to be relaxed and submissive? If she sat in the chair would he think she was guarded and careful? She didn't understand his game so she decided to create her own game. She strolled past the couch behind his desk, and dropped into his chair beside the computer. She tapped at the

key board for a moment then spun the chair around to check out the view, hands behind her head.

“This will do just fine, doc.”

“Ahh. Um.”

She spun back around to enjoy the site of his mouth opened like a child trying to catch rain drops.

“I’m just messing with you.”

His hands guided her out of his chair without actually touching her.

“How about you sit here and I’ll sit here.”

The Sopranos set up it was. The doctor sat down, adjusted his glasses, and scribbled into a note pad.

“So,” he began. “You were a little short during our phone conversation. Can you now tell me what you wanted to talk about specifically?”

“What do you want to talk about, doctor?”

He adjusted his glasses again.

“It’s your quarter, Miss. Steadman.”

“Call me Maureen. I’m no stranger to informalities.”

“Maybe you could just start by telling me a little about yourself.”

“I’m a professional yodeler. Gold medal at the 1980 Olympics. I endured a throat injury during a gang bang in Calcutta. You may have heard about my plight during a *60 Minutes* piece in 82’. Tragic tale.”

“I’m sure it is.”

He scribbled again and then stopped. He tossed his glasses onto a newspaper.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Steadman. I don’t think we’ll be able to work together.”

She sat up straight.

“I’m an educated professional therapist, Ms. Steadman. I’ve paid my dues. I’m not here for your amusement. If I waste my time being your rag doll I’m taking away from people that are serious about needing help. There’s no way I’m going to do that.”

Maureen had been rejected a thousand times but this was different. This wasn’t a function of a bad economy or a dying industry. This was on her. She reassessed her need to overcome her guilt and lost her iron shield.

“No. Please. Dr. Aumora, I truly need your help. Sorry for my manners. I don’t know if it’s a defense mechanism. Maybe I’m just an asshole.”

Maureen settled back into her chair.

“Dr. Aumora, I need your help... Please.”

He reclined as he scribbled another note. He stared at Maureen and then scribbled again.

As she sat waiting for his response she processed a thought with each of the million threads of carpet her eyes captured. Her hotel victim had once been a baby, perfect as gold to his parents. Why had her mother been so horrid? Her mortgage company hated her. Her yellow page customers hated her even more. The internet. Unrest in the Middle East. Bogey. Death. Love.

“Ok.” His voice pulled her from her mind’s grasp. “I’ll work with you, as long as you promise not to cross the boundaries of mutual respect.”

“Ok.”

“You promise?”

She nodded.

“Good. Let’s start over. Tell me why you’re really here.”

She breathed deep.

“Doctor, I’m here a different person than I was only a few days ago. I thought the new me would be a better person. Then I became something else.” She stopped herself.

“What do you mean?”

She stared blankly.

“How about just starting out with your background,” he said. “Leave out the orgies in Calcutta.”

“I grew up in Baltimore. Lived here my whole life. Loved the Colts and now the Ravens. I always wanted to be in a fantasy football league.”

“Why aren’t you?”

“Guess I’m supposed to lay my cards on the table here, huh?”

“Guess so,” he said unaffected just like Dr. Melfi in *The Sopranos*.

“The fact is I don’t much like people. And they certainly don’t like me.”

She tried to assess a reaction from him. Nothing. No note writing, no expression.

“You ever have a client like me before?”

“No two people are exactly alike. So, no I’ve never worked with someone exactly like you.”

“Exactly.”

Dr. Aumora tilted his glance, a mild reprimand.

“What were your parents like growing up?”

“Cards on the table. Dad was a drunk and a drug addict.” Her eyes faded back to the carpet threads. “But he was kind, loving...”

“You said *was*. Did he pass away?”

“He did. When I was twenty-three.”

“I’m sorry.”

More carpet ogling.

“Your mother?”

Maureen’s eyes left the carpet. She smiled.

“My mother was an evil abusive bitch who didn’t care about anyone but herself. She kicked the bucket too.”

“I’m sorry... Can you tell me more about her?”

“Sorry, doc. Too many cards for today.”

“Understood.” He scribbled more. “Let me go back to a couple minutes ago. You were questioning your own validity compared to a few days ago.”

Maureen’s eyes returned to the carpet.

“You know the stories of kids that enjoy pulling the wings off flies?” She asked.

“Yes.”

“I was never one of those kids. I felt too sorry for the flies.” Her eyes dug deep into the carpet, beyond the threading, through the padding and floor boards, even past the building foundation. Her gaze reached the center of the earth. “I don’t feel sorry for the flies anymore.”

Dr. Aumora put down his note pad.

“What happened, Maureen?”

“I did something bad. I did something really bad.”

The session helped. She could eat again. She could drink again. The guilt had dissipated. It was more than getting things off her chest although that helped too. In college one of her elective classes was Theology. One thing she liked about the Christian faith was the concept of forgiveness. As long as we are truly sorry for our sins and we confess them, God absolves us. Maureen was truly sorry and she had done a partial confession, at least that's what she told herself. It was enough to make her feel absolved, at least for the time being.

Now she had to hope she could control her lust and desire for revenge.

Chapter Fourteen

Pete Kendrickson had been a Baltimore cop for eighteen years. Ever since he saw what happened to his best friend, Carlos at age ten he had dedicated his life to going after the bad guys.

Carlos was as sweet as candy. In contrast Pete, being the son of a disciplinarian cop who brought his work home, was street smart even at age ten.

Both their families went to mass at the same Catholic church off of Falls Rd. –St. Josephs. Pete and Carlos would always talk afterward about baseball and where they'd meet to play after lunch. They'd talk about the Orioles' new phenom Cal Ripkin Jr. and argue about who'd play short stop and pretend to be him.

It was a rainy April Sunday in 1982. The downpour felt like tiny water balloons exploding on their scalps as Pete and Carlos had their usual post-church baseball conversation, hoping the rain would subside.

Both Pete and Carlos then went with their parents. Both families had planned to meet for a lunch out together- crab cakes at Patrick's Restaurant. Pete's family car lead the way. They exited the church parking lot and stopped off for gas a mile or so down the road.

Pete noticed Carlos' parents arguing as they pumped gas. Carlos left the car and walked down Falls Rd. Amid the arguing and busyness of the gas station his parents never even noticed him leave. Pete did. Carlos walked fast, obviously agitated by the increasingly loud conversation between his parents.

Pete went after him to make sure his friend was ok.

It happened fast. A long black car pulled up beside Carlos. The boy engaged them in conversation as if he knew them. Pete ran faster toward them, knowing something was wrong.

“Carlos!” He yelled. Carlos started to get into the car. “Carlos!”

As Carlos got in the back seat he looked back at Pete’s frantic sprint.

His last image of Carlos was a suddenly petrified face and giant hands pulling him back, then a slamming car door and squealing tires.

Carlos disappeared forever.

The effect of Carlos’s abduction had many immediate effects - disinterest in sports, tardiness at school, and general discontent. None of it was received with empathy from his father. There was no real physical abuse- a few shoves here and there. The old man’s screaming lectures about discipline and the importance of grades were far more torturous than a punch in the face as far as Pete was concerned.

His old man didn’t want him to be a cop. He wanted college and a white collar profession for his son, something as far away from the cruel Baltimore streets as possible. He simply wanted a better life for him. It wasn’t until years later that Pete grasped that.

After Carlos’ abduction the soft touch Pete needed came from his mother. There were mornings when he just couldn’t get up. She’d cozy up with him in bed and try to coax him to go to school.

“Petey, sweetie,” she’d say so soft he could barely hear her.

“It’s just Pete, Mom. I’m not a little kid anymore.”

“I know. I know. You’re turning into a young man.”

“Mom.”

Her Mom only allowed a few moments of silence.

“Knock. Knock,” she said.

Silence.

“This is a good one, darnit! Knock. Knock.”

He couldn’t resist.

“Who’s there?”

“Mattress.”

“Mattress who?”

“I’m pretty comfortable. I mat’ rest on this bed all day.”

The mother looked out of the corner of her eye and saw his torso gyrating but he held back any sound.

“Another,” she said. “Knock. Knock.”

He was still trying to contain his laughter.

“Speak, man!”

“Who’s there?” A chuckle was ready to escape any second.

“Bed.”

“Bed who?”

“I bed I can make you laugh.”

She did an all out tickle assault and young Pete exploded with laughter.

“Mom, stop!” He yelped in between guffaws.

“OK, I’ll stop.” She did just that.

“Thank you... Jeesh.”

“I changed my mind,” she said. More tickles and more laughter.

After a while they settled down.

“That woke me up,” she said. “How about you?”

“Yeah.”

She got up and tore the blanket off him. “Good. Time to get up and face the world.”

Eventually his tardiness decreased as time and his sweet mother healed the loss of his best friend.

Thirty years later Pete still thought about his old pal Carlos from time to time. He suspected Carlos would have remained active with sports throughout his adult life – softball leagues, club soccer, running 5 K’s, something. Pete wondered if Carlos might have influenced him to do the same. Had Carlos been around perhaps Pete wouldn’t have his large gut. Pete brushed his hand over his receding hair line. He wondered if Carlos would be balding too. It amazed Pete how frequently Carlos invaded his thoughts. He’d spent a lot more years of his life knowing friends from high school and college, some of whom he still stayed in contact with. Carlos remained closer than any of them. Carlos was a part of that fraction of life, during youth and innocence. That alone made his memory something to cherish. But Pete knew it was more than that. He should have run faster at that car. He should have screamed louder.

Pete’s superior Captain Chancey came up to his desk and tossed a file on it. Pete didn’t come to attention or give any due respect. Pete rather enjoyed the pissed off look on Chancey’s face.

Everyone else on the force respected and or feared Chancey— not Pete. Sure Chancey had paid his dues as a cop and before that in Vietnam. But Pete had paid his own dues. He didn't owe him anything. He'd been wishing the old man would retire for ten years.

Pete looked at the file. In only a few moments his feet fell off the desk. He pushed his chair in and read closer.

“Don't think I've ever seen you more intrigued, Kendrickson. Nice to see you're human.”

“Victim – twenty-four year old male. Professional salesman. No criminal record. Member severed from his body? Shit.” He looked up at Chancey. “They interview friends and family? Any jealous girlfriends?”

“Nope. No drug background either. Pretty stand-up YUPY citizen.

Pete leaped through the photos of the victim.

“A sociopath on our hands, huh?”

“Not on our hands yet. It's a Frederick case.”

“Then why are you showing it to me?”

“The Forensics Psychologist thinks it has the potential to be a serial.”

“From one isolated incident in Frederick County?” Pete said dismissingly.

“Jesus, those shrinks have imaginations.”

“Based on her assessment the Chief found it necessary that we're all made aware of it.”

“There's nothing to be aware of. Does he want us to put out an APB for a perp walking around with a severed penis in his hand? Forty miles away for that matter?”

Chancey left his office. Pete could tell by his look that Chancey agreed with him. It was ridiculous to bother their department so prematurely.

Pete propped back up his feet and returned to day dreaming. After only a moment the Frederick murder file appeared in his peripheral. His feet dropped and he started reading again.

Pete didn't always enjoy coming home at the end of a day. It wasn't because he didn't love Kendra, his wife. There were still moments he'd watch her hum a song as she washed dishes or hear her wonderful laugh during a sitcom. But the moments were few and far between. A distance had been brewing. It was a distance he couldn't completely identify or come to terms with. In reality he and his wife didn't make a real attempt at coming to terms with anything. Their conversations didn't dig that deep. Their issues required professional in depth analysis that Pete would never believe in and Kendra would never surrender to, in spite of her profession, perhaps because of her profession.

In the beginning their love was so strong that it could overcome their opposite ends of the idealistic spectrum, he a staunch pig-headed Conservative, she a bleeding heart Liberal. Back in college they'd actually enjoy each other's political banter as they drank at the bar.

Then life came. They got married and tried to have a child. They tried again and then again. Sex had become a chore instead of a magical experience.

Even before discovering his lack of virility Pete blamed himself for the beginning of their marital problems. He recognized his stubbornness and lack of communication. He liked to blame all that on the way his old man raised him.

Then on top of all the other marital issues the money problems came. Pete had been demoted a couple years prior. He got hit with a second salary decrease when they implemented the across-the-board cuts just a few months back. Since then he'd been working twelve hour days more often than not. In reality his extended hours were as much a way to escape from his wife as they were a way to make money.

Kendra arrived home at six o'clock as she had every night, just in time to hear Fox's Bill O'Reilly rip apart Obama's health care plan. Pete waived hello as he continued to watch TV. She made a noise as if she'd stepped in dog excrement in reaction to the TV dialogue. She disappeared into the kitchen without a verbal hello.

They ate dinner together with almost as little conversation, did some chores, and before Pete knew it bed time arrived.

At night there was always an unspoken race between the couple to put on pajamas and brush teeth. Whoever got in bed first had the power of the remote. That night Kendra won the race. CNN it was.

The newscast presented two political historians debating whether George W. Bush's war in Iraq or lack of response to Hurricane Katrina were his most catastrophic mistakes. Pete couldn't help himself.

"Is this political analysis a debate or a crucifixion? Does every liberal just think everyone not like them are all naïve and stupid?"

"No, just you." Kendra couldn't help but take the lay-up she'd been given.

"Screw you."

"Brilliant come back. You're about as charming as your buddy Rush."

"I may not be charming but at least I'm not a flag burning baby killer."

The abortion topic always got under Kendra's skin. This time was no exception.

"You're an asshole!"

"You're pretty charming yourself."

She got up and threw the remote on the floor. The TV blinked off.

Kendra stopped before exiting the bedroom. She stood there for a while, obviously processing something important.

"We're never going to be okay are we?"

The words hurt Pete but far less than he might have imagined.

"I don't know."

Chapter Fifteen

Maureen promised herself she would never take again the morning after the hotel. And her session with Dr. Aumora enabled her to feel absolved. To an extent she was even able to pretend the evil never happen.

Then came days and weeks of rejection, failure, and loneliness. The hatred and lust began to boil over. She felt as if she were losing her wonderful femininity again. She felt as if she were losing control. The torment was even worse than the guilt she experienced after the taking.

As she plotted she told herself every step of the way that in the end she wouldn't actual go through with it.

For convenience she set her trap a little closer to home in the Baltimore suburb of Rosedale. Getting caught was becoming an option. Perhaps that could be the only thing to stop her from doing it again and again. But she knew she would not go through with it this time. In her own mind she was pretending. That's all.

She placed an ad in a newspaper just like before – this time posing as a new beauty salon, Stacy's Get-Away. She found an arrogant internet salesman pretty fast. His name was Harlow. They first spoke on the phone.

“Harlow, I'm up in the air between yellow pages and internet. What do you think about yellow page advertising?”

It was like a lob thrown to Eddie Murray, just asking for a homerun response.

“It might sound silly that I'm saying this, Stacy,” he said with a plain farm boy delivery. “I still use the yellow pages once in a while myself. I don't think it's going

away completely anytime soon for some industries. But if you're under forty you probably don't use it. I would certainly recommend that you have something in there so people can find you, perhaps a referral listing. If you suspect search engines might get you a larger volume of new prospects then I'd love to meet with you and show you what makes my company different from the others."

Maureen wished she could have responded to similar questions about the internet with the same grace during her sales calls. There was a kindness and realness to Harlow. She didn't want to take him.

All logic and any lingering sense of morality told Maureen to abort and let sweet Harlow enjoy the rest of his life without her horrid existence. Go after the bad guys. There were plenty out there. But he was bad. He was the enemy, in spite of his grace.

She made the appointment.

Another hotel room. She didn't know what to expect. She exhausted the same expenses she had for the first taking – displays, business cards. All covered by the fine people at the credit card company who were at any given moment assessing the fifteen percent interest on her now twenty thousand dollar debt. Generous souls.

He knocked.

The room began to spin. Deep breath. Another deep breath.

He knocked again. She opened the door.

Harlow was as pretty as his voice. He was thirty-something with slightly graying hair.

Boring introduction niceties was accompanied by a hand shake. She wasn't impressed with his handshake. It was like holding a dead trout. Everything else was great. His smile. His smell. His confidence.

"Congrats on your new business," he said.

"Thanks."

He seemed as nice as he sounded on the phone, but she searched for that evil masculine something hidden behind the smile.

"Is this your first business?"

"Yea, but I've been in the industry for a long time."

"Oh yeah? Where'd you work before?"

Time to get creative.

"I just moved here from western Pennsylvania. I managed a salon in Johnstown for the last ten years. Worked in a few others before that."

"So what made you make the big leap to start your own business... and why Baltimore? Long way from Pitt Panther country."

Lots of questions. Suspicion began to creep into her mind. She actually entertained that he might be a cop. After all she'd taken only weeks before in the same way, a hotel room, another internet salesman. She was already establishing a routine with each crime, the exact thing she needed to avoid, at least that's what the TV shows indicated. Maybe they'd already tracked her down. One thing her job helped her perfect over the years was to think on her feet. Cop or no cop, she was building a back story on the fly. She hoped she could remember it all if the details came up again.

"I've always loved Charm City. I found a great deal on a house here too."

“You bought a house?”

“Yea.”

“Why are we meeting in a hotel room then?”

He was a cop. No one could be that nosy. His interrogation was beyond building rapport. Things got real scary real fast. Jail suddenly seemed real. She tried to stay in control.

“It’s being renovated. Unless you want to breath in dry wall dust and paint fumes this is the best I can do.”

“Hey, works for me,” he replied. “I’m easy.”

“The real reason I moved all the way down here and decided to start from scratch is because my husband and I divorced.”

Any other questions, dickhead.

Harlow’s boyish smile faded. It was at that moment she knew he was not a cop. His was real empathy and real embarrassment.

“I’m sorry.” His head dropped. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

Maureen couldn’t help but push the envelope.

“I caught him in bed with our sixteen year old babysitter.”

“My goodness.” Harlow put his hand over his mouth. She suspected he attended church at least twice a week.

“It was the two of them... with our next door neighbor Susan... the owner of the salon I managed.”

Maureen couldn’t help but laugh. It was a guffaw she stifled with her hands and tried to camouflage as a cry. Harlow bought it.

At first he just sat there frozen. She was about to come out of her fraudulent hysteria when Harlow took her hand and got on a knee as if he were about to propose.

“I’m sorry, Staci. I want to pray for you. Will you let me pray for you?”

She realized two things at that moment. If Hollywood had any demand for an aged obese ugly actress she could make millions. Second, Harlow was very real and very weird.

“Um... okay.”

“Lord Christ our Savior, I pray for this wronged disciple.” It was so bizarre Maureen wondered if he was playing with her as she had him. “Please Lord give her the strength to live, love, and trust again... in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.”

She couldn’t formulate the syllables to tell him to get the hell out. Instead she responded, “Amen.”

“Staci, you’re God’s child. Believe in his ultimate plan for all of us.”

“I believe,” she patronized.

“The heathens of the world, the coveters, the baby murders, the gluttons – they’ll find their due place in the afterlife.”

“Amen,” she said, even though she’d coveted every attractive man she’d ever seen, had an abortion at twenty, and eaten every donut and pizza this side of the Mississippi.

She’d found his true self. He was as ugly as anyone.

She would take. He needed laid anyway.

“Harlow, honor me with a pure drink of water together. It’s not holy water but the closest thing I have to it.”

“Staci, you are a special child of God. I’d be honored to drink God’s gift with you.”

She went to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of water for herself and the special bottle for Harlow.

“Is it cold?” He asked. “My stomach gets upset with warm liquids. I can’t even drink tea unless it’s iced.”

She cradled the special water carefully and spoke as she closed the fridge door.

“You bet your ass it’s cold.”

Chapter Sixteen

It happened again, numbness, a total annihilation of self worth, crippling guilt that made every food and drink repugnant.

After vomiting she left the bathroom and crawled to the phone on the floor in the vacant family room. She dialed.

“Dr. Aumora, it’s Maureen Steadman. I need to see you. If you can fit me in tonight that would be great. I’m sorry. Please call me back. Thanks. Thanks a lot.”

Within six hours Maureen was seated across from her therapist. Just being in the room made her start to feel a little better.

“What did you have to give up to be with me tonight?” She asked.

“Family time.”

“Thanks again.”

“So, why did you need to see me?”

Her eyes eluded him and went to the window. It was a beautiful dusk sky with caressing streaks of gold and azure but she saw only gray.

“It happened again.”

“What happened, Maureen?”

No response.

“You said you did something bad the last time you were here. Do you want to talk about it?”

Her eyes stayed with the gray outside. “I’m ready to talk about my mother.”

Dr. Aumora sunk into his chair and broke out his notebook.

“I told you the basics- bitch, etcetera. She mostly ignored me. You see she was beautiful in her day, just as her mother before her. I had broken the chain of beautiful Helshire women. That was her maiden name. My very existence made her embarrassed and resentful. If she wasn’t ignoring me she was yelling at me.”

“Did she physically abuse you?”

“Not really. Some pushing. I would have welcomed a slap to the face. It meant she noticed me.

My father, on the other hand received all the beatings. One time when he was passed out she got so angry she bounced his face into the bathroom floor over and over. He bled quite a bit. But that wasn’t enough. Then she threw our cat into the wall.”

“Then what happened?”

“She finally calmed down and left the house. The cat walked with a limp after that day. It died of unknown causes a month later. She split Dad’s head open good. Fifteen stitches put him back together.”

“I’m sorry. I wish I could explain the why.”

“I know,” she said.

“How do you think your childhood affected your life, who you are today?”

“I have no idea.”

“Are you a trusting person?”

“Hell no, but I don’t think that’s a function of my upbringing. After over thirty-five years of sales I can tell you that people are shit.”

“Do you consider yourself a loving person?”

She conversed with the gray outside for a moment.

“Yes.”

“Who do you love?”

“...I don't have a husband, if that's what you're asking.”

“Friends? Other family?”

Maureen thought of Premi for a moment but then shook her head negative.

“What do you love?”

Amid the gray sky a perfect shiny gold coin materialized. The Golden Eagle turned slowly like a show room Mercedes, displaying the true beauty only it possessed.

“I have a coin, a 1920 Golden Eagle. Perfect condition. It's increased in value ten times since I bought it back in 1988.”

Dr. Aumora wrote in his notebook.

“What do you feel when you look at it? What do you think about?”

“I feel pride. It's neat to watch an investment grow year after year. I love its color, its luster, it's perfect lines even though it's over 90 years old.

It makes me think about those days at Cousin Terrance's house. He and Dad would hang out. I'd get to look at Cousin Terrance's coin collection. I never saw my Dad more happy.”

“So do you love the coin or the memories of your father and cousin that it inspires?”

Maureen looked at the doctor and nodded her head. A smile threatened to surface. She looked at Dr. Aumora through new lenses. It was no longer a question if he had rock

hard abs and biceps under his loose fitted clothes. He had them. His calmness and intellect made it so.

“Dr. Aumora, why did you agree to meet me here tonight?”

“A question you already know the answer to. You needed my help, remember?”

“Oh yeah. I forgot.”

Dr. Aumora abandoned his notebook and pulled off his glasses.

“Maureen, that first time we met I nearly discontinued our association. You remember?”

She nodded.

“No more inappropriate advances.”

“Agreed.”

“So. You wanted to tell me something.”

She nodded again.

“What did you do that’s making you feel so guilty, Maureen?”

Maureen just wanted to say the words. Hearing them flow from her lips to another human being might free her in every way. It might be a complete absolving of her sins. She also knew it might land her in jail.

“You don’t want to know, Dr. Aumora.”

Chapter Seventeen

Pete Kendrickson's career decline didn't help his home life. Making mortgage payments was becoming difficult. Kendra who was a psychologist at Shepard Pratt had no real opportunity to garner a bigger check. Shepard Pratt, like every other government backed organization was cutting back, not offering raises.

Pete diagnosed the money his wife made and was amazed at how they could possibly be in any financial trouble. She made more than twice as much as he did but it still wasn't enough. The renovating, the vehicles, the bad stock purchases, the beach house they bought but never used and barely ever rented out.

Pete was okay with his wife being the primary bread winner. Once in a while the ghost of his father would whisper something negative about it and he couldn't help but carry it with him for a while. But most days the money he made by working so much overtime wasn't as important as was the ultimate goal – Sergeant. He loved the job when he had it. Not only could he still be on the streets as essentially an elevated Detective but he had his guys. Pete was a leader but not a manager. He loved advising and taking guys under his wing. He never aspired for Lieutenant or Captain because of the paper work, politics and endless meetings with the Chief and Deputy Chief that came along with the titles. Sergeant was the perfect position for him. If he ever had the opportunity to get it back he promised himself he'd do whatever it took to keep it even if it meant towing the line a little more. Easier said than done.

Pete didn't feel that he deserved the demotion he received two years earlier. Captain Chancey was an honest cop but being a former Green Beret, was all about

structure and precision and being by the book. Pete was the opposite of that. It came to a head two years earlier during the Hansinger child abduction case.

Chad Hansinger was a registered child molester with a wrap sheet of other petty crimes that got him in the newspaper every couple years.

This time around he'd been suspected of abducting a missing twelve year old girl.

He was taken in for questioning and when the-interrogation was over Hensinger was let free. His smug expression spit on every cop he passed by exiting the precinct.

Later that night as Pete drove his unmarked Crown Vic destiny intervened.

Four car lengths ahead of him a vehicle applied its brakes revealing an out tail light. He hit the siren. The vehicle pulled over almost immediately. As with any traffic stop he watched the driver – no sudden movements. That alone indicated a standard eventless traffic stop ninety-nine percent of the time. Pete left his vehicle and did his thing.

“Driver’s license and registration, please?”

“What’s the problem?” The voice inside barked. Not the kind of respect Pete was hoping for, especially in his mood.

“Did you know your left brake light was out, son?”

“No, I didn’t, Dad.”

Pete had enough.

“Step out of the car, sir.”

“Why? You have PC from what?” The driver exited reluctantly.

He looked at the man's license and had to catch his breath. He lifted his eyes from the laminated ID and stared into the face of the demon Chad Hensinger.

Adrenaline surged through Pete. He saw Carlos. He saw Hensinger's most recent twelve-year-old victim. He pulled out his night stick.

"What are you gonna' do, pig? I got a lawyer that will own your world, bitch."

Pete smiled.

The night was silent. He had pulled him over off Route 40 in a ramp near a silent residential neighborhood. It was off the highway and off the residential street. Perhaps Hensinger hadn't assessed all that before he spoke. Pete assessed it all and much more.

Pete just stared at him.

Then Pete curled one corner of his mouth, the most dangerous smile Hensinger had ever seen. The scum's expression changed from confident predator to fearful prey in an instant.

Without warning Pete swung his nightstick up into his own brow. Blood flowed around his eye but the gash didn't seem to bother Pete.

"What the fuck?" Was all that Hensinger could say.

"It's not nice to assault a cop, Hensinger. In fact it's against the law."

"Jesus." Hensinger knew fear at that moment but it wasn't enough for Pete. He wanted him to know pain, a lot of pain.

He started with a knee into the demon's groin. Hensinger dropped, coughing.

Pete pulled him up and Hensinger blindly threw a punch. It only connected with Pete's burly chest. He might as well have thrown a toothpick at him. Pete caught the fist and twisted, forcing Hensinger to his knees once again.

“You know what I just realized, Hensinger? You probably had to hold them down to rape them. It’s gonna be hard to hold anyone down with a broken arm.”

Pete kicked down as hard as his hips and leg would allow. His boot met the flat of his elbow, shredding ligaments, fracturing bone, and completely hyper extending the joint. Hensinger screamed. Pete had just begun.

Through all the Internal Affairs questioning and ultimately the hearings in court Pete’s story about that night was somehow believable enough to get him out of any real legal trouble.

Pete suspected the eight stitches and giant mouse above his left eye provided by his own nightstick, lent him some sympathy.

He didn’t get off completely.

Captain Chancey brought him into his office on a Monday.

Pete took a seat as Chancey finished up a phone call. The office was a representation of the man – tidy, not a piece of paper misplaced, not a spec of dust. Along with framed citations and diplomas on the wall were a couple photos of Chancey and some Army buddies in camouflage fatigues with a green jungle framing them.

Pete suddenly noticed photos of children of all ages, perhaps Chancey’s kids twenty years younger, perhaps grandchildren. He thought of how he and Kendra could never know such a family structure. It made him hate Chancey even more.

Chancey finally finished his phone call and took in Pete’s look of disdain.

“You don’t like me, do you Kendrickson?”

“What? You didn’t get my Christmas card?”

“You know why I called you in. It’s interesting that you accidentally turned off the video recorder from your cab during the Hensinger stop. How many times have you made that mistake since it was mandated a year ago?”

“I don’t know. Two or three times, I guess.”

“Try two or three dozen.”

“So what’s the deal?” Pete cut to the chase, just wanting to get the hell out of there.

The anger lines on Chancey’s forehead got more defined. He took a deep breath and they went away. Pete was mildly impressed with how Chancey had gradually gotten better with his own anger issues over the years. At times, however Chancey’s meditation practices, or therapy, or sedatives- whatever made him calmer- had also turned him into a preacher.

“You know, Kendrickson. Whatever it is inside you that makes you angry. You don’t have to let it own you.”

It reminded Pete of Kendra, who so often spoke of internal peace and letting go, whatever the hell that meant. Her language was belittling, not uplifting. Kendra and now Chancey, whether they knew it or not, were accusing Pete of being a naïve child completely unaware of his own inner workings.

“So what’s the deal?” Pete persisted.

“The Chief ordered an official disciplinary write-up and a two week suspension without pay.”

“OK. Fine.” Pete got up to leave.

“That’s not all.” Chancey stopped him in his tracks. Pete sat back down. “I recommended to the Chief that we demote you back down to Detective. He approved it. Don’t bother talking to the PBA. Based on the severity of your actions they’re not going to waste time attempting for an appeal.”

Pete got up to leave.

“Pete, you’re lucky you didn’t get kicked off the force and you know it.”

“You were right, Captain. I don’t like you,” Pete said. He flicked one of Chancey’s family photos. It slammed face down on his desk as Pete left his office.

“Kendrickson!”

He was gone. Chancey set the frame in the exact position it had resided. He took a deep breath and then another.

Chapter Eighteen

Pete and Kendra were enjoying their time off on a Saturday, kind of. They had spent the last hour watching The Food Network avoiding conversation.

Pete's cell rang.

"Please don't answer it, Pete," Kendra pleaded.

"Sorry. I have to." He picked up.

"Kendrickson..." His face slumped as he listened. "Jesus."

As he listened to the details he could feel his wife's stare.

Unlike his father who scared Pete and his mother with his tales of the streets, Pete vowed to never reveal the horrors of his job to his wife. Pete knew she resented him for this lack of communicating.

Pete hung up.

"Well, I know you're not going to tell me what happened."

Kendra stormed into the bedroom.

Instead of leaving Pete decided to confront her. Her attitude combined with their finances, Chancey, and the scum bags on the streets pushed him to his limit. He went after her and pulled the bedroom door open as violently as she had closed it.

"Hey! This is my job. I'm sick of these reactions every time I have to leave. It's what I was twenty years ago. It's what I am now"

"It's not your job, Pete. It's the last hour. I've tried to talk to you but your answers were yes, no, and I don't know."

“Maybe you don’t ask the right questions,” he said, too overwhelmed to truly dissect their flawed relationship.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“You’re the fucking psychiatrist. You figure it out.” He left and slammed the bedroom door behind him.

Kendra wept.

Pete forgot about his domestic misery quick. The damned Forensics Psychologist was right. It happened again, this time in Pete’s jurisdiction. The dead castrated victim was placed on a random side of highway on 695’s south end of the Baltimore Beltway. The naked man was placed neatly on the burm with his arms folded like a corpse in a casket.

Pete was amazed at how carelessly the murderer had placed his victim in such a visible place. Obviously the perp wasn’t concerned with hiding the body.

This guy either couldn’t wait to hear about himself on the six o’clock news or ultimately wanted to get caught. Probably both. It matched the tendencies of a lot of serial murderers, many of whom killed for months and even years before being brought to justice.

Pete pulled behind the parade of cop cars and got out.

“Follow us, Detective.” Two uniformed officers led him to the body. Pete immediately consulted the Commanding Officer.

“Talk to me, Smitty,” Pete said.

“Same as the one in Frederick. His Johnson severed off. No bruising or evidence of struggle anywhere.”

“His dick would disagree,” Pete said.

“I’ll be sure to question it when we find it. We’ll discover traces of Ketamine like the last one, I suspect. Castrated, throat slit. Cold and calculated. The press is gonna’ love this. ...Speaking of the Devil.”

A rush of TV vans screeched to a park on a side street near the highway. Pete and Smitty watched how efficiently they readied cameras and microphones.

“You hear the radio on the way over? They came up with the nickname Charm City Killer.”

“Whoever first nicknamed Baltimore Charm City never got kicked in the nuts by a transvestite junkie on North Avenue at 2:00 am.”

Captain Chancey materialized.

“To what do we owe this pleasure, Captain Chancey?” Pete played as always.

“Fuck off, Kendrickson.” Chancey’s eyes studied the oncoming press core like a general surveying a battlefield.

“Good luck with all that,” Pete said.

Pete and Smitty disappeared behind the crime scene tape as Chancey became engulfed by cameras and anxious reporters.

Chancey was blinded as flash bulbs went off. Questions came at him with the same vigor.

“Captain Chancey, is this another castrated victim like the one in Frederick?”

“We don’t know anything yet. After we receive a forensics report we’ll inform the press on every detail...”

“Come on, Captain,” another reporter interrupted. “It doesn’t take a forensics report to see if the victim got his privates cut off.”

Chancey ignored him as another reporter chimed in.

“Captain, do you have any suspects in the Charm City Killer murders?”

“No. We’re working diligently but no suspects yet. But as I said we have no idea if these crimes are related.”

Chancey left the press, ducking under the barrier tape and disappearing into the crime scene. He found Pete and motioned for him to step out to speak alone. They walked behind a police car a distance from the scene. Pete leaned on the trunk of the vehicle as he let Chancey figure out what he was about to say.

“Kendrickson. Forget about how much you hate me for a second.”

“Now that’s an effort in futility.”

Chancey ignored Pete’s insolence. He had no choice.

“I want this sick bastard, Pete. I don’t want this to become another Son of Sam. Not in Baltimore. Not on my watch.”

Pete wasn’t surprised by Chancey’s desperation. He could have almost predicted it. The press can do that.

“You take down this psycho I’ll make sure you’re reinstated to Sergeant.”

Chancey hadn’t quite offered the potential of a dream come true. All dreams died soon after Carlos was gone when, in his teens, Pete knew he’d never become a Major Leaguer. Becoming Sergeant was the closest thing though.

He promised himself he’d work morning, noon, and night if necessary. He was going to catch the Charm City Killer.

Chapter Nineteen

Since her session with Dr. Aumora Maureen's guilt had quelled. Her hunger for taking had also subsided. She hoped refocusing on her job could preoccupy her enough to block the evil thoughts and desires. In recent weeks she'd worked into the evenings processing orders and doing prep and planning for upcoming appointments. When the desires crept into her mind she worked harder.

The new Performance Ranking Report came out. Maureen Steadman – number three. It was the first time she'd cracked the top five in over ten years. The number one rep was her darling Premi.

Whenever her thoughts turned to the perfect man they automatically embraced the perfect coin. She recently discovered the Golden Eagle had appreciated five percent in the last two months. In spite of the ugly economy, in spite of the ugly deficit and ugly housing industry true beauty was appreciating in value –her coin and her man.

But in reality he was not her man. Her mind remembered the events in the hotels. She had been alone her whole life. Taking had fulfilled her in a way she'd never known. A false intimacy is better than no intimacy. After the taking of intimacy came another type of taking. She suspected most men would prefer death over losing their manhood. It was a curious creature. It was so beautiful that it must want to leave the ugly mind and soul of its master. So she set it free. It was a power and control she hadn't known could exist, not in the most awarding sales call, not even during sex.

After Kenny had announced her number three placement on the Performance Ranking Report she discovered a residual effect from her taking. She passed by the break room and overheard some of the coffee filled herd.

“What about this Charm City Killer?” One beautiful person said to another.

“Bizarre. Puts the Baltimore/DC area back onto the national news like it was during that sniper scare in 02’. They say the guy used some date rape drug to get his victims.”

“Scary.”

Maureen walked by and some of the guilt visited her again. She was officially infamous. Though it gave her no pleasure there was something appealing about being a mystery. She had no identity other than The Charm City Killer. She was Basquiat before his graffiti placed him into a decadent reality few could handle, including himself. She was Andy Kaufman wrestling women at the peak of his fame and success- trueness and true illusion for the purpose of achieving a reaction. She had achieved her reaction, even though she never strived to achieve it.

She took something else from the break room conversation. They assumed the killer was a man. She enjoyed being the only one in the world who knew the beautiful revenge was at the hands of a woman.

Beautiful revenge. Maureen’s mind was beginning to take over again. There was nothing beautiful about it. She tried to navigate through the thoughts and force out the taking, but her attempt was futile. The thoughts roared through her like hurricane winds.

“Congratulations.” The velvet voice made her want to fall into his arms. “You moved up fast.”

“Congrats to you as well, Premi. You moved up faster.”

“You helped me get there... You look different,” he said.

“How’s your collection?” she asked.

“Not as good as yours. I saw your Golden Eagle appreciated. Not many are doing that these days.”

“I thought you didn’t pay attention to the monetary value of coins.”

“I don’t... I didn’t. I guess after working in this job you realized money is a part of everything.”

He looked at her, perhaps searching for a reaction. She gave him none. Premi was in the middle of an identity crisis himself. She sensed the Renaissance man was becoming the reality man.

She felt sorrow for him and for herself. Selfishly, she cherished the idea of a friend with the heart of a child. Like everyone else, his heart was beginning to blacken.

After their conversation she couldn’t help but feel that swarm of activity in her belly. Premi still had that effect on her. Her lips wanted lips. Her skin craved skin. She couldn’t stop her mind. She had to take.

Chapter Twenty

It was a hotel in Baltimore.

The cops hadn't pieced anything together. She'd been careful but she knew she was pressing her luck. Logic told her to abandon the whole plan, pack up, and go home. Then in a separate moment of shuttering loins she rationalized that she'd get away with it again. It was like a sales call. If she planned well, paid attention to detail, and stayed one step ahead of them she would win in the end.

His name was Charles Efran. He turned out to be the most egregious violator of the internet plague. For this he had to pay.

On the phone he had talked about the value of their search engine marketing program and how it was far superior to anything out there. When Maureen said she was considering doing yellow page advertising he asked if she was serious.

Her mind was so preoccupied with the destruction of Charles Efron that she nearly forgot to finish getting dressed in the hotel room. She sat on the bed putting lotion on her newly shaved legs when she noticed it was two minutes before seven.

She finished lathering and hustled to get dressed. Then she dolled herself up. Maureen loved her disguise. Feeling pretty had been non-existent prior to taking.

She squeezed into her sultry yet professional outfit and sat on the couch. It was five after seven. Her victim was late, another disrespect. She could barely contain her excitement. There had never been a more justifiable crime.

For fifteen minutes she worked herself into character and then became pulled back out of it by boredom and exhaustion. She suddenly had a new respect for actors who could play their roles convincingly after sometimes hours of waiting.

The knock came at seven twenty. She'd completely abandoned where her mind needed to be. Instead there was just rage. She tried to refocus. Deep breath. She infiltrated her mind with memories of previous takings. She'd dedicated too much time and planning to blow this one because of her temper. There was the new fake ID, the business cards, the cost of the Penny Saver ad that attracted Charles Efron. The ten seconds of processing was all it took to calm her enough to get back into character. She was Tara Meldrick, owner of the hottest mobile pet grooming company in the tri-state area, Mamma Meldrick's Mobile Pet Grooming.

She answered the door and met Charles Efron with a smile. He smiled back.

"Hi, Tara. I'm Charles. Nice to meet you."

He wasn't what she expected. There was a kindness to him that contradicted the propaganda he spewed on the phone. He was attractive – medium height, long eye lashes, thirty maybe.

"Sorry for being late. Traffic."

"It's okay," she said even though it wasn't.

"Look Charles I don't have a lot of time. As I mentioned when we spoke I'm only in town tonight and I have a dinner meeting soon."

Maureen enjoyed pressuring him. She always hated being rushed by a prospect when she was on the other side. Her tactic gave her control of the call and she hoped it would put Charles on his heels.

“Tara, I appreciate the value of your time but you have to appreciate mine. I came a long way to help you increase revenue and increase it fast.”

“You appreciate my time so much that you showed up a half hour late without calling.”

She worried the meeting might be over before it began.

“You got me there. But look at my cell phone.” He handed it to her. “It’s dead. I left my recharger in my wife’s car. I know you don’t know me from Adam but I promise that I take pride in being on time and calling ahead of time if I’m running late. I guess this was just one of those days.”

“Look, Premi... I mean Charles. Sorry... I don’t mind doing some internet advertising and I need a website which you said you do but I’m really looking at yellow pages as my primary avenue at least as I get started.”

“Tara, I’m about to ask you the most important question anyone is ever going to ask you about your business. It’s that important.”

“Okay,” she said. What a set up. The bastard took control again. She had to find out what the question was going to be from Tara Meldrick’s perspective and her own.

“Who is your ideal target customer?”

That was it? That was his profound question?

“People with pets,” she said.

“We both know that but who have your customers been since you’ve been in business –their demographics, ages?”

She knew where he was going.

“I don’t know. It’s all over. Some are twenty-three. Some are seventy-three.”

“Really?” Charles laid a visual on the table. “This is a new 2008 usage report from Advertising Research, Inc. It’s not an internet company. It’s not Google. It’s a completely independent marketing company. Eighty-one percent of people who look for pet groomers do it on-line.” Maureen found it refreshing to see that he hadn’t manipulated the statistic to say ninety-nine percent.

“Charles, I’ve seen all kinds of studies. Studies can be manipulated to state that half of all American men dress in women’s clothing every other Tuesday.” Not a laugh, not a smile. She respected him a little more for his stone face. She wanted him.

“Can I get you a water, Charles?”

“Sure.”

She left their conversation and went to the mini-fridge.

“So, Tara with a name like Mama Meldrick’s Pet Grooming I assume you have children.”

Maureen didn’t feel like creating an elaborate story about three children, one in college, one working at IBM, and the black sheep fighting off meth and Wild Turkey in rehab. Too exhausting.

She used a moment to reflect. She was too kind to bring a child into the world. Procreation is the cruelest of human errors.

“I don’t have any children. The fact is I never wanted children. The reason I chose the name is because I treat every pet I handle as if it were my own child.”

“That’s nice.”

She was minutes away from owning Charles, the most effective representative of the internet plague. She took another deep breath and closed the refrigerator door.

She gave him his bottle and watched. He drank.

“Tara, you’re giving your competition the business *you* deserve. You need to be on the search engines. Our search engine marketing and search engine optimization programs can get you on the top of the first page of results every time. Our New Media Specialists are the absolute best in the country.”

Obviously the Ketamine hadn’t kicked in yet.

Maureen felt herself pulling down her blouse a little. What was she doing? Then she tried to articulate a rebuttal to his internet platform.

“I can’t see the chores...” It wasn’t what she wanted to say at all. “Your clovers did the senses.” She was slurring. Maureen wondered if she had suddenly had a stroke. She looked down and knew. A tiny pin hole existed in her bottle of water.

She thought about the potential devastation her error would cause – namely jail and possibly the death penalty. Rational thought became a wave of syllables and acronyms like EKG, DDT, and NFL.

Maureen was about to sleep in the most bizarre sense because she wasn’t tired. She knew the potential hell she was about to endure because she’d done the research prior to buying her first dose of Ketamine or Special K as the drug dealer referred to it. She’d seen its effects on her victims. Now she was about to become her own victim.

Chapter Twenty-One

Maureen chose ketamine as her date rape drug because its effects were immediate. It was also the only date rape option available as a clear liquid. There was no potential of clouding a translucent drink like water. What really enticed her about Ketamine was that unlike Rohypnol and GHB it was common for the victim to be completely aware of what was happening to them. Her revenge on the internet was more fulfilling knowing her victims were completely cognizant of her hell.

Ironically she used Google to do her drug research.

Slurring. Incoherent scrambled words. Every muscle was impossible to manage. Charles Efron's face was becoming distorted. His cheeks, nose, and eyes became this wide stretched monstrous image of flesh like a reflection in a fun house mirror. He and the rest of her surroundings were blurry. She could only try to focus as best she could to remain stable in her chair.

“Tara, are you okay? What's wrong?”

Then the vomit came. It was the easiest sickness she'd ever experienced. There was no pre-vomit agony. There was no rush of chills or the feeling of her innards being torn apart by tiny belly gremlins as she'd felt from food poisoning after bad Chinese food. It just came up and went out. She knew it was a potential effect. Fortunately her previous victim lovers didn't regurgitate.

“Jesus Christ!”

Charles leapt from his chair, avoiding the projectiles. It seemed he might vomit himself.

Special K obviously didn't like her body as its host. Another severe reaction took over – convulsions. They became so violent that they knocked her paralyzed body out of her chair.

“Jesus!” He dialed 911.

As he spoke frantically into the phone Maureen started to enjoy her paralysis in a strange way. Her carelessness had created this blurry madness. In it her mind began to see, of all things, beauty.

She was an infant lying in her father's arms so snug and peaceful. She hadn't developed all of her features that would one day be considered ugly. Her mole could be overlooked by otherwise perfect smooth skin and cute baby coos. Her father held her in a recliner just before nap time and read her the story of the *Velveteen Rabbit* about a stuffed animal who becomes real once it gains the love of a little boy. In her lucid out of body experience she recognized that she hadn't been real since those wonderful moments as an infant. Just like the Velveteen Rabbit, she could only hope a boy might love her and then and only then would she be able to explore the beautiful green fields and forest that was meant for her. Only then could she be real.

Next stop on the ketamine train was the Golden Eagle and how it had represented true beauty for so long. In her vision it sat in its regal night stand frame. That was it. Maureen didn't feel beautiful because of it or loved by it. Instead she felt empty.

Maureen woke in a hospital bed. The last thing she remembered was looking down at that tiny pin hole in the top of her water bottle. It had been a calm sleep. She

woke without being prompted, a peaceful introduction to reality. Everything beyond that was anything but peaceful.

An IV was feeding God knows what into her vein. A small television protruded from the top of the wall. A curtain separated her from what she suspected was another hospital bed.

There was no one around to ask questions. She tried to remember. As she turned her head and looked out into the hallway it all came together. There was a nurse having a lively conversation with a young attractive man... Maureen knew him... Charles, that was his name. A State Police Officer joined the nurse's side. It was the vision of the cop that made everything clear.

Jail was all she could think about. The Charm City Killer was loose and in the back of everyone's minds especially cops. She wanted to leave her bed and climb down a fire escape. No chance of that in a hospital.

As she watched the three-way exchange outside her room it was seeming more and more like an interrogation. The more the cop pressed, the more defensive Charles Efron became. Then Maureen realized that she was the victim as far as they could discern. She was the one who'd been drugged.

As Charles spoke about sudden violent vomiting and convulsions, in the back of the cop's mind were musings about Charles drugging with the intent to rape and then freaking out after witnessing the violent reaction. In a panic he knew he had to get her to a hospital no matter what. If she died he'd be screwed for life. Accidental homicide would put him in a state prison for a long time. It was far less appealing than an attempted rape charge, or maybe even just battery.

The cop must have also wondered if Efron was more than just a Yuppie that chose a logical and humane option. Even more pressing was that Efron might just be the Charm City Killer. A female victim wasn't exactly the same pattern but it was possible.

Historically it had been common for mass murderers to visit the crime scene, very often during the investigation. Some have even allowed themselves to be interviewed as a witness. The cop was probably processing all of this.

It was obvious they weren't going to let Charles out of their sights, at least until they questioned the victim.

The nurse left them and entered her room. Maureen pretended to be sleeping.

She spoke loud. "Ms. Meldrick. Ms. Meldrick," I'm Nurse Nancy. Time to get up."

Maureen feigned exhaustion opening her eyes, barely. Then back into dreamland. Her acting chops continued to shine.

One thing about Ketamine and all the date rape drugs was that there were no exact clinical reactions to them from victim to victim. Her body reacted violently. None of her victims had done so. The after effects were much the same. She hoped she could milk hers long enough to get the hell out of there.

Nurse Nancy sat on the corner of her bed and spoke louder.

"Ms. Meldrick. Wake up now."

She lifted an eye lid slightly and then down. Nurse Nancy gave up and left the bedside.

As moments passed Maureen's mind became increasingly clear and increasingly panicked. The plant in the corner wilted. The lights dimmed. The TV jumped from *Wheel of Fortune* to some slutty reality TV Show.

Maureen was going to jail and then the chair. They had The Charm City Killer even though they didn't know it yet. She looked into the hall to see the cop walking by. With the press her crimes had garnered, even a sub-par cop knew to dig deep in any minor local case that involved a date rape drug.

She saw images of being in a jail cell on death row. She thought about her home and the Double Eagle. She didn't want to die and she didn't want to be in a cage the rest of her life with nothing but her thoughts. Her thoughts were what got her into the mess in the first place.

She could pretend to be asleep for only so long. Soon the police would question her. She'd be able to tap dance around their interrogation for a while.

Hotel clerk descriptions, interviews with her victim's families and co-workers. Possible hotel parking lot surveillance cameras identifying her car over and over again. As careful as she'd been, there had to be holes.

She had to get out. Her home beckoned. Even though she had to sell most of her furniture over the months she still had her big screen, ceramic tile floors, the Golden Eagle. She needed them, fully aware they might be a very temporary sanctuary. She had to spend her final days or maybe hours of freedom in her home.

It all seemed fitting. She was collapsing along with the economy, along with the yellow page industry. All she wanted was to curl into a ball in her own bed. She had to find a way to get there.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The cop kept pacing the hall. Maureen looked out the window. She contemplated opening it and maybe shimmying down some light pole or something. Hospital windows like those in most multi-story commercial buildings didn't open. Plus at her weight she wasn't shimmying down anything.

Between the after effects of Special K and her sheer panic, focus wasn't easy to find. Every second she saw prison bars. She had to accept that it was likely to be her future and just place it in the back of her mind.

She tried to settle down. Maureen had to leave herself. Her mind visited Cousin Terrance's coin room. She thought about swimming in Premi's sky blue eyes. She thought about her Golden Eagle.

First thing – clothes. She wasn't going far inside or outside the building with just a paper thin gown.

As she searched drawers the panic started infiltrating again. Perhaps the cop took her belongings. Maybe they were checking the background of Tara Meldrick and finding out she didn't exist.

She heard the distinct footsteps of hard soled shoes to floor, the footsteps of the cop. She hopped back in bed and played possum. The footsteps got louder and then stopped, replaced by the smell of coffee breath. He was studying her closely. She could feel his eyes. She could sense his wheels turning, trying to figure out the puzzle before him.

He turned in a frustrated burst and left, his loud shoes disappearing down the hall.

Maureen got up and recommenced her search. She found her clothes. It was all still there, ID, cash. Her real Maureen Steadman license remained in her car at the hotel. She wondered if she could get to it before they figured it all out or if she could even get out of the hospital.

She dressed and caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror. Her mole was visible. Makeup obviously dissipated with tossing and turning during Ketamine come-down. Her true identity was becoming easier and easier to discover for them. She had to get out of there.

As much as she tried to stay calm, sweat poured. Nerves created tiny floating demons in her stomach. She made her move in spite of it all. Dressed, Maureen Steadman walked out of her room. Exit and elevator signs were everywhere. As she followed them it seemed like she was just going in circles.

Finally elevators. She got on and pounded on the L button for the lobby. The elevator doors were slower than paint drying. Finally after dislocating her thumb they began to close.

A hand swung in and caught the door. It was Nurse Nancy. She got in, faced forward, and minded her business as any good elevator occupant should. She had no idea Maureen was with her at first.

Then as the elevator began to descend the nurse turned around slowly. The images of jail attacked Maureen's mind again.

“Ms. Meldrick? What are you doing?”

“I'm feeling better,” She said as calmly as she could.

“I’m glad but it doesn’t work this way. We have to monitor you more. Then you have to be discharged.”

“I’m discharging myself.”

“You’re not going anywhere.”

Nurse Nancy grabbed her wrist hard, so hard that it made her flinch. Maureen had flashbacks of her mother’s same vice grip when she was a child.

It was a purely instinctive punch. She watched sweet little Nurse Nancy crumble to the floor. The elevator bell chimed and the door began to open.

A crowd of doctors, visitors, and one security officer waited to ride the elevator.

Think fast. She quickly bent down to attend to the unconscious nurse.

“Someone help!” Maureen yelled. “She started hyperventilating and passed out.”

The security guy and a couple doctors pulled her out and placed her on a nearby bench. A crowd came over to see what was going on. In the chaos she slipped out toward the lobby exit. The cop who’d been lingering around her room sprinted by her with a new twenty ounce coffee, steam billowing from it, its dark roast aroma emanating like Columbian lighter fluid. He didn’t notice her. She left the hospital to freedom, at least temporary freedom.

She looked for a taxi cab but saw none.

She didn’t realize it until minutes later that she had been at Johns Hopkins, apparently the closest hospital to her hotel.

After ten minutes of walking toward the Inner Harbor she began to feel calm. The sun began to enter the clouds creating a miraculous translucent canvass of newborn reds and golds. She thought about the contradictions between the beautiful sky and the

ugliness that resided beneath it. Even though Johns Hopkins was the finest hospital in the world if you were to walk two or three blocks the wrong way you might find yourself in a world of pain. These were areas as bad as parts of west Baltimore – all residential often Section Eight apartments. No businesses existed there, except for liquor stores with bullet proof glass and brave fast food restaurants, all of whom had signage indicating they had no more than fifty dollars on the premises or that managers do not have access to the safe.

A siren exploded behind her. The police car screamed by and kept on going.

As she walked through Little Italy and neared Presidents Street and Route 83 she was slowly introduced to the Inner Harbor. At first she just saw the skyscrapers. As she got closer there was the miraculous architecture of the Baltimore Aquarium.

She passed by Water St. and the giant Cal Ripkin Jr. mural covering the side of one of the buildings, barely visible in a wan early morning. Then came the water itself, glistening under the new partial sun. There was the distant sound of city street cleaners whisking away street trash with their giant oscillating scrub brushes.

She envisioned what was to be hours later, dozens of dragon boats on the May water and tourists everywhere shuffling in and out of restaurants and shops.

For now besides a couple joggers and city workers picking up trash it was a wonderful vast Cosmopolitan ghost town. She suddenly realized how seldom she'd visited the Inner Harbor even though she'd lived less than thirty minutes from it all her life. Isolation is a powerful thing – to take one away from that kind of beauty for so long.

As she studied the water and the benches and landmarks of Federal Hill overlooking it, she leaned against one of the giant concrete pillars of the World Trade

Building. It was hard, cold, and gritty, just like her city, just like she ended up being. She wished she could be soft. She wished she could truly be feminine.

She went back to the street and found a cab.

Maureen was thankful to find the parking lot of the hotel to be safe. There were no cops, no media vans. She hopped in her horrible murder mobile and drove without event.

Cruising up Route 83 back toward her home in northern Baltimore she had to slap herself to stay awake. Next came opening the window and blaring music. Her thoughts swirled. The exhausting weight and pressure of everything forced her to come to a definitive decision. She was done taking- this time for good.

Miraculously she got home without crashing her car into a telephone pole. She pressed the key into the front door, turned it, and entered.

It seemed like she'd been gone for weeks. As soon as her shoes touched the hardwood foyer she began crying.

Her cry became an uncontrollable wail. She covered her mouth and went down the steps to her floor bar. A Gin & Tonic disappeared in twenty seconds. She made another and finished half of it in a swallow. The remains were poured in an old giant beer stein cousin Terrance had given her on her fifteenth birthday. She topped it off with more of her toxin of choice and went upstairs.

There was a relief with being in her own bedroom. The beautiful king sized bed was one of the few pieces of furniture that remained in the house. Her clothes were in boxes on the floor aligning the wall. Her end table was an egg crate with an old checker board on top. She plopped onto the lonely plush duvet. It felt like an ocean of clouds.

The Golden Eagle beckoned her. It had been the ultimate representation of true beauty for much of her life. Now its gold seemed a little faded. Its metallic charm seemed slightly less lustrous.

She curled up under her duvet, settled her head onto her pillow, and began to enter a deep sleep in spite of her threatened freedom. She hoped she wouldn't be awakened by the sound of cops busting down her door.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The next morning Maureen couldn't eat again. This time her guilt was accompanied by the desire. The desire in fact fed the guilt. She hadn't gotten the satisfaction from taking the night prior. Perhaps that made her even more filled with the lust.

Maureen was feeling like Louie in *Interview With A Vampire*, lusting to kill but tortured by the guilt killing invoked. In taking the kill was only part of the lust. Sex and murder were creating a passion in her she could not control.

They sat in silence as a severe thunderstorm raped the trees outside, bending them over and then throwing them left and right. Rain bullets pelted the window.

Dr. Aumora flipped open his notepad.

"The notepad. Expecting something juicy, huh?"

"Expecting something important."

"Do you meet all your clients spur of the moment at ten o'clock at night in the middle of a hurricane?"

"It's not a hurricane... And yes, I'd do it for any of my clients if they sounded as desperate as you did. You seemed to have calmed down since your call."

"How many clients have you done it for so far?"

"Remember what I said about games, Miss. Steadman."

"Oh yeah. I forgot."

Maureen wondered again what existed beneath his loose fitting clothes. This night he wore a gray short sleeved silk collared shirt most men would only wear for special dinners with their wives or girlfriends. His hair looked perfect contained by moose or gel with a curl twisting over a barely wrinkled fifty-year-old forehead. She envisioned abs of steel beneath the gray silk. She envisioned heaven below that.

“You requested my service for a reason, Miss. Steadman. What did you need to talk about?”

“I’m afraid, Dr. Aumora.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“I just don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“What do you mean? Who would you hurt?”

Maureen sank as deep into her chair as possible and stared at the rain attacking the window.

“Dad would have kicked my ass if he knew.”

“Knew what?”

“He wouldn’t have literally kicked my ass. He could barely stand most of the time. It would have been a sad look, a disappointed gesture.”

“You really loved your Dad.”

“I did. I do.”

Dr. Aumora pulled his chair closer.

“Why would he have been disappointed?”

Maureen’s eyes returned to the stormy window.

“He was too sweet for this world. Maybe that’s why he left it early.”

More scribbling.

“Do you have to write notes? It disconnects you.”

“Yes, I do.” he said, brow straightening.

She left the embattled window and returned her eyes fully to him.

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” she said.

“You seem a little disconnected yourself.”

“I’m not. Not from you.”

Dr. Aumora crossed his legs and cleared his throat. Maureen tried to assess his discomfort. He was attracted to her. She knew it. But any advances might risk losing the one source of reflection and healing that she had.

“Why would your father be disappointed in you? Are you going to tell me what you did?”

“Can’t there be any secrets in the client/therapist relationship?”

“Of course there can. You’re free to reveal or conceal anything you’d like. I sense you want to tell me.”

“You have nice eyes, Dr. Aumora.” She couldn’t help herself.

He put down his notepad.

“I forgot,” she said. “No games.”

“What exactly do you want to get out of our sessions, Miss Steadman? I left my family at ten o’clock to help you. This will be our last session if you don’t stop the games.”

“I’m sorry. You see... I just don’t interact like other people. I can’t help but joke and criticize.”

Dr. Aumora sat back.

“Can you elaborate on that, Miss. Steadman?”

“Will you please just call me Maureen?”

“Maureen.”

She breathed in deep. The exhale felt like a release of toxins. Her eyes returned to the windows protecting them from the battle of rain and thunder outside.

“Why do you think you interact that way?”

“I know exactly why. It makes me feel safe.”

“Do you think you could feel safe without it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you ever felt truly safe, Miss... Maureen?”

“Yeah, sure I have.”

“When?”

“Plenty of times. Ten years ago when things were good and I didn’t have to worry about money or the economy there were some great moments in my house when I’d just look at my new hardwood floors or my Golden Eagle. Other times I’d sit in my Lexus. I could breathe that feeling of safety.”

“So part of safety for you is financial safety?”

“Damn right. Isn’t it for everyone? Isn’t it for you, doc?”

“Yes, it is.”

“But it wasn’t always just about that. Sales has a strange way of bringing you up when you’re down and vice versa. There’s nothing like walking out of a business with a

forty-thousand dollar new sale. There's something that transcends the money you earn from the sale."

"Being a salesperson isn't easy, is it?"

"Depends on the day you ask the salesperson." She tilted her gaze. "Do you always feel safe, Dr. Aumora?"

His eyes scrambled from floor to ceiling and then back again. "No. I suppose sometimes I do. Sometimes I don't."

"Good answer."

"Are you patronizing me, Maureen?"

"No. At least I don't think I am. You've got me all aware of my bullshit now."

For the first time he smiled. It was then that she noticed it. A faint aroma emanated from him, part spice, part floral. Why would a family man wear cologne to see a client late at night? Perhaps he had worn it for his wife at a special dinner that night. Perhaps not.

She began to wonder again about the physique that existed beneath the loose gray silk shirt. Swimmer's body or slug?

"You're a really nice guy, Dr. Aumora."

"Thanks. What brought that on?"

"Coming out here in the rain to help me."

"I'm not that nice. I get paid by the hour, remember?"

"I bet you have a dark side, don't you?"

"This is about you Maureen, remember?"

Maureen shifted in her chair slightly. It was a seemingly innocent adjustment. When she completed the quick squirm, the top button of her blouse was undone.

Dr. Aumora's gaze remained on her eyes but he blinked briskly. He cleared his throat and stared down at his note pad.

"You're not going to write in that again, are you?"

"No. It disconnects me, right?"

She stood and walked toward his chair, undoing her blouse another button lower, this time without subterfuge. She kneeled in front of him so there was no way of avoiding her cleavage. She placed her hands on his thighs -skinny but firm with muscle.

"I'm married."

"Not in the next hour."

Her finger nails softly scraped up his thighs into his crotch. Then their lips met.

She owned him for the next hour. It didn't require Ketamine. It was real and true love making. His body was no swimmer, nor was it a slug. It was like eating an apple instead of apple pie, drinking tonic water without Gin. His passion and endurance however were commendable.

They laid on the soft plush carpet of his office floor staring at the ceiling, hearing the untamed remains of the thunderstorm. He was completely naked. She was half covered by blouse and blanket.

She pulled his hand to her lips with a dominant grasp and kissed it.

"You don't really have a wife and family, do you?"

"Why would you ask me that?"

"Tell me the truth."

He laid still.

“Do you have anyone special?” She persisted.

He leapt from the floor and began searching for his clothes. As he stumbled with boxer shorts and socks Maureen caught a clear look at his body in the moonlight. The slug/swimmer hybrid turned her on. She decided she would satisfy him again.

They lied in the same exact spot on the carpet, sweating, breathing hard.

“Dr. Aumora.”

“Yes.”

He rubbed his hands over his face hard. The moonlight cascaded through the window tickling his naked bottom.

“Why did you tell me you had a wife and kids?”

“Because I didn’t want this to happen. I just committed the cardinal sin of my profession. If the APA found out I’d lose my license.”

“Don’t worry. No one will know.”

“*I’ll* know.”

“Mr. Ethics, huh?”

“This shouldn’t have happened.”

“It did happen... And it’s going to happen again.”

She reached for his privates but he pulled away.

“So what now?” She asked.

He got up and dressed as if his clothes had stolen from him.

“This was amazing, Maureen but we absolutely can not see each other in this way again.”

“You’ll still be my therapist, right?”

He sat on the couch.

“That’s what I’ve been pondering... Yes, I’ll remain your therapist. You shouldn’t have to suffer because of my crime.”

“What crime? We had sex.”

“It was just about the worst crime I could have committed.”

“Believe me. There’s worse.” Maureen got on her knees. “Are you sure we can’t see each other? Who knows. Maybe we’d make a great team.”

“Absolutely not. No healthy relationship can come of this. And your flirting has to stop. Those games end now or I can’t work with you. Agreed?”

Maureen knew what they shared wasn’t love but it had been the first consensual sex she’d had in decades, outside of her prostitute Michael. She surrendered to his wishes, knowing he could not be sold. She accepted the rejection as she had the thousands during her yellow page career.

“Agreed.”

The room was silent save the rain that had now transformed into a sprinkle. Maureen got dressed in the calm air.

“So,” Dr. Aumora said. “I came here tonight for what I thought was an emergency. You never told me specifically why you needed to see me. Or was it all a plot to seduce me?”

“No, it wasn’t. You see I have a guilty conscience too.”

They sat on the couch, seamlessly returning to the patient/therapist relationship albeit a more casual one.

“Are you finally going to tell me what you feel guilty about?”

“...No.”

“I confessed to you about no wife. Your turn.”

Maureen knew the healing power of confession. After all that was ultimately why she was there. But to confess fully might seal her fate that may or may not already be in motion. The end of her freedom. She got up and approached the exit. She stopped before leaving and placed her forehead onto the door, eyes closed. She saw the faces of her victims. She saw their parent’s crying with the knowledge they were to outlive their child. The words just left her. It was as if each syllable were beyond her control.

“I committed murder.”

Her eyes opened wide. Her head jerked up erect. She left in a sprint.

Dr. Aumora now alone didn’t move. His mouth froze open as if about to say something. After several catatonic moments he got up and paced. He did another hands-over-face cleansing. More pacing. He stopped in a sudden moment of clarity. He rushed to the phone and dialed 911.

“Hello, this is Dr. Manju Aumora. I’m a psychiatrist in Hunt Valley. One of my clients just confessed to murder.”

He paced more as he listened.

“My address is 3410 York Road, Hunt Valley, Maryland... Her name? Maureen Steadman.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

While driving home from her session Maureen felt consumed with fulfillment. It was like holy water was being poured over her from head to toe. Her confession had been a truly complete one the Pope would have approved. She felt entirely absolved of her sins.

The one horrifying residual effect of it was that another person knew of her crimes. The vagueness and lack of details in her confession made the information useless to the police. That gave her comfort.

The day after her meeting with Dr. Aumora her comfort was destroyed.

She left her house for work and noticed a car across the street, but not directly across the street. They were parked about a hundred feet south of her home. It was a black sedan hosting two males auditioning for *Men In Black 5*. The passenger read a newspaper. The driver stared directly at her as far as she could discern through his sunglasses.

Blood left all her extremities, creating a coldness in her toes and fingers. She lumbered to her car and got in.

Over the days and weeks to follow, Maureen saw the car every morning. Once in a while she saw the same car in her rear view mirror on her way home from work.

She didn't hold a grudge against Dr. Aumora. It was her own fault for confessing to him.

Eventually she got used to the stress of it and dismissed it altogether.

After all she was done taking. They could follow her for the rest of her life. All they'd get on her would be a speeding ticket here and there.

For several weeks she was able to hold her desires at bay until one day for no particular reason they took her over once again. Like the vampire Lestat she had a deep dark yearning that could not be contained. The lingering Baltimore police could be eluded, she decided. She'd park her car on a different block. She'd enter and exit her house through the back patio door. She'd crawl through her window in the dark of night if she had to.

Maureen had checked her mirrors a dozen times on the way to the print shop. The black sedan hadn't followed her.

A recent high school graduate appearing half baked approached the counter like a slug. Uncontained curly red hair and freckles reminded her of an unmotivated less charming Howdy Doody.

"Steadman order, please."

He turned back around and began the long arduous journey to the outgoing orders fifteen feet behind him.

Once in her hands, she inspected the contents.

"That will be two hundred ninety-six dollars and twenty cents."

She finished assessing the contents of her order and pulled out the Amex.

She stopped herself, realizing it was close to its limit. She took out the VISA but hesitated to give it, looking at an invisible calculator. She put it back and handed Howdy Doody the Discover.

He processed it.

“Don’t worry. It’s going through,” he said.

“Thanks for that loud verbal confirmation.”

“You’re welcome.”

She signed the receipt and left the clueless clerk.

One of the officers in sunglasses peeked around the corner watching Maureen Steadman leave the print store. She entered her car and drove off.

Detective Pablano was twenty-four but he felt ten years older. He pulled off his shades and entered the store.

He flashed his badge at Howdy Doody.

“How can I help you?”

“I’m Detective Pablano. I need to ask you a few questions about the woman that was just in here.”

“Ms. Steadman?”

“What did she buy from you?”

“I don’t think I can tell you about that?”

Pablano stepped closer to the counter, not in the mood.

“How long you been a cashier here, kid?”

“I’m not a kid and I’m not a cashier. I’m a Client Service Representative.” He thumbed the identity badge on his shirt.

“Don’t you need a warrant or something?”

Pablano leaned in closer. He could smell the stale beer emanating from the teenager's pours from the prior evening's bash.

"Do you know if your parents have paid all their taxes this year?"

The kid didn't budge.

"So you're a tax collector too?"

"How about I find out where you live and bust one of your little beer parties this summer?"

"Right this way officer."

He escorted him behind the counter to the computer. He tapped at the keyboard and images appeared.

"That's her sign. That's her business card. Samantha's Style Boutique. Must own a beauty salon or something."

"Must be."

"Or maybe a clothing boutique. My mother lives at those places... What did Ms. Steadman do?"

"Probably nothing. You keep this little conversation between you and me and I'll make sure your local Five O doesn't give you a hard time."

"Cool. I'm having a kegger next weekend when my parents go away. Should be killer."

Pablano stared, amazed.

In his car he dialed his cell.

"Pete, it's Pablano. I followed Steadman to a print shop. She looks like a lady starting up a business. Think she's a real suspect?"

“Probably not. People lie to their shrinks about all kinds of crazy shit. Just stay on her for a couple more days.”

Two days later Maureen was on a bus. She hadn't ridden the bus in thirty years. She noticed the black sedan following five car lengths back.

She got off at her stop and began the half mile walk home, sweating profusely after only the first block.

Poblano watched her enter her house from his car and addressed his partner in the passenger seat.

“Why the hell did she take the bus? Where's her car?” He asked.

“Who knows? We haven't seen her move it.”

“Maybe she moved it in the middle of the night?”

“Why would she do that?”

Maureen peaked between her curtains. Same black sedan. Same spot. But she'd planned ahead.

The latest she could set up her meeting with the internet rep was eight o'clock, which meant she had to leave by seven- still daylight. At least she'd be returning during the cover of night.

She looked out her back door leading to her patio. She had cherished her yard space and distance between hers and her neighbors' homes. Now she dreaded it. She thought about the location of the sedan and the angle of their view. Maureen took a deep

breath and went for it, leaving her home and crossing yards east of hers. She hoped her house completely blocked her from the spying sedan.

During the walk to her car she did several behind the shoulder peeks, no sight or sound of the sedan. In fact there was no sound at all. The calmness of the tree aligned suburban streets gave her some peace.

She entered her car several blocks later and inspected her back seat. The trash bag upholstery she'd created looked thorough and secure.

His name was Toby Todd. He was young just like the others. He was six feet tall. His dress shirt held tight to football player shoulders and biceps. The shirt's close but puffy fit around the abdomen suggested a perfectly flat belly. Maureen wondered if she might meet her first six-pack-abs.

They drank water as they talked, Maureen speaking convincingly about the reason for her running a business out of a hotel room – her home under construction, lease negotiation with her prospective office building.

Ketamine infiltrated his blood and soon his will was not his own. He became her slave.

She did meet her first six-pack abs. And Toby Todd ultimately met his demise.

By the time Maureen reached her neighborhood she was shaking. The body was discarded but she did a poor clean up, including her own self. Under the brightness of passing street lights in the rear view mirror she saw some red still smeared on her cheek. She wiped it as best she could.

She clicked her garage door open with a remote, parked, and closed it behind her. It wasn't until she got inside the house that she thought about the black sedan and that it might still be watching. In the dark she dropped her keys. She picked them up and they felt wet. Blood.

The guilt had torn apart her mind so severely after her crime that she had no idea just how careless she'd conducted the disposal and clean up. She paced in the dark and then dropped to the floor, perhaps shattering knee caps on her lovely hard wood. She sniffed tears into her nose and coughed them out- they came so fast.

The door bell rang.

She covered her mouth.

Maureen had no idea what time it was, certainly well after midnight. Perhaps the black sedan had finally given up on pretending to be invisible.

She crawled underneath her bay window to see the stoop outside her door. A cop indeed. He pushed the door bell again and again. Eventually he abandoned the front door and entered the bushes outside the window. He was right above her as he invaded her home with a flashlight. She looked up and saw his name on his badge – Pablano.

Her hands shook. She placed them on her face hoping and praying she wouldn't make a sound. She never believed in God. At that moment with jail lingering above her she began to question her philosophy. Devine intervention was exactly what she needed.

She saw his badge again, visible intermittently as he turned in and out of the light with his search- Pablano.

Darkness. He'd stopped his search and she hoped retreated to his black sedan. She wasn't about to get up and look out the window to find out. Instead she pulled her cell

phone from her pocket and carried it in a scurry into the hallway near the kitchen, obscured from windows. She pushed a contact option and placed the phone to her ear.

“Hi, it’s me.”

“Ms. Steadman, I told you not to call me like this.”

“And I told you to call me Maureen,” she said between tears.

“I’m sleeping.”

“It’s important.”

She closed her eyes and let out the words like a flood of bile.

“I am The Charm City Killer.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Pete Kendrickson took Captain Chancey's challenge to heart. The capture of the Charm City Killer was his way back to Sergeant. He had some strange notion that it somehow might magically help to restore his marriage too.

Pete often wished they could have had kids. Perhaps Kendra wouldn't have pursued her doctorate. Maybe she would have even been a stay at home Mom. They would have lived in a smaller house. They wouldn't own the boat or the beach property. And that would have been ok. Just maybe they would have been happy. Obviously that wasn't meant to be.

After a charming evening of drug dealers and hookers Pete got home around midnight. He got a beer from the fridge and suddenly noticed a flickering light from the living room area.

Kendra rarely stayed up that late even on weekends. He peeked in to see her watching some low definition video. He hoped it was porn. It was an image of herself in session with one of her patients.

"Kendra?"

She leapt from the couch and fumbled for the remote. After some juggling she got it to pause.

"Jesus Christ, Pete!"

"Hi?"

"Why did you have to sneak up on me like that?"

"What ya' watching?"

“Pete, just leave me alone, okay.”

Pete leaned on the door jamb unaware that he had a coy smile. She had turned him on. He just hoped she would relax enough to realize why.

He moved to the couch and sat down beside her. She turned off the DVD player.

“What?” She asked.

“You look beautiful, Kendra.”

“Yeah, right. Are you drunk?”

“...Why did you record your sessions?”

“I didn’t.”

“Of course you didn’t. That would be a breach of ethics and punishable by law.”

Kendra looked at him annoyed.

“Cuff me, asshole.”

She gave him her wrists. He took them, but not with handcuffs. He held her hands with a soft touch and moved it down to her fingers. He looked into her eyes in a way he hadn’t in years.

“What are you doing?” She asked.

“I never knew you had a dark side, Kendra.”

“I don’t... You wouldn’t have ever noticed it if I did.”

“I’m noticing now.” His hands moved from her wrists to her hips. He held her close and just hoped for a signal, something that indicated she had a shred of interest in him sexually. Her defensive brow softened. Her eyes did a sort of slow flutter. He was in.

It had been so long since they’d been intimate that it felt completely new. Kendra had put on ten pounds since the last time. Her breasts were a little larger. Her ass was a

little fuller. He loved it. The feel of her smooth skin was beyond what he remembered. He took his time with every inch of hip and breasts.

There were no arguments about inept listening skills or midnight shifts. Pete and Kendra became husband and wife as they hoped they always would be when they first exchanged vows – kind, gentle, ever loving.

It might have taken them five minutes or five hours. When it was over they lay in bed, sweaty and exhausted with indelible smiles.

“Wow,” Pete said.

“You said that already.”

“It needed to be said again.”

Kendra breathed amused.

“Damn,” Kendra said.

“You said *that* already.

“No, I didn’t.”

“That’s right. You said shit before.”

“Exactly,” she replied.

“See, I am a good listener.”

She turned to him with a playful reprimand.

“Kendra, in all the time I’ve known you, you’ve never lied, or bent the rules. And I love that about you as much as everything else. But when I saw that video, I don’t know why, it just awoke something in me. I thought maybe you’re more like me than I thought.”

“It’s all about you.”

“No, it’s not... Well maybe a little.” Pete hoped the mood would live forever. As much as Kendra wanted to ignore the video, the sooner it was addressed the better as far as Pete was concerned. Their sex life might depend on it.

“I hope I’m not ruining a great moment but I have to ask – why did you record that session?”

Kendra didn’t leave her euphoria completely but dropped down a cloud. There was truth in her eyes as they began to tear.

“I didn’t mean to upset you. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “I never told you.”

“Told me what?”

“One of my clients committed suicide last month.”

Pete held her hand. “Jesus. I had no idea.”

“He was schizophrenic. I couldn’t break through in our sessions. It was a battle to convince him to stay on his meds.

Kendra rolled over and lied on Pete’s chest.

“He went to the roof top of his twenty story apartment building and jumped.”

Pete could feel the tears saturating his chest. He wished he could find the perfect words. He decided silence was his best means of support. Eventually her tears stopped and her breathing returned to normal.

“You should have told me. Aren’t you the one who said we should always talk about things?”

“I know. I couldn’t follow through with the advice I give people every day. It just hurt too bad to talk about. I guess I’m not as strong as I thought I was. Now I know how difficult it must be for some of my patients to open up about some things... and you.”

“You gonna’ keep recording your sessions?”

“I have to. I’ve never progressed more professionally. I’ve never been able to be more proficient at helping my patients... You got a problem with that, officer?”

“No ma’am.”

Pete’s cell vibrated from inside his jacket.

“Text.”

“Let it go,” she said. She left his chest and straddled him, softly scraping her nails over his thighs. She moved her hips into a position that had them both ready fast.

“Repeat after me. Fuck the text.” She had him inside her with one small wiggle. His eyes rolled over.

“Fuck! Fuck the fucking text!”

An hour later they laid in bed under a blanket of darkness. Kendra was in such a deep sleep that she was snoring. She hadn’t snored since she got drunk on New Year’s Eve two years earlier, which was also the last time they had sex.

Pete looked over at her as she lied on his arm, only able to make out her outline in the darkness. With her peaceful snore he imagined her features, more beautiful than he’d ever known them to be.

His jacket vibrated again. He’d almost forgotten about the text before he and Kendra’s second go at it. He didn’t even bother trying to ignore it. He knew his mind. He knew one minute of wondering would feel like an hour. Why put himself through that?

After all Kendra was sound asleep. Pete slowly shimmied his arm out from under her and quietly rolled out of bed. He got to his phone. The text read, “CCK again. Call me asshole.” He thumbed back to the first text. It was the same basic message.

Pete hustled to get on his pants as quietly as possible in the dark. As he gathered his other clothes he planned his middle-of-the-night goodbye. He’d write her a note that would express what the evening had meant to him.

He left the bedroom and put on the hall light. He dressed as he pondered what he’d write. In the kitchen he put paper and pen down on the table. He paced and then grabbed the pen. He shook his head, dropped the pen, and then paced some more.

All he could think about was the Charm City Killer. He had to get to the new crime scene. He had to find out what was going on. He had to help take the bastard down.

He forced himself to sit and write.

Dear Kendra,

You’re the best.

Love,

Pete

Short and sweet. He liked it.

“What are you doing?” Kendra entered the kitchen, exhausted and agitated.

“That text was from Chancey. There’s a new victim. I got to go. Look. I wrote you a note this time.”

He slid it to her and she read.

“You’re the best? What am I, a football team?”

“Sorry I’m not a fucking poet.”

“No you’re not. You’re an asshole.”

Pete motioned for her to sit down with him at the table. She didn’t.

“Please.”

She finally sat with a scowl.

“I’m lead Detective on this case. Three men were tortured, castrated, and murdered over the last months. I have to find this psycho and get him on the closest electric chair as soon as possible.”

“I know you have to go. I know... It’s a shame this guy didn’t get help.”

Pete sat back perplexed.

“What? The murderer needs help? I don’t care what kind of insanity plea anyone supports for these guys. The actions they take are undeniable. No matter how insane they are they don’t deserve to have one minute of life, let alone freedom.”

“Calm down. My point was that those actions could have been prevented if someone would have gotten the guy in to see someone. With therapy and proper medication even extreme cases of mental illness can lead a dependant but fairly normal life.”

“Well, this asshole aint’ doing nothing of the sort.”

“Dickhead, I’m agreeing with you and you don’t even realize it, except for the capital punishment part.”

“Then you don’t agree.”

“I haven’t agreed with you since college. Why start now?”

Pete got up and walked to the door. He turned back.

“I’ll call you later.”

“Whatever.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Pete drove sixty through his neighborhood, intermittently hitting the siren as he made turns. Once on the highway he was going over a hundred, sirens full board.

Pablano got the call as he neared sleep outside Steadman's house.

"Jesus, Pete where have you been?"

"I know. I'm on my way."

"I'm still outside her house now."

"What are you talking about?"

"Maureen Steadman. Her shrink called into 911. She confessed to being the Charm City Killer."

"I got a different lead from dispatch I'm going after. At least I think it's a different lead. Stay there. Call in for support and have them cover a four block perimeter."

Pete felt guilty about showing up an hour late to the crime scene. He hoped he and Kendra's night had been a precursor to many more sexual rendezvous to come. He knew better. As life and the pain that accompanied it moved along Kendra would lose her attraction to him if she hadn't already. He would continue to be a ghost passing in and out of their bedroom between shifts.

The Charm City Killer had apparently dumped his latest eunuch victim right smack dab in the middle of Baltimore's Inner Harbor. By the time Pete had arrived the body had already been pulled out and bagged.

Chancey was tap dancing with reporters as Pete walked by him to question the other Detectives. He was surprised at how quickly Chancey was able to escape the vultures. He was on Pete before he could take a sip of coffee.

"Where the fuck have you been, Kendrickson?"

"Sorry I'm late. I was having sex with my wife."

"Very funny... We have to talk."

"Okay. Let's talk."

The two left the chaos and disappeared between restaurant pavilions- Hooters on one side, Cheesecake Factory on the other.

"Same as the others. No witness. No evidence of struggle. Probably roofies again. The press is just a pain in the ass," Chancey went on. "The Mayor's pressuring the Chief. The Chief's pressuring me."

"Captain, I'm going to get the son of a bitch. Every pill pusher in the city is getting crunched. We're tracing all incidents of date rape drug in the last year back to the dealers and then the source. Look, the bastard's careful. We haven't gotten one consistent positive ID. It's as if this guy were a ghost. We just need a break. We'll get it."

An Officer approached Pete with a cell phone. He showed him a text.

"We might have just got that break, Captain. Gotta' go."

"I'm going with you," Chancey said, trying to make it sound like an order.

"What?" Pete didn't bother hiding his disgust.

“I’ll follow you. I got to get the hell out of here.”

“What about the press?” Pete asked.

“I’ll let Sergeant Pavlovich handle them.”

“Pav stutters in our staff meetings.”

“Perfect. He’ll frustrate the shit out of these fucking leaches.”

Pete knew where it might go. Any wrong move, any betrayal of procedure and Chancey had yet another ace up his sleeve to control Pete’s future.

“Captain, I have to be able to do my job without...”

“Pete, for tonight if shit goes down and you don’t do everything by the book I’ll give you a mulligan.”

“Really?”

“I promise. Mulligan.”

Chancey prepped Pavlovich as Pete made a call on his cell. They met back at their cars and gazed nervously as the lights shined on the press’s new prey. In the spotlight and pressure Pavlovich appeared confident and poised. Then he spoke.

“My name’s S-s-s-s-serg-g-g-g-g-geant. P-p-p-p-p-p-p-p-p-p-...”

“Jesus,” Pete said.

“I know. I feel horrible,” Chancey replied. “Let’s get out of here before it gets ugly.”

They walked toward their respective cars.

“Chancey, you’re as fucked up as the rest of us, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea.”

Pete took 83 South toward the city and got off on North Avenue. He passed by boarded up row homes and vagrants outside liquor stores. He looked in his rear view mirror. He'd tried his best to lose Chancey but he was right behind him, trailing so close that Pete could see his lips forming curse words at Pete's driving.

It was an average drug house in an above average drug city. The only thing that made it unique was its proximity to Route 83. Maybe that's why the Charm City Killer had chosen it - convenience.

It was a lonely end of unit row home. Dogs were barking inside. Their tone indicated pit bull or doberman pinscher. No lights. No life.

As Pete approached he was intercepted by a beat cop.

"The note on the door said come in. It's signed Charm City Killer."

Pete looked around then spoke to the young officer's badge. "Officer Trenton?"

"Yes, sir. You think it's a trap?" Trenton asked.

"Only one way to find out."

Chancey approached the scene. As he had promised, he didn't wield his power. In fact he didn't even speak. He simply walked to the front door and read the note.

Pete was curious about his silence.

"What do you think?" Pete asked Chancey.

"Call me crazy but that hand writing appears to be that of a child, or an adolescent. I suspect we're dealing with something whose mind is well beyond the complexity of the average psychopath."

“I could have told you that after the first severed johnson,” Pete replied. “Let’s go.”

Pete lead the way followed by Chancey and Officer Trenton. Several other policemen held the perimeter as the flashing lights of five police cars illuminated the otherwise completely dark drug haven.

Inside the barking dogs sounded like cannon fire. They were apparently fighting in a nearby room. Pete approached to make sure the beasts were secured and contained. As he neared the dog room the door flew open.

A tornado of claws, fangs, and a massive body of muscle and fur leapt onto Pete’s chest, knocking him to the ground. Pete pushed against the beast’s neck to avoid getting his face torn off. It was like grabbing at a heavy bag in the gym, solid and immovable. The claws felt like rusty razor blades in Pete’s cheek. The other paw dug into his shoulder reminding him of an old rotator cuff injury during his pitching days in high school.

“Officer!” Chancey motioned toward Trenton’s taser. Pete heard a sound that reminded him of the novelty hand-shake-shocker Carlos tricked him with back in third grade. Then he felt suffocated by hair. His inability to breath was accompanied by a severe cramping of his muscles.

They pulled the Rottweiler off him, drug it into a nearby bathroom, and closed the door behind it.

“You got me a little on that shot too, you know.” Pete shivered.

The remaining dog growled, obviously agitated that he’d lost his friend.

“May I?” Pete asked shaking as he reached for the officer’s taser. He handed it over.

Before he could walk a step closer the second dog sprang out of the room. Pete tasered it in mid air. They stored it with its muscular twin and continued their search.

The lights from the police cars through the windows gave them only intermittent visibility as the blue/red illumination made its three hundred sixty degree journey. The men split up, each taking one of the three remaining rooms on the entry level. Pete inspected the dog room which also posed as a kitchen. No perps. No nothing. Just two empty dog bowls. He wondered if their owner hadn’t fed them in days.

They met in the living room, each sweeping their hand signaling that it was clear. Next was the second floor. Pete lead the way up the steps experiencing sporadic mini-seizures as a result of the taser. It was quiet and not a good quiet. There was a tiny crunch with each boot up the carpeted steps. Pete suspected the house hadn’t seen a vacuum in years.

Such thoughts were necessary to help him buffer what was really going through his mind. He was dealing with an adversary who was advanced far beyond himself. The killer had the intelligence to elude a BPD and FBI search for him and a will so strong that its appetite demanded murder and mutilation. Pete could barely figure out how to talk to his wife. He was outmatched, more so than on any other case. He pressed up the steps anyway.

The crunchy carpet continued on the second floor but the police lights died. They were in almost pure black and pure silence. Pete motioned the uniformed cop to approach

him. He grabbed his flashlight and shined it on the floor – enough light to maneuver and see each other.

“You okay, Trenton?” Pete whispered.

“Sure.” Pete suspected Trenton was seconds away from pissing himself. Pete looked over to Chancey. Stone cold calm. As much as Pete had always hated him, at that moment he wished he could have had Chancey as a partner in a different life.

They stayed together this time. Bedroom one. Nothing. Bathroom. Nothing. As they approached the last room on the floor they heard a sound inside. They looked at each other and readied their guns.

Pete nodded and then kicked in the door. He surveyed the room frantically with the flashlight and his gun. Chancey and Officer Trenton followed behind him. Lying on the bed was a young naked African American man. His wrists and ankles were tied to the bed posts. His mouth was duck taped. As Pete’s flashlight explored further he saw the Charm City Killer’s handy work.

Pete walked to the drug dealer. His eyes were wide and desperate. Pete didn’t want to hear what his muffled plea would become upon taking off the duck tape. He tore it off anyway.

“That mutha’ fucka! Shit mutha fucka!” He was obviously in shock. Chancey began releasing his feet and arms as Pete tried to ask a couple questions.

“Where is he?”

“Mo’ fucka’ cut it off!”

Officer Trenton spoke into his transmitter.

“We need a medic in here now.”

Chancey placed a blanket over the victim who kept screaming.

Pete tried to figure out how to ask the question with some tact.

“Where is it?”

“What?”

“Where is... IT?”

“The bitch put it in the dog bowl.”

He grasped at Pete’s shirt. Tears were welling. Pete thought back to the empty feeding bowls in the kitchen and knew it was gone.

The drug dealer read Pete’s eyes. His body stopped shaking and turned into a wet noodle. Pete put a comforting hand on his shoulder and then went to Officer Trenton.

“Where the hell are the paramedics, God damn it?”

A thud. Glass shattered.

“Fuck!” Pete watched their victim and their case fly out the window. He and Chancey went to the shattered window and looked down. It was only two stories but the drug dealer landed as he had hoped - head first into the concrete sidewalk. His naked body lay with head and limbs in a twisted pose emulating a Van Gogh.

Pete stared at the broken body. A deep sorrow overcame him, some for the drug dealer but mostly for the ongoing victims that would inevitably continue to fall. Pete played out the past crime scenarios in his head. Fingerprint sweeps – nothing. Full forensics investigation – nothing. Their first non-corpse witness had just become a corpse.

After a long stare Pete finally turned from the window and sat on the bed as sirens accumulated.

Unlike Pete, Chancey didn't sit on the bed in a melancholy heap. He was investigating everything – the closet, under the bed. They made eye contact once. Chancey gave him a nothing look that discussed the frustration of losing their sole witness but that told him not to dwell on it.

Pete followed Chancey's lead. The dogs were barking again. They were awake but still locked in the bathroom. Their sound was like nails to a chalk board for Pete. He wanted to get out of this hell hole, find an all-night coffee shop in the suburbs somewhere and read the newspaper for an hour or two. As motivated as he'd always been there were moments in his career that he just wanted to escape, curl into a ball, and forget about the job and his life. This was one. The lingering shivers from the stun didn't help his mood.

Chancey was investigating with the energy of a neophyte detective. Pete continued to assemble some respect for his superior. Without words he was sending a message to Pete, Trenton, and any other cop that came on the scene. It wasn't over.

"I'll take the other bedroom," Pete told Chancey.

It was a smaller room with the same crunchy carpet syndrome as the rest of the house. A tie-dyed tapestry was tacked to the ceiling, billowing down like an inverted parachute. Below it were brand new solid oak bureaus, a king size bed from Ethan Allen, and a fifty inch flat screen. Just like the master bedroom it was a strange combination of dirty college dorm room and affluence.

The bureaus had some drug paraphernalia on them – a bong, a baggy of marijuana crumbs, a crack pipe. Pete put his hand over the bong and the crack pipe and didn't feel any heat to indicate recent usage.

The far end table grabbed his attention. Baseball cards in protective plastic sleeves were aligned neatly like Five Hundred Rummy. It was an impressive collection – a 65’ Pete Rose, a 73’ Mike Schmidt Rookie, a 60’ Mays and in the middle of them a 82’ Cal Ripkin Jr. rookie card.

Then Pete saw something out of the ordinary. Above the Ripkin rookie was a business card for Wilson’s Pharmacy on York Rd. in Towson. It was a clean brand new business card with perfect corners, unlike most of the baseball cards.

It seemed so perfectly out of place that it couldn’t have been accidentally left there.

As always Pete disregarded protocol and grabbed the business card by the edges, careful not to smudge any potential prints. He called the number from his cell.

Pete wasn’t expecting anything except an answering service considering the late hour. Someone picked up but didn’t speak. Then Pete heard screams of horror in the background of the phone call.

“Hello? Can you hear me?” He hung up and sprinted out of the room.

“Chancey! Let’s go!”

On the way to the pharmacy Pete was trying to figure out the why’s. Why had the Charm City Killer left behind a live witness? Why had he left a second piece of evidence? Where would the evidence lead? Historically many serial killers had actually appeared at their own crime scenes during the investigation. Part of it was simply about pushing the envelope, seeing what they could get away with. The other serial killer mind set was the driving urge to be caught. It seemed completely illogical but Pete had seen and heard of sociopaths whose patterns indicated exactly that phenomena. Being captured

was the only way to truly fulfill their destiny of notorious killer. It seemed grandeur and fame were such powerful forces for some that it could cause them to forfeit their freedom and their lives.

By the time Pete and Chancey pulled into the pharmacy parking lot it was swarmed by police cars, sealing any escape routes for whatever lied within.

Pete was greeted by a fellow plain clothed policeman.

“Boritzer, when did you get here?” Pete asked.

“Literally a minute ago. What the fuck’s going on?”

“Have you heard any screams from inside?” Pete asked as he surveyed the building.

“Screams? No... Does this have to do with Toby Anderos?”

“Who the fuck’s that?”

“A Pharm. assistant. Been on suspicion of dealing out of here for months.”

“What kinds of drugs?”

“Everything – percs, vicodin..”

“Date rape drugs?”

“I wouldn’t doubt it.” Boritzer put two and two together. “Holy shit.”

“Boritzer, any activity?” Chancey steamrolled into the conversation.

“No, Captain. Been able to hear a pin drop.”

“Ok. Boritzer, you hold the...” Pete stared at Chancey with cold eyes, so cold that they stopped Chancey in his tracks. He looked over at Pete and nodded. He was a man of his word.

Pete took over the directive.

“Boritzer, you’re responsible for holding the perimeter. Chancey, Trenton, and I are going in. Three man formation behind us a minute after we penetrate. We’ll let you know if we need backup beyond that.”

“You got it.”

Pete lead the way as he, Chancey, and their newly acquired partner, Officer Trenton shuffled against the wall near the entrance. Pete pushed the door. It was unlocked. Yet another invitation. They went in.

Inside there was a lonely ghostly silence that made it feel like a grave yard more than a pharmacy. The darkness made the diagonal pharmacy aisles that much more disagreeable.

As a knot tightened in Pete’s stomach Kendra infiltrated his thoughts. Pete wished he’d spent better time with her. He wished they’d had a child.

The three cops quickly covered each aisle and met with a nod before going down the next. Before they knew it they were at the pharmacy area positioning themselves in a kneel right beside the condoms below the pharmaceutical stage. They heard the assigned backup enter behind them, way too loud. A display rack was knocked over. So much for the element of surprise.

Pete assessed everything. The screams he heard on the phone weren’t a figment of his imagination. He wondered what existed behind the wall to the pharmacy. It was either nothing which meant an embarrassing dead end that put him back to square one with the investigation or it was a silent horror, a calm before the storm.

Chancey nodded to Pete and they both moved to the pharmacy partition. As Chancey worked the lock, Pete looked over the ledge with a flashlight and his gun. He

saw nothing out of the ordinary - containers of pills, prescriptions organized, patient files. Chancey clicked the latch, pulled the wooden college bookstore partition and entered the pharmacy. Pete followed, gun drawn. He surveyed. There was nothing. He was beginning to think that the Charm City Killer was toying with him, that he knew of Pete's potential plight with the BPD and his plight with his wife. More failure might mean another pay demotion and a divorce.

"Kendrickson!" Chancey's voice was a primal scream. He was looking up.

Pete followed his eyes and soon mimicked Chancey's open mouth expression. The killer had somehow displayed the Pharmacist's body on the wall looking like a twisted crucifixion, heavy nails through the meat of his hands and feet supporting his body. He was naked except for his lab coat barely hanging over his shoulders. The victim was castrated and his member had been shoved into his own mouth.

Through all of Pete's career he'd never witnessed pure evil in quite the same way. Chad Hansinger was the worst kind of evil –a child molester. But he was arrogant and stupid. This new creature was ultra-smart and ultra-careful in spite of his clue drops. It seemed the Charm City Killer was writing Pete's script and manipulating each and every page as he saw fit.

Half the BPD enveloped the pharmacy. They took down the corpse from its crucifixion. Pete leaned against a counter and stared out the front window into the city lights. He was through pursuing. He just wanted to stare at the lights and relax.

Chancey leaned beside him. Before Pete could protest Chancey handed Pete a flask. Pete drank.

"This doesn't seem like you," Pete said.

“I’m not as together as you think, Kendrickson.”

Chancey snatched the flask, drank and gave it back to Pete. “We’re going to find the son of a bitch.”

“I hope... We’re being played with, Chancey. By the craziest of puppet masters.”

It was out of nowhere. A muffled high pitched moan sliced into the chaos of shuffling police officers. It sounded like a sick cat. Pete and Chancey followed the sound and it led them to a private bathroom connected to the pharmacy. It came from a cabinet underneath the sink probably too small for a human hiding place. Pete saw blood dripping out of the bottom of it. He readied his firearm.

As he opened the small door the smell is what hit Pete first.

Pete opened the cabinet completely. The high-pitched moans were accompanied by skinny ice pale limbs wrapped around pipes in an impossible contortion of extremities and plumbing. The naked humanoid pretzel was still except for the quivers that accompanied his moans. Pete couldn’t tell if he was an adolescent child or a very small young man. He continued to meow like a cat as Pete’s flashlight exposed him. It was a frantic assessment – potential victim, potential suspect.

“Out! Now!”

The naked man-child turned his head to Pete in a way that told him he didn’t care what day, month, or year it was. His body was smooth like a boy but his face had a four-day-shadow. He smiled apparently unaware of the blood all over his hands and body. The creature slowly untangled himself from the tiny dungeon. He stood still moaning and smiling.

“Don’t fucking move!”

The creature was only around five foot four but the physics still didn't add up to him fitting under that sink. Pete couldn't figure out his eyes either. They knew something he did not. He was squeezing something in his hand like a stress ball. The freak looked at Chancey and laughed. He threw the stress ball at him and giggled more. It bounced off Chancey's chest and landed on the floor somewhere.

It was then that Pete and Chancey noticed the source of blood covering him was from his own groin area and what he'd thrown was not a stress ball. The mad man they assumed to be the Charm City Killer had castrated himself.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Maureen woke up on her family room rug but didn't remember how she got there. She remembered cleaning off the blood. She remembered the snooping cop, Pablano. Then the call to Aumora. The next couple hours were a cloudy mix of gin and depression. She caught the late night news as her eyes teetered in and out of consciousness.

“Breaking news. It appears the Charm City Killer is now in custody. The suspect's name is Ferris Tomlinson. He is a nineteen-year-old physics student at Johns Hopkins with an apparent one-hundred-seventy-nine IQ...”

She smiled for a moment, wondering if she were dreaming. Then in an instant she knew she wasn't. She faded back into darkness.

She woke again, this time reasonably sober. Maureen remembered what she thought was her last waking memory but had to again reassess if it had been a dream.

She thought of that movie from the nineties called *Copy Cat* starring Harry Connick Jr. and Segourney Weaver. Conick played a deranged killer. The movie, as the title indicated, was about a copy cat killer. She turned on the TV to find out if her copy cat killer was a reality or an aberration brought on by alcohol, stress, and exhaustion.

After some channel surfing she caught a mid morning broadcast. It confirmed what she thought she'd seen the night before. Perhaps she was in the clear.

She studied the possibilities further. The only consistency between hers and this murder was that the victims were castrated. Her pattern of taking salesmen, specifically internet salesmen had been broken. The cops would recognize that. Plus even an inept

defense attorney for this Ferris Tomlinson could get the murders she committed thrown out if they pinned them to the copy cat killer. There would be no evidence to convict him for those and so her original Charm City Killer case would be open for further investigation.

Just maybe it wouldn't matter. The press would assume the boy genius committed Maureen's murders. The public would assume it too, even though the guy would never get convicted for her crimes, only his own. It's an easy rationalization for the cops to say case closed.

Then there was her most recent more specific confession to Dr. Aumora. They'd take her into questioning for it but just like her other vague confessions to him it wouldn't be enough to convict her. She'd tell them she lied to him to get a reaction. She'd throw in their affair if she had to.

It was as if she had a clean slate. But her face was a clenched fist. Already the guilt and desire were rallying troops to prepare for battle.

She lost track of the weekend. It was Sunday maybe. She made a Gin & Tonic and thought about her copy cat killer. It was a virtual miracle to think that she might get away with her crimes. Then she thought about her prior victims, especially Charles Efron with whom she hadn't sealed the deal. Drinking out of the wrong water bottle. Stupid. That was a miraculous escape. In the end luck had been with her every step of the way.

Charles Efron. She imagined his tight muscular body beneath his business casual. She saw herself on top of him, his body catatonic. She kissed his lips. She saw herself in her death mobile, hovering over his corpse. Lust. Intimacy. Control.

She had to take again.

She didn't want to put the time and effort into creating another charade to target the evil internet sales reps. There was something going through her mind and body that told her she didn't have the time. Something forced her to take action immediately. It had all become a whirlwind of desires that trumped her moral revenge on the internet and any fear of getting caught. She, like her mother was a relentless monster.

She targeted The Block, a four block segment of Baltimore St. in downtown Baltimore. It's a beautiful stint of smut with the likes of The Kitty Cat Club and Girls Express. The blatant potential sale of sex was especially amazing due to the fact that the city police station resided only a quarter mile from it all.

On The Block she'd find someone desperate enough to attract. If he wasn't desperate enough he'd become so with sweet Special K.

Circus 101 was like every other club on The Block –dark and seedy. The entrance had a slight ramp with a series of black cheap perfume teased curtains. As she approached she wondered what kind of drunken drooling meth heads had passed through the same curtains. She imagined diseases infiltrating her body as she entered.

The doorman inside was a three hundred fifty pounder with sun glasses and a gray beard that hung to his belly. He'd been an attractive lean youngster, the pride of his biker gang in the seventies. Five hundred gallons of Jack Daniels, fifty pounds of cocaine, and Krispy Kremes resulted in this sloth of a being.

“Five dollars,” he slurred.

Inside she saw a scene unlike any she'd ever known. The strippers on the various mini stages were swaying instead of dancing. One laid on the stage as she stroked a

customer's package and probably negotiated a price for her future services. Another played a disappearing act with her fingers as three guys howled and handed over bills.

Maureen knew her search would be a challenging one. She was one of a dozen old worn out predator women. And who knew how many of the strippers were willing to sell themselves for sex.

Maureen's eyes snapped from one scene to another. The stoned dancers. The baby Mamas yelling at their drunk loser boyfriends. She assessed herself. Make up. Cleavage was intact. Her silk blouse and black slacks stood out among the faded jeans and Motley Crue t-shirts that surrounded her. Perhaps that would be what differentiated her and attracted her victim.

She ordered a G & T and chugged it in record speed. She pulled her blouse down a little further.

The desires became more overwhelming by the second. She devoured drink number two and surveyed the crowd. Then he appeared. He was six-four, two hundred fifty plus pounds. She guessed he had been a high school football star whose abilities couldn't quite garner a college scholarship. He'd dropped out of community college and worked for his old man at the local hardware store ever since. Bitterness and anger grew with each passing day and he wore it on his sleeve.

He'd trapped a stripper in a corner, his hands secured on the adjacent walls like gigantic prison bars. It seemed a conversation turned into a reprimand quickly. As he pointed his finger into her face Maureen wondered how many women he'd raped in his pathetic domineering alpha male life. He would truly be a perfectly benevolent and justified taking.

She waved over the bartender who himself was stoned or drunk.

“You see that big douche bag in the corner? What’s he drinking?”

“I don’t remember.”

Another useless member of the human race. She studied the area around the giant and the stripper. There was a glass near him half filled with a clear liquid. Gin or vodka? He wasn’t cool enough to be a gin drinker, Maureen decided. She ordered a cheap vodka on the rocks and discretely added ketamine.

Soon the stripper ducked under the giant’s arm and left him. He punched the wall and yelled at her as she scurried off.

Maureen approached him and offered the drink.

“You look like a vodka man. You like Gray Goose?”

He took it from her and drank half of it with one gulp. She got right to the point.

“You’re just my type. If you come with me to my car I’ll give you a blow job.”

“How much?”

“It’s free, Mr. Sunshine.”

He looked her over and his eyes settled on her breasts.

“Can I titty fuck you too?”

“Sure. Why not?”

The charmer pulled her arm violently. She couldn’t wait to take him. She couldn’t wait to take his manhood.

“Hey!” Maureen nearly broke character after the tug.

“What?”

“We can’t leave without finishing our drinks.”

“Oh. Okay.” He chugged his ketamine vodka.

She’d considered his size and made his a double ketamine cocktail. She just hoped he could make it to the car.

Once they left the bar, slurred speech and loss of motor nerves commenced. She looked at his face- distorted mouth and clenched eyes- stroke-like symptoms. He got heavy on her shoulder. She held him for as long as she could and then let him crash onto the sidewalk.

A couple passing by stopped concerned.

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah. My boy friend tends to drink a little too much.”

“Do you need help getting him in the car?” The man asked, sizeable himself.

“Actually, yes. That would be great. Thank you.”

Her victim slurred something and rolled his head. Maureen knew what was going through his brain. Why am I feeling so useless? I didn’t drink *that* much. Then just maybe he would figure it out. I’ve been drugged. Anger. Then helplessness would settle in. Maybe even an abusive bully might feel vulnerability and fear. If he hadn’t yet, he would soon. She’d make sure of that.

With the help of the good samaritan and his girlfriend they wrestled the heap into the back seat.

“Why do you have garbage bags all over the back of your car?” The woman asked.

“Let’s just say this won’t be the first time he’s vomited. He’s fine with four or five shots of tequila. But thirteen send him over the edge. It’s his birthday so I knew it would be one of those nights.”

“You are such a good girl friend,” she said. “Why can’t you take care of me that well?” She slapped her man’s chest and then peaked in at Maureen’s victim who was still trying to desperately form syllables.

“Happy Birthday!” She yelled, revealing her own level of intoxication.

“I hope he doesn’t feel too bad tomorrow,” the man said.

Maureen smiled and said, “I’m sure he’ll be dead to the world.”

They said good bye and Maureen drove off with the giant.

“It’s just me and you, big boy.”

He mumbled and brushed his foot against the back head rest. She guessed in his mind he was attempting to kick out the back window. Ketamine was the ultimate tranquilizer.

“They were nice people, weren’t they?” More mumbling and slurring. “I’m glad you agree. I love that I’ve found such a massive asshole to take. Unlike with the internet sales reps, I won’t feel an ounce of guilt with you.”

She turned on the radio and rolled down the windows as they left The Block and exited onto Route 83 north bound. Maureen bobbed her head to the music as she drove.

She turned down the radio and rolled up the windows a little.

“So, where you from?!”

All he could do was mumble.

“It doesn’t matter really. In fact it doesn’t matter what you do or where you live now because it will all be over soon. The reason I say that is because I’m The Charm City Killer...”

He went silent and limp. In an instant the giant was puzzling together the trash bags enveloping the car’s interior, the free sex proposal, the drink.

“That’s right, asshole. The guy on the news is some copy cat killer. Crazy world, isn’t it? ...So, how ya’ doin’ back there?”

Silence.

“How many women have you raped in your life? Honestly? ...It’s a tough question, I know. Most of them you probably don’t consider rapes. No means yes after all.”

He remained silent, motionless. Perhaps he was praying.

“Here’s the deal, Biff. You’ve been drugged with something called Ketamine. You won’t be able to move for several hours. You will, however be able to experience pain and be cognizant of everything that is happening to you. How’s that sound?”

He moaned.

“Now, as The Charm City Killer my MO is to castrate.”

She turned on the dome light and looked back at him. His eyes begged.

She returned to the steering wheel and turned off the light.

“So what I’m going to do to you is this. Those trash bags the nice man referenced are to catch your blood. We can’t be soiling my nice car after all. I’m going to use these to cut it off.”

She displayed gardening shears and then tossed them into the passenger seat.

“I sure hope they’re sharp enough. I suspect it hurts more when they’re dull. I have been doing a lot of gardening with them lately. But you’re a big strong man. You can take it.”

They drove for a while longer into the country. She pulled into a dirt road between farms somewhere in northern Baltimore County near the Pennsylvania border. There was a little clearing on the side of the road framed by woods. She pulled into it and turned on the interior dome light. She wanted to see every squirm, every expression of pain. The sex had taken a back seat to death for the first time.

She climbed into the backseat and straddled him. Maureen held the shears near his face and squeezed the handles demonstrating the sheering action of the not-so-sharp metal. His arms and legs moved a little brushing against the interior, desperate flails that could not be.

Suddenly he stopped his paralyzed desperation. His eyes softened. She couldn’t tell if it was fearful begging or remorse. Purity occupied his eyes at that moment. Then one single tear descended. She watched it flow down his cheek and into his two day old whiskers. A surviving remnant of tear left the whiskers and dissipated amid his neck.

The tear and the honesty of his eyes made her realize his humanity. All desires left her. She nearly shed a tear herself.

Maureen could only do what her mind allowed her to do. She drove him back into the city pondering the repercussions of releasing him. A live would-be victim had heard her confession and could provide a positive ID. It didn’t matter. Witnessing his humanity had invoked emotions and possibilities she hadn’t known during her other takings – namely sympathy and an appreciation for life. It had been that powerful. She could only

do what her mind would allow her to do.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Glass shattered.

The night before Maureen had dropped off her live captive in a random Baltimore alley, drove home, and drank gin.

She watched calm and relaxed as a probable cop reached his hand through the broken glass and turned the lock of the sliding glass door. She was still lying on the floor of her family room, unable to move. She hoped that the break-in was a hallucination, just as the dancing figures in white had been over the previous months.

Her fate was unwinding before her very eyes and there was nothing she could do to stop it. She envisioned a cold future of prison bars and having to use her sales intuition to get out of fights and maintain some level of respect with the most uneducated and irrational of humans. She envisioned an electric chair.

Instead of pain and death her immediate fate was warmth.

Premi kneeled down and held her wrist, apparently assessing her pulse.

“You won’t find it, Premi.”

“Jesus, are you okay?”

“The cops got the wrong person.”

“What are you talking about, Moe?”

“I still have my Golden Eagle. I’m never gonna’ sell it, no matter what.”

“That’s good. You shouldn’t... Look Moe, I have to get you out of here.”

“I know. I should go. I need to disappear. It’s only a matter of time until they find me.”

“Who’s they?”

“The cops.”

“Why would the cops be looking for you?”

She was able to open her eyes completely for the first time. As she stared at Premi’s light auburn skin and uncanny ocean blue eyes she felt sadness. She knew she would never see him again and never have him. She’d been able to stifle her feelings for him with taking and the identity it had created. Now looking at him she realized it had all been nothing more than a band aid. She wanted to tell him that she wanted to have eight kids with him and live together forever- even though she didn’t like kids and was post-menopausal. She wanted it anyway.

“Premi, why are you here?”

“Are you kidding me? I was worried about you... What were you talking about the cops looking for you?”

She thought about her answer carefully.

“Premi, I guess we’re sort of friends right?”

“Of course we are. That’s a stupid question.”

“I ask you because I’ve never known anyone like you.”

“What do you mean?” Premi asked. His peripheral surveyed the desolate room.

“You’re my friend,” she responded getting lost in his eyes.

She felt his sympathy.

“I am your friend.”

Her fingers straddled his and caressed every pore. She knew it was the closest thing to intimacy she’d ever get with him.

“You okay, Maureen?”

Maureen knew her infatuation over Premi was the least healthy thing for her. She pulled her hand from his. It was the only way she might stay sane. Her new sensibility decided to sprint from her mind to her lips.

“Premi, somewhere along the way you’re gonna’ form a permanent identity of what you are. Your family forms it. Your hobbies form it. Your job forms it. That identity will get challenged often. But it’s when that identity is taken from you that a person can be driven to act... in drastic ways.”

“What’s going on with you, Moe?”

She thought about everything she’d done. She’d given up hope of getting away with it. Her only fear in telling Premi was that he’d abandon her. Of course that would occur soon enough once the giant from the previous night went to the police.

“Premi, I’m going to tell you something but I don’t want you to freak out.”

“OK.” Premi’s entire face was a question mark.

“I’ve taken.”

Premi sighed but didn’t ask one of his hundred queries.

“I decided to avenge my stolen identity. It was my turn to take. The first time was back in March. Then I did it again two months later. Another followed. I tried to take again last night.”

“What do you mean you took?”

She didn’t feel guilty about what she was about to reveal. It was all justified. She thought about being infamous. She thought about the control.

“In the last five months I killed three internet sales reps. I hunted them down. I took their man hood, and I killed them... I’m the Charm City Killer.”

Premi stared, shocked and confused. He pulled from her and stared out the shattered sliding glass door.

“How has work been for you in the last few months?” He asked.

It was a strange question, both in its timing and its tone.

“Why are you asking that? Why do you want to talk about work now?”

“Just tell me.”

“You know. I’ve sold more in the last three months than I have in five years.”

“Listen to me...” Premi took her hands again, and talked slowly. “Maureen, this time I have to ask *you* not to freak out. I have to tell you something.”

“What? Why are you talking that way? I’m not a fucking child.”

Premi became more assertive.

“Maureen, you took a leave of absence four months ago.”

“A leave of absence? Have you lost your mind?”

Premi gave a sympathetic fraction of a smile. Then he took a deep breath that lasted an hour.

“You did take the leave, Moe. I’ve been trying to call you every other day since then.”

“What are you talking about?”

Maureen jolted off the floor to a wobbly supine position.

“Moe, I talked to your neighbors before I came over.”

“My neighbors hate me,” she snapped.

“You don’t understand,” Premi said.

“What don’t I understand?”

Premi paused for the purpose of settling himself as much as her.

“You haven’t left your home in the last five months.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Captain Chancey stood at the podium amid a hundred microphones. Silliness was slung at him with reckless abandonment.

“Captain, why did it take you so long to find the Charm City Killer?”

“Captain Chancey, why did the killer castrate himself?”

Chancey looked at the reporters with a tired blank stare. Chancey noticed Pete walking behind the press core.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Chancey said, commandeering the focus of the conference. “Here’s the lead Detective Pete Kendrickson. Pete, why don’t you come up here.”

Pete glared at Chancey. Chancey left the podium and escorted Pete to the microphone.

Once at the podium Pete covered the mike with his hand and grabbed Chancey’s arm before he could escape.

“What the hell?” He whispered.

“Relax, Kendrickson,” Chancey said. “Don’t say anything that might indicate guilt at this point. Remember he’s a suspect, an alleged murderer. No opinions. No emotions.”

“What else?”

“Do what I always do. Wing it.”

“This isn’t exactly protocol. What happened to being by the book?”

Chancey looked up at the perfect clear blue skies.

“It’s a beautiful sunny day. I’m throwing the book away. I think I’ll take a walk in the park.”

Chancey turned to leave.

“You’re a real asshole, Captain.”

“So are you... Sergeant.”

Pete’s eyes brightened, the closest thing to a smile one might accomplish just before entering a wolves’ den.

Chancey dissolved into the crowd and Pete looked over the sea of reporters.

“Detective Kendrickson is it true the Charm City Killer had mutilated himself?”

Pete reprocessed every word of Chancey’s advice. He took the microphone and took a deep breath as he studied the press.

“The suspect was injured. We don’t have any other details from forensics yet.”

“Is there anything else you can tell us about Ferris Tomlinson, beyond being a boy genius at Johns Hopkins?”

“He was raised in an upper-middle class family in northern Baltimore County. Completed high school at age fifteen. He won a Merit Scholarship, went to Johns Hopkins at sixteen, completed his undergraduate degree within two years. No criminal record.”

“Is there any evidence of a motive?” Another reporter chimed in.

“We’re still investigating that.”

“Is it reasonable to say at this time that he’s a psychotic sociopath?”

Pete resisted the burning temptation to confirm the speculation.

“We have no mental assessment of the suspect at this time.”

Pete arrived home that evening around seven. Kendra was cooking something amazing in the kitchen. A frosty mug of beer waited for him on the table in the foyer. Pete put his keys in the drawer and took off his holster, placing his fire arm on the table top beside the beer. He drank as he walked into the kitchen.

“Smells amazing. Is it what I think it is?”

“Maybe.”

“Awesome. Shrimp Fra Diavolo. A cold beer waiting for me. Did seeing me on TV help get me all this?”

“You did great, Pete. Hell of a lot better than Chancey. You looked so cool. You could take his job if you wanted to. You could be Police Chief if you wanted to.”

Pete sat back in a chair at the kitchen table and watched his wife, smiling.

“I’ll settle for Sergeant.”

She kept cooking for a few seconds. Then she stopped and looked at him with a newly acquired glow. She dropped her tongs and spoon and attacked him with a hug and a kiss.

“You got Sergeant!”

Her kiss went from his lips to his neck. She yanked his pants down, and then her own.

“I have to get on TV more often.”

Kendra pulled him onto a couch in the adjacent living room. They bounced off the couch and fell onto the floor with a thud. They laughed.

An hour later they finally got to the dinner with weak knees and dazed smiles. As they sat in the living room eating they watched some local news and the re-airing of Pete's press conference.

"Jesus, I look bloated."

"Shut up. You look hot."

As Pete watched himself he felt a sudden attack of insecurity. He left his wife, went to their corner wet bar, and poured himself a whiskey. Kendra followed.

"Pete. You look great up there."

"It's not that." He took a drink. "Before last night we had nothing on this guy – dead end leads, evidence that turned out not to be evidence. The clues we got that lead us to that drug house and then the pharmacy. He gave them to us. I didn't do any great detective work. I just happened to be the guy assigned to the case. I didn't really earn my promotion."

"You did earn it."

Pete bartended for Kendra and they took their drinks back to the couch.

"How do you figure?"

"The cycle of life."

"Is this psychiatry stuff?"

"It has nothing to do with psychiatry, asshole."

"What is it?" Pete yawned.

"You sound so intrigued."

He patted her leg.

"I am intrigued. I'm just exhausted. You wore me out. What is it?"

She looked him over.

“My cycle of life theory is this. The attitude with which we approach every day determines our ultimate results. They might not determine the results of that day but they contribute to an accumulation of positive energy that will ultimately effect days in our future.”

Kendra looked at Pete who stared at her with a nothing expression. She guessed he was listening intently. She hoped.

Kendra sat back with her drink and stared out the window to see a near full moon. She got back to her philosophy.

“What you feed into the world- your attitude – cycles back to you in one way or another. Pete, the reason you earned your promotion is because you remained focused and worked hard day after day. Sometimes life’s as simple as that as far as I’m concerned. You got the guy, not the exact way you expected or hoped but you got him. Not once have I ever broken through with a patient or client the exact way I anticipate. I just rely on the cycle of life and it works out more times than not.”

She turned to her husband with a smile.

Pete was sound asleep, drink propped on his belly. Her smile faded, replaced by angry and then sad features. Kendra just kept staring as the two emotions battled. Anger won. She walked to the stove, grabbed the pan of shrimp and held it over his head. After a few moments of contemplation she put it down and turned back to the mesmerizing lunar image outside the window.

Kendra dressed, grabbed her keys, and wrote Pete a note.

Pete,

You're not the best.

Love,

Kendra

She left the house.

Chapter Thirty

After a weekend in a hotel ignoring Pete's calls Kendra went into work Monday feeling refreshed and empowered. The thought of Pete stuck with her like a barnacle. Leaving him felt as surreal as it did uplifting. She knew work was the only thing that could distract her.

A nervous looking woman in her twenties approached her, wearing a long white lab coat similar to Kendra's. She was running and then slowed to a walk as she reached her.

"Dr. Kendrickson, we have a problem in the East wing."

"Susan, I told you to call me Kendra." Kendra studied a chart on a clipboard as she walked and listened.

"Sorry, Kendra. Dr. Sanford requested your assistance."

"Again?"

"We have a new patient that is just over the top."

"Over the top? Is that a clinical term?"

"I'm sorry. A new patient that's..."

"I'm just kidding, Susan. Over the top works for me. Tell Dr. Sanford I'll be right there..." Kendra stopped walking. "No wait. Tell them to bring the patient to my office."

"Your office? Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. If he's potentially violent the orderlies can be present, obviously."

"She," Susan said.

"What?"

“The patient’s a female.”

“Great. I’ll be ready in ten minutes.”

Susan marched down the hall like a marine on amphetamines.

Kendra got to her office and set up the camera in the private bathroom that captured the office through a tiny hole beside a picture frame above her desk. Kendra settled at her desk and soon there was a knock.

“Come in.”

Susan came in with a chart. She handed it over.

“Her name’s Maureen Steadman,” Susan said. “She thinks she’s the Charm City Killer. It’s all there. She’s described in detail the abduction of four men...”

Kendra’s mind wondered. The odds of she being the psychiatrist to handle a patient who had identity delusions pertaining to her husband’s case were one in a trillion.

Kendra braced herself as a stampede of doctors and orderlies approached. Soon the entourage was in her office. Her office was large but seemed tiny with the staff populating it.

The patient flailed in her straight jacket sending an orderly into the wall, knocking one of Kendra’s diplomas onto the floor. The glass shattered. They restrained her.

A bald fifty-something psychiatrist materialized.

“Dr. Kendrickson, this is highly unorthodox. This should be conducted in an interview room.

“Relax, Stanley. *You* asked for *my* assistance, remember?” Dr. Sanford left her office without a word, frustrated. The orderlies stayed.

“I’d like to interview the patient in private.”

The orderlies exchanged glances briefly and then left. They each did a choreographed spin move settling on the wall outside the office. The last enforcer closed the door behind him. Kendra and Maureen were alone.

“Hi. I’m Kendra.”

“I’m Fuck You.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Fuck You. What’s your middle name?”

“My middle name is Twot.”

“Fuck Twot You. Sounds Chinese.”

“Thai, actually.”

“Oh. I love Thai food.”

“Tastes like shit to me.”

“What food do you like?”

“You could play this game all day, couldn’t you doc?”

“How did you know I was a doctor?”

“You’re bragging about it all over your walls. Plus you put Stanley in his place. You’re at least a colleague.”

“Do you know why you’re here, Miss. Steadman?”

“Yes.”

“...And why is it?”

“Penus.”

“Excuse me?”

“Penus. Cock. Shlong. Johnson. Prick. You see, they thrive on it. It’s the soul that doesn’t exist in their vapid spirits. It’s what drives them to dominate. It’s kind of like a river flowing beneath a bridge trying to catch a fish without a net. It’s like a rock in the desert with tree plumbs tasting the crude oil.”

Kendra watched Maureen’s mind enter her episode fully. Maureen continued to babble and then for no particular reason she leapt from her chair and slammed her body into the wall. Photos and framed citations fell to the floor shattering. The orderlies sprinted in, tackled her and carried her out screaming.

Maureen had committed no crimes even though her mind told her she had. She was the true definition of the word victim. After diagnosing Maureen to be bipolar with severe schizophrenia Kendra placed her on Zoloft, Wellbutrim, Lithium, Clonazepan, Abilify, Tricor, and Vitamin D in collaboration with their therapy. Her cocktail was designed to control her severe mental health issues and physical problems stemming from her obesity. She worked with her as a therapist and as a life coach. Kendra made helping Maureen Steadman her primary cause.

Pete had been reliving his last night with Kendra in his mind over and over, trying to determine exactly what he said or did to elicit the drastic life choice Kendra had taken. He remembered discussing the press conference and then his promotion and how he didn’t feel deserving. Great sex. Then he fell asleep. Kendra’s abandonment was beyond strange. Her actions were those of a wife who caught her husband cheating on her with her best friend or who had snorted away all their life savings.

Pete paced in what had been their living room waiting for Kendra to answer her cell as he had seven times in the previous forty-eight hours. Kendra finally picked up.

“What, Pete?”

“Nice greeting. Real cordial?”

“Pete, my level of etiquette is irrelevant at this point, don’t you think?”

“Depends on what you think etiquette is. You obviously find me to be such a piece of garbage that you can’t even explain why you’re putting me through this hell.”

“Pete..”

“You just think I’m some kind of a game you can play with. What is going through your head?!”

“Pete.”

“What?”

“What do you think about the cycle of life?” Kendra asked and then waited for an answer. Pete didn’t know what she was talking about.

“...Kendra, why are you torturing me?”

“Pete, you’re torturing me, more than you know.”

A dozen other phone conversations had ended similarly.

Most days Pete followed her after her shift at Sheppard Pratt. He had known where she was staying the entire time, a Marriott in Towson only three miles away from their home. He had followed her every day his job would allow it, watching every finger brush of her hair, every step of long legged nylon elegance. He also watched for a man. He thanked God he didn’t see one.

After a couple weeks of torture Pete decided it was time for him to take charge. The phone wasn't doing it. He assumed the flowers he sent were thrown in the trash. Kendra entered the hotel and Pete followed with a one and a half Carrot ring in his pocket. Even with his new promotion they couldn't afford it. Money was irrelevant at that point. He had to get her back at any expense.

Pete entered the lobby, watched Kendra get on the elevator, and then watched the floor display above the elevator doors. It stopped at 3.

Pete hopped on the neighboring elevator and followed.

After ascending to the third floor the elevator chimed, the doors opened, and Pete got off. There she was, only yards away from him, with her wonderful curves. He could smell her shampoo from her soft wavy auburn hair. He wished he could swim in it.

Pete had no idea what he was going to say. He took out the jewelry box and opened it revealing the sparkling ring.

She turned, not happy. She looked down at the object collecting and projecting every blade of light the narrow hall provided. She stared for a few seconds, seeming confused more than enamored. Then she looked up at him.

“What the hell is that?”

“I need you, Kendra.”

“I don't think you do. You need a pet.”

Pete walked closer.

“Kendra, you're a great wife. You're my best friend... I'll do anything to get you back. Tell me what I need to do.”

“Pete, that was beautiful.”

She closed the jewelry box lid and pushed it back into his pocket.

“That was beautiful too but it’s not for me.”

“It is for you...”

“Pete...” Kendra closed her eyes and breathed deep. Pete assessed that she still loved him. Maybe it was just hope. Kendra had made it clear however that he was severely flawed in some capacity. He wasn’t providing her something she needed. He wished she would just spell it out.

“Why did you deserve your promotion?” She asked.

Pete didn’t want it to turn into another one of the puzzling phone conversations they had over the past weeks. He just stayed silent trying to think of the right thing to say. He looked into her eyes, practically begging.

Kendra turned, entered her room, and closed the door behind her.

Pete kept staring at the door with the same desperate look in his eyes as if he could see her through the partition. He put his head on the door and considered knocking. He knew she wouldn’t respond. For now he had no other option but to go home. He moped down the hall and into the elevator.

As Pete slumbered through the lobby he tried to understand Kendra’s test. Why did it matter why he got his promotion? Pete surrendered to the fact that he didn’t understand Kendra and there was now the distinct possibility that he never would.

Pete left the hotel and staggered into the parking lot as if he’d chugged a bottle of tequila. His delirium was interrupted by a pack of high school BMX bikers. They sped past him fast and furious. It reminded Pete of his childhood days before Carlos was gone.

They'd ride on sidewalks consumed by church-goers on their way to the bakery, too anxious for baseball to realize they were a nuisance.

Pete sat on a bench watching the bicycle riders. He watched the wheels turning, their spokes creating a translucent silver sphere. The teenagers jumped a ramp and threw out ridiculous curse words as they tackled the earth with painful crashes. They got up and tried again. They kept crashing, over and over again.

Pete wondered what was going through their hyper adolescent minds. He suspected each was trying to look cool in front of the others. The first to admit defeat might forever be the lesser man. They were developing that desire for respect they would continue to strive for until the day they die. Pete suspected their characters were being constructed at that very moment and that they had no earthly clue that the process was occurring.

It hit him. Pete practically jumped from the bench. He hurried back into the hotel looking like a ridiculous loose-hipped speed walker. In a minute he was outside Kendra's door. He knocked lightly.

"Go away Pete."

"The cycle of life!"

Pete had realized over the last weeks how much Kendra meant to him, how he was not a whole person without her. As he'd revisited their relationship over the years he realized how much he disrespected her in some ways. Instead of saying all that he repeated, "The cycle of life."

Finally Kendra opened the door. Pete could tell by her eyes that it wasn't an invitation to rush in and start tearing off clothes. He'd earned a conversation though.

“I want to show you something.” Kendra motioned for Pete to sit on the bed. She set up her lap top on the table beside the entertainment unit. She placed a disc into the hard drive and pushed play.

“This is a woman they brought in about a month ago.”

An image flashed on the screen. Beyond the back of Kendra’s head was a seated heavy female patient and an entourage of orderlies and other doctors. The clip came and went with the patient babbling incoherently, suddenly throwing herself into the wall and then being dragged out of Kendra’s office screaming. Kendra cut to another part of the DVD. It was an image of the same patient, this time calm and lucid.

“It’s all over now, Maureen. You’re safe. You have nothing to worry about. Can you tell me what you did?”

“One word explains it all – Ketamine. It was my vehicle of revenge.”

“Revenge for what?” Kendra asked.

“Lots of things I suppose. Revenge for my loss of life, my loss of identity, income and everything that went with it. I was selling yellow page advertising for thirty-three years. It wasn’t the internet that killed my industry and my life. It was the internet plague that did it – that national mind manipulation that suggested to business owners no one used my medium.”

“So at whom specifically was your revenge directed?”

“Every bastard that perpetuated the internet plague.”

“Your victims were only men. Why?”

“It wasn’t just that they were men. They were masculine, domineering. It was their aggression that I had to destroy, not their gender necessarily. But it wasn’t just about taking their lives. Ketamine enabled me to make it an event, spiritually and sexually.”

Pete couldn’t get any closer to the TV.

“Maureen, please tell me exactly what you did to your victims.”

“I advertised as a small business owner through different advertising mediums. Inevitably I received solicitations from advertising sales reps. I responded to the internet reps and set up meetings to do advertising.”

“What happened at those meetings?”

Maureen let out a little guilty laugh.

“Is it funny?”

“...No, it’s not.” Maureen’s expression stiffened. She became playful again.

“Well, maybe a little.”

“What did you do?”

“I took, Dr. Kendrickson.”

“What do you mean you took?”

“I already told you. I’m the Charm City Killer.”

The DVD went to black.

Pete went from a kneel to standing in half a second.

“What the fuck?”

“Relax,” she said. “She hasn’t killed anyone. She’s been alone in her house for most of the last half year.”

“Her confession had more logical motivation to it than the real killer’s confession,” Pete said.

“It happens sometimes with schizophrenia. A person reads something in a book or sees something on the news. They attach themselves to it and build their own reality around it.”

“Is it common?”

“It happens. But really nothing’s common with schizophrenia. It’s like snowflakes. Each case is unique in one way or another.”

Kendra bent down to retrieve another disc. She put it in the laptop.

“This was Maureen Steadman on Thursday.”

Another image of her patient materialized.

“Maureen, how have you been feeling?”

“Fine. I’m feeling fine.”

“Do you remember what we talked about yesterday?”

Maureen’s eyes drifted as if taking a long walk. They returned to Kendra with a child like appeal.

“We talked about the past,” Maureen said.

Pete watched in amazement the newly born kind gentle soul that contradicted the demon he had seen in the previous footage.

“She’s that different. From drugs, huh?”

“Just watch.”

Maureen's eyes moved around the room, a little curious, a little groggy.

"Maureen," Kendra said. "What have you learned from the past?"

Maureen thought about the question for a long time.

Finally Maureen moved her eyes and settled on a new point amid her strange world of lucidity and confusion, of light and black abyss.

"I think I've learned that there is no past. For me there can't be, at least not consciously."

"Do you think it's healthy to suppress your past?"

"The proverbial response disguised as a question."

Pete smiled. Maureen was obviously adept at dueling, even in a sedated fragile state.

Maureen's eyes wondered again, studying the degrees on the wall.

"What's wrong, Maureen?"

"I broke your frames."

"It's ok. I got them fixed. You remember doing that?"

"No. They told me I did it." Maureen closed her eyes and massaged them with thumb and finger. It gave her a little clarity perhaps. "Kendra, I don't know what I am from one moment to the next. This medicine makes me feel... I don't know. I don't know what I am... I wish things were simple again."

"What do you mean?"

Maureen sat back. This time she massaged her temples.

“You know – simple. The times when wars were a million miles away from our own soil, when computers were things you saw in science fiction movies, the times of yellow pages.”

“You miss the job.”

“I never thought I would, especially in the last six years when it got real hard or in the last two years when it became impossible... I think what I got out of it most wasn't the income it gave me. It was the people. Even the people I hated. Their images have become something I cherish now. I don't know why.” Maureen surrendered her eyes to Kendra. “Does that sound crazy?”

“No. It's the most sane thing I've ever heard.”

“I bet you say that to all your patients.”

Kendra shook her head and Maureen believed her. A stifled hope entered Maureen's eyes.

“Am I ever going to be able to do sales again?”

Kendra remained still and silent, assessing prospective responses carefully.

“Maureen, do you feel like taking a walk around the campus right now?”

“No.”

“And you're not going to feel like getting in your car on a cold February morning for a eight o'clock AM sales appointment... We're going to monitor your medication and your response to them and come up with the best possible solution for you so that you can be as productive as possible.”

Maureen left Kendra's eyes and stared at the floor.

Pete watched Maureen deflate. She was a broken person whose every desire and instinct was to cry. He couldn't understand why those broken eyes wouldn't shed a tear.

"Maureen." Kendra asserted.

No response.

"Maureen, look at me." She did. "I don't know how this is going to play out just like you don't. There's one constant that you can rely on."

"What's that?" Maureen asked sounding like a frightened child.

"Me," Kendra answered. "I'm going through it with you every step of the way."

Maureen reached out her hand to shake.

"You promise?"

"I promise."

They shook hands.

The screen went black. Pete stared at the laptop, his eyes glazed over.

Pete snapped out of it and turned away from her. He coughed and pretended to study the birds outside the window.

"Kendra, you were amazing."

She only looked at him. Pete couldn't tell what kind of look it was.

"You've been amazing at this for a long time, haven't you?" He asked.

The same nothing stare.

"And I've ignored it, haven't I?"

"You've degraded it," she responded firmly.

Pete didn't dare get closer as much as he wanted to.

"I'm sorry, Kendra... I haven't exactly been the perfect husband."

Kendra propped her feet up on the bed and sighed.

"I haven't been a perfect wife either."

To Pete's surprise Kendra's hand slithered across his and weaved into his fingers.

He reciprocated the squeeze and then placed his other hand on top.

"So what do we do now?" He asked.

"We live... a little wiser... together."

The husband and wife remained in their hand embrace.

Pete forgot he had a three thousand dollar diamond ring in his pocket. Kendra's touch told Pete she forgot too.

Chapter Thirty-One

Damn reality. Zoloft, Wellbutrin, Lithium, Clonazepam, Abilify. They'd slowed Maureen to a snail's pace. They exposed reality but clouded it at the same time. They stopped the madness – episodes during which her mind apparently created a reality and morality she wouldn't condone in a million years. But there were side effects. They encouraged apathy and laziness, stifled ambition of any kind.

She thought back to her selling days walking the streets, getting beat up by nine out of ten doors that told her no one used yellow pages anymore. She used these memories to justify her laziness. She'd paid her dues.

When Premi came to the hospital to visit she was more embarrassed than she was happy to see him. He came with a girl. Salt on the wound.

They sat in the lounge, watching the other tenants talking to themselves, talking to the walls.

"It's good to see you, Moe," Premi said.

"It's Maureen."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. It's good to see you too."

Premi looked at his female companion with a forced smile.

"Maureen, this is Saman. Saman, Maureen."

She was a beautiful dark skinned creature with a kind smile, just like Premi. Maureen suspected she was Indian, Middle Eastern, something like that. She shook Saman's hand.

“Nice to meet you, Maureen.” She spoke slightly broken English, probably in the U.S. ten years or less.

“Where you from, Saman?” She asked.

“I’m from Iran originally. Now I live in Owings Mills, Maryland.”

“What’s your religion?”

Premi’s uncomfortable eyes darted between the women.

“I’m Muslim. And you?”

“Oh, Christ. I have no religion.” Maureen’s eyes faded into a near sleep for several seconds.

“Are you okay, Maureen?” She asked. Premi came to Maureen’s aid and she snapped out of her nap.

“Oh,” Maureen said, realizing she’d lost a few seconds.

“And where are you from, Maureen?” Saman graciously probed as if the odd sleep interval hadn’t occurred.

“Baltimore. I’ve been in Baltimore all my life.”

“You are very lucky, very lucky indeed.” Saman’s eyes spoke of the horror’s she’d witnessed in her life.

Maureen had never felt lucky. She pondered the realities in other parts of the world that existed- the attempted assassination of a fourteen year-old Iranian girl for exercising her human right to acquire an education, the brutal stoning of women for committing adultery.

The reality smack in the face triggered something in Maureen, some chemical reaction. Maybe the meds were wearing off or maybe they were metabolizing. Either

way, she suddenly felt completely exhausted. She wished she understood half of why she felt what she did when she did.

Maureen wanted to smile wide at Saman to acknowledge that she'd won her over, just as Premi had done so quickly many months before. She could only stare. The medicine wouldn't allow anything more. She wanted to ask them how they met, how long they've known each other, and what they enjoy doing together. The words seemed too arduous. She hoped her eyes were expressing the words and smiles her lips could not manage to create at that moment of numbness.

Maureen's sessions with Kendra enabled her to discern the cause of her energy descent in certain situations at least from a psychological standpoint. Her new respect for Saman opened her mind to the couple's possible future together – marriage, kids, happiness – all the things she accepted as impossibilities in her own life. Identifying the source of her depression had become easy. Overcoming it was far more difficult, no matter what medicines they put in her or what exercises Kendra taught her.

“How's your coin collection?” Premi asked.

She looked at him with slow eyes, trying not to bring the couple down into her abyss. She summoned some energy.

“I had to sell a lot of them.”

Premi appeared as if he'd just lost his own worldly possessions. He'd witnessed her empty family room when he rescued her but it was only now that he was cognizant of the true extent of her financial decline.

“Don't worry. I still have the Double Eagle.”

“Good.”

Then there was silence. The nothing allowed her to contemplate the last thing she'd said. In any other conversation she'd ever had with Premi or anyone else she'd always referred to her pride and joy as *my* Double Eagle. Now she had referred to it as *the* Double Eagle. She didn't know why.

The next week Premi visited again and then the week after that- both times without Saman. She wondered if he hadn't brought her for Maureen's sake or hers or maybe his own. Probably all three. Premi's once a week visits quickly became once a month and eventually a card on her birthday. A truly gentle soul was he.

Maureen didn't know why she gravitated toward crocheting at the hospital, beyond simply giving her something to do. She suspected it was the same reason she loved coins. It was simple. It was nostalgic, something her Great Great Grandmother did back in 1892. Her first project was a blanket for Kendra to give to her husband on their anniversary.

Crocheting made her feel like she was contributing, creating. There was something about the stroke of the hard metal against the soft sensitive yarn. The rhythm of it. The soulfulness of it. It made her blood flow. It relaxed her.

She crocheted a pair of sox for Mrs. Toddemeier down the hall because she always walked around bare foot. She was very appreciative and wore them every single day, but on her hands.

After nearly two years living at the hospital she'd become comfortable with her place in life. Ambition and will had remained stifled but so had the anxiety and pain that

came along with them. She was content most of the time, something she could never claim while in the outside world.

Every morning she ate in the cafeteria. Sometimes she'd have conversation with someone mentally and intellectually beneath her. She'd humor them because she knew what they were going through.

It was incredible for her to think about how she treated human beings before her breakdown. She understood why she was so callous. Even now she was afraid of people outside her walls. It was easy in the home though. No one challenged her. No one made fun of her. No one hated her. It was easy to be kind.

Once in a while she'd get to have conversation with a friendly orderly or better yet Kendra. After breakfast she'd go to her room to shower and dress. Then she'd crochet for the remainder of the morning. During the cold winter months she'd sit in the lounge looking out at the snow-chastised trees. Often other patients would gather to watch her and ask questions about crocheting or what she had done before Sheppard Pratt.

Once Mrs. Toddlemeier asked her a question that had never been posed.

"How long can you make a chain?" She asked.

"I don't know. Let's find out."

Maureen began crocheting and Mrs. Toddlemeier clapped briskly, the sound muffled by her hand socks. Within fifteen minutes she had five feet of perfectly woven yarn. In a half hour it was ten feet. After two hours a crowd had gathered to witness over thirty feet of crocheted yarn stretched from Maureen to the nurse's unit at the other side of the hall. Their fun ended after Nurse Tamara tripped over the taut yarn, spilling half the floor's lunch.

Later that day Kendra entered Maureen's room unannounced as she often did. She sat across from her on the uncomfortable wall cot, feet propped up on a chair, hands behind her head. She looked more like a chic watching a baseball game on TV than a doctor in a psyche ward.

"Heard you pissed off Nurse Tamara."

"Kind of. Sorry about that."

"Don't be. It made me laugh. Doesn't happen every day, believe me."

"Nurse Tamara falling or you laughing?"

"Both," Kendra said.

"That's a shame. Maybe I'll body slam Nurse Sarah for you tomorrow."

Kendra wanted to laugh but didn't. She looked exhausted.

"You're working too hard, Kendra."

"Not really. Just tired today." She dragged herself to a more assertive seated position.

"Now you look like a psychiatrist," Maureen said.

Kendra looked down and then back up at her.

"What the fuck?" Maureen asked.

She kept staring, her eyes processing something.

"Is this serious?"

"No. Maybe. It's as serious as you want it to be."

"Then let's make it not serious," she replied. "Look, I'm sorry about Nurse Tamara... It was an accident."

"It's not about that. It's okay. Relax."

“What is it?”

“Maureen, you’re ready to move on.”

Boiling water rumbled in her belly. An onset of exhaustion made her eyes, hands and feet numb. She was about to be thrown away yet again, just like she’d been by the advertising industry, her mother, Premi and every man she’d ever desired.

She sprung from her bed, ready to either run out of the hospital or jump through the window.

Kendra stood calming.

“You don’t understand, Maureen. You can stay here as long as you want. No one’s asking you to leave.”

“You promise?” She asked, her mind feeling like a clenched fist, her body like she’d just run a marathon.

“I promise, Maureen. What did I tell you when we started this thing? I’m going with you every step of the way.”

“You did.”

“That still stands.”

“You promise?”

“I promise. Now sit down and relax.”

She sat but didn’t relax.

“Maureen, I’m just letting you know there’s an opportunity available.”

Opportunity. It was the word managers used to push failing sales reps. *You’re missing out on opportunities. This is your opportunity to shine.*

“I repeat. You can still stay here as long as you want.”

“Okay.” It finally sunk in. She didn’t have to leave.

“It’s my job to tell you about it so I’m going to do just that. It’s a new assisted living facility up in northern Baltimore County called Meadow Gardens.”

“Sounds like a brand of douche.”

“You could come and go as you please.”

“Why are you telling me about this now? ...I’m just getting the hang of my life here.”

“Maureen, a lot of the patients that come through this wing never leave. I don’t mean that literally. They come and go all the time for one reason or another. But they often go nowhere developmentally. You’re going somewhere, Maureen. I don’t know where. The facts are that you might never be able to own a home again. I don’t know if you’ll ever be able to hold down a full time job. But you have a chance. Meadow Garden will give you the best chance of becoming the best you can be.”

Maureen pondered the two years she knew Kendra, her only friend as far as she was concerned.

“What about you?”

“I don’t break promises, Maureen. Every step of the way, remember? There’s a great little café near Meadow Garden. We can have our conversations on a patio sipping tea in the sun.”

One thing life had taught Maureen was that pain was the only way to improve one’s self. It was painful starting college. It was painful starting her career in yellow pages. It would be painful to leave what had been her home for two years.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Meadow Garden was a beautiful place as its name promised. As Maureen received her orientation tour she noticed that the occupants were mental upgrades from her wing at Sheppard Pratt. Some played ping pong or pool in the recreation room. Others walked by with some kind of purpose, perhaps going to job interviews, perhaps going on dates. Everyone was dressed in clean casual clothing – no robes or hospital gowns. But their upgrade was one of competency only. She doubted any of them had the sweet soul of Mrs. Toddemeier with her coveted hand socks.

She brought her belongings into her new room. It was much larger than her room at the hospital. Her bed and other furniture had already been set up thanks to assistance from Kendra. “Every step of the way.” She was true to her word.

The walls were newly painted and the carpet was pristine. There was a framed picture of a flower in the center of the main wall above the bed. She wondered if Kendra had placed it or if it was a leave-behind from the previous occupant. She walked to the window. Her view was of a courtyard and a flower garden, trees, and a fountain. She wondered what kind of strings Kendra had pulled to get her into this place.

The mild-pitched alarm sounded on her watch – 10:00 AM. She pulled her suitcase onto the bed, unzipped it and searched for her medicine. Not in her underwear section, not with her toiletries.

Had she left them back at the hospital? That would be the end of her. She imagined herself losing it and running down the hall naked screaming “Attica” at the top

of her lungs. She'd be kicked out and lose whatever confidence and dignity she'd developed over the last two years.

Just before complete panic settled in she found them. She remembered why she packed them on the very bottom of the suitcase. They seemed more protected. Good old paranoia.

She swallowed the seven pills with the remains of a bottle of water, laid in bed and curled under the blanket. She didn't move until breakfast the next morning.

Maureen acclimated to her new home over the next days which for her meant eating at the cafeteria as fast as she could and staying in her room the rest of the time. There she stared out at the trees and thought about everything from her father to what little she could remember from her episodes as the Charm City Killer.

Most of her sexual urges had been stifled by the meds over the years but once in a while her erotic moments with Dr. Aumora would surface, even though they had been hallucinations. Dr. Aumora was one of the few details she remembered from her episodes. She even remembered his phone number.

The boredom of her room forced her to make the call, now that she had the freedom to do so. She knew what she'd find but she called anyway.

"Anderson Tent & Party Supplies. How can I help you?"

"Was there a Dr. Aumora's office at this number recently?"

"No, just us. We've been here for twenty-five years."

She smiled knowingly.

Another detail of her dark episodes invaded her. She fast tracked to the library's computer lab. She Googled Baltimore County Police Department, accessed their website, and clicked on Employee Phone Directory. With slow certain fingers Pablano was typed. Enter. No record. She tried it for all precincts one through twelve – no record. She went to the public phone in the lounge and called each precinct receiving the same pissed off dismissive phone operator. None of the twelve precincts employed a Pablano. The city precincts hadn't heard of him either.

Confirmation. Closure. Maureen pondered how powerful the human mind truly was.

Amid tossing and turning in bed that night Maureen processed that she'd lost the better part of half a year, something she already knew but could only now wrap her hands around.

The next morning the only reason she was able to get out of bed was because she was scheduled to meet Kendra for lunch at the café. She arrived at the restaurant almost an hour early just after 11 AM – anything to avoid meeting new people and explaining her life story to complete strangers at Meadow Garden, not that anyone would want to hear about it.

She drank tea on the patio just as Kendra had suggested. Unfortunately the café's relaxing sunshine Kendra described was absent. Instead it was raining. As the rain got heavier and faster the other patrons retreated from the exterior umbrellas to the indoor café. Now alone, Maureen was the most comfortable she'd been in days. Kendra showed up ten minutes past noon with an umbrella and rain coat.

“Kendra, good to see you.”

“Same here... Let’s go inside.”

“Can we stay out here?”

Kendra looked at the cluster of people inside the café.

“You’re going to have to learn to deal with society – crowds, traffic.”

“I know. Just not today, okay?”

Kendra nodded. She dropped her guard as a therapist and became a friend as she had seemed to do so often.

“How about we talk in my car?” Kendra asked.

“Perfect.”

As they walked to her car Kendra shared her umbrella.

Once inside Kendra fumbled with the herculean umbrella. She tried to shove it behind her seat. It opened up and hit her in the face.

“You okay?”

“Damnit.” Kendra held her eye. They looked at each other and started laughing.

Kendra finally wrestled the umbrella into submission and they settled into their seats.

“So. How do you like it?” Kendra asked.

“It’s different.”

“Give it some time. Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

“How’s your husband? He still like the blanket I made you guys?”

“Very much. We use it all the time.”

“Everything’s good with you two?”

Kendra paused with a smile that turned into a frown and then back into a smile.

“Ups and downs. But the best it’s been in a long time.” Her smile relaxed. “And how are you doing... really? I know how hard change can be. You hanging in there?”

“I don’t know about tomorrow or even an hour from now but right now I’m okay,” Maureen replied.

“So just like me and everyone else then.”

Kendra could always make her feel normal.

“I could hardly sleep last night. It was weird. I was starting to remember more details of my episodes. It was kind of like being in a dream while I was awake.”

“Stress can do that,” Kendra said.

Her lunches with Kendra took place every Wednesday for a couple months. Then they became twice a month and then once, until like Premi’s visits, they dried up completely. Maureen understood. They had a special bond at Sheppard Pratt. Kendra saved her mind and spirit in many ways. The reality was that she had been one of hundreds of patients she’d helped, maybe thousands in her career. Kendra had her own life to live, just like Premi. They stayed in touch through e-mail once in a while.

A year or so after their visits stopped she learned that Kendra and her husband were expecting a child. She followed her FaceBook postings over the months of her pregnancy. Then one night in the library near the ten o’clock curfew Maureen discovered they’d had a healthy baby boy. All was well with the world.

As the overhead lights dimmed around Maureen she obediently left the computer and made her way to her room.

When she got there and closed her door she looked at what had become her home for the last year and a half. The end table beside her bed had an alarm clock and a lamp. The walls were barren except for the framed flower picture the previous occupant had left that she hadn't bothered taking down. Other than the Golden Eagle positioned in the far corner on top of her bureau, there was nothing in the room that represented her, no photos of relatives or friends, no character, no love.

She sat on the bed, feeling like a hippo. She continued to study the room of nothingness and for the first time in a long time she cried. Rivers left her just as everyone in her life had ever done. She pulled up the covers to her chin and looked out the window at a full moon. Tears kept flowing. She wondered if God would ever wipe them from her cheek. Eventually she fell into a nothing sleep in her nothing room.

The next morning she woke, invigorated. The new energy she felt might have encouraged her to get some Gin and Tonics at the Applebees bar. Prior to her breakdown that would have been an absolute. Now alcohol had no appeal.

She looked around her room as she had done the night before. She knew exactly what she wanted. And she was going to use every remaining sales skill she had left to get it.

She showered, skipped breakfast, and went directly to the library to claim a computer. She Googled "dating websites" and was hit with a barrage of sites and advertisements. She knew she'd be limited since her credit cards were deactivated and her disability checks barely paid for underwear. She re-typed in "free dating websites". The results page was significantly smaller.

She clicked on a site. As she filled out her profile she suspected she did as much lying as everyone else. Body type – voluptuous. Voluptuous was four sizes ago. Age range – forties, an accurate statement in the mid 90's. Occupation – Self Employed. She assumed Self Employed might be a red flag for prospective suitors so she switched it to Sales. There was an option to download a photo. She left it empty and hit submit.

Her half honest profile was out there for a few billion people to pick up on and give her a chance. She had hope.

Maureen's morning ritual was strenuous for her. It took ten minutes of self encouragement before she could walk down the hall to the public restroom. Even though the showers were cleaned daily and spotless, images of dirt and germs flowing off the other Meadow Garden inhabitants made her gag as she cleaned herself as quickly as possible.

She arrived at the library at 7:50, ten minutes before it opened. She held her breath as the librarian opened the doors with the push of a button. Colossal automatic glass partitions retracted allowing full access to Shakespeare, Fitzgerald, and Hemmingway. Maureen bypassed them all for the computers. She violently tapped in her access code and went to the dating site. As it processed on the server she bit her lip and fidgeted with her hands. Finally her profile came up. She didn't have one response to her profile.

Checking her dating account became part of her morning ritual. After her shower, she'd dress and claim a computer at the library. After a few weeks without one response she wondered if she should download a photo, not her own of course. Perhaps she could

pirate an image of a perfect skinny lingerie model. It might get her the date but once the guy saw the antithesis of what he was expecting he'd head for the hills.

She searched the web for an image of a fifty plus overweight yet attractive looking woman on sites such as plusmodeling.com and maturemodels.com. If she could get a man interested in her same general profile of age and weight the photo represented, perhaps he'd stick around long enough to have a conversation in spite of her misrepresented face. They'd hit it off and live happily ever after. Yeah right.

After eight days with the fraudulent photo she received her first response. His name was George Bistrolesta. His photo looked good. He was also in his fifties. He had full luscious silver hair slicked back, a perfect smile, and great kind eyes. He was out of her league but maybe he wasn't the superficial type. Maybe he'd see something in her beyond her mole, maybe something she didn't see in herself. She doubted that *something* existed.

Their date was at the Applebees a couple miles down the road. As she rode the bus her face warmed as if under a sun lamp. Her hands got clammy, making for a disgusting swampy upcoming first handshake. She rubbed them on her pants and took a deep breath. It was as bad as that first yellow page sales call right out of college. She got through that. She'd get through this too. Then she thought about how she improved and lost her nervousness back then. She studied the great ones. They were relaxed, confident, and energetic on every sales call. She had embraced it and lived it through the rest of her sales career. She could embrace it now. That's all this date was after all, just another sales call.

As she sat on the bench outside the restaurant five minutes before their scheduled six o'clock date her hands began to sweat again. She couldn't help but wonder if he was going to show up or if he did if he'd stick around.

Chapter Thirty-Three

People entered the restaurant as she waited – couples, families. There were two single men that entered right around six but neither were her date. She looked at her watch and checked it with the clock above the bar- both read two minutes after. She surrendered to that ever lingering reality she'd known all her life. She was meant to be alone.

“Maureen?” It was one of the two singles that had entered the restaurant minutes before. “I didn't recognize you from your photo so I looked for you inside.”

She didn't recognize him either. Among a hundred other inconsistencies, he was as bald as a cue ball. The only luscious silver locks were some dying follicles above his ears. He dressed ultra-casual including a loud Hawaiian button down shirt. His profile claimed he was an Investment Banker. He was as much an investment banker as she was a snake charmer. He probably lived with his parents.

“Shall we eat?” He asked and reached out his hand to help her up. “You noticed the word bistro in my name I'm sure. I have to love food, right?” He smiled. At least his smile matched the photo. But its appeal had nothing to do with his features. Like the man in the photo he used to represent him, George was confident. She took his hand and they went inside.

They sat in a booth. The calmer private atmosphere made her relaxed and pressured at the same time. She knew that if she could maintain her own confidence she'd be okay, just like in a sales call.

“Sorry about my less than genuine photo on line, by the way,” he said. “I used my own pic at first but didn’t get a hit for six months.”

Thank Christ he spoke first.

“Six months? Really? I didn’t even bother putting up a photo for the first couple weeks.”

“You’ll never get anywhere without a photo.”

“I know now.”

“Where’d you find your image of lies?” He asked.

“The website for *Plus Model Magazine*,” she said. “How about you?”

“It was the “after” image in a before and after promotion on Hair Club For Men. I was a member for a while. Didn’t work so well for me.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, controlling an urge to laugh.

“Don’t be. It is pretty funny. I laughed too after I spent my three grand for nothing. Actually I cried first then I laughed.”

This time the laugh escaped her.

Squinting eyes accompanied his perfect smile. He thoroughly enjoyed her laugh. In an instant he was far more attractive than his fake photo.

A twenty-something waiter trying to pay for his sixth year of undergraduate approached.

“Good evening.” His twelve hour hangover was starting to subside and his eyes were almost clear. “My name’s Chip. I’ll be your server. Can I start you two off with something to drink?”

He looked at Maureen first.

“Do you have root beer?”

“Sure do. And you, sir?”

“I’ll take a Bud, please.”

“You got it. Here are your menus. I’ll be back in a few minutes with your drinks.”

Two years before she would have ordered a gin and tonic, the first of three over a dinner. She hadn’t had a drink since her breakdown, mostly because of fear. Every doctor told her that alcohol might counter-act the anti-psychotic effects of her medicine. If she drank she’d increase the chances of another episode. She never wanted to have an episode again so she would never drink again.

She peaked over her menu and looked at George. He caught her stare and flashed another quick confident smile. She craved his voice.

“So George, your profile indicated you’re an Investment Banker.”

He put his menu down and scratched his bald head.

“You caught me in lie number two. I used to be an Investment Banker. I lost everything in the crash, completely wiped out by 08’. The truth is I live with my parents now.”

His eyes remained unchanged, filled with confidence and energy.

“You’re amazing, George.”

“That wasn’t the reaction I was expecting after a lady killer statement like I live with my parents.”

“You’re amazing because it doesn’t bother you.”

“Why should it? I’ve done the best I can all my life and I continue to do so. I’m better off than a lot of people. Haven’t you heard there’s starving kids in India?”

Maureen was consumed by him. His baldness and weight didn't exist. His eyes owned her. His confidence owned her. Fear was starting to attack her front lines. She hoped her troops wouldn't crumble. She hoped she wouldn't screw it all up. She had a sense George wouldn't let her screw it up.

The waiter came with their drinks. They ordered entrees and were alone again.

"So your profile said you're in sales?" George asked.

"Lie number two for me. I used to be in sales."

"Oh. Is there a story behind it?"

"Basically the same story as yours."

"I'm sorry." And he truly was.

It happened that quickly for Maureen. She felt like she was drowning in wine. It was a glorious helplessness she'd only known in dreams. Her mind and the history it knew told her it was too good to be true. Would he be so charming when he discovered she was mentally ill and lived in an assisted living facility? She couldn't wait until date number four to find out. She was too old and too tired. George had laid his cards on the table. So would she.

"George, I have to tell you something."

"Okay."

"I'm not normal."

"That makes two of us."

She tried not to smile but it happened anyway.

"I wanted to tell you this now so that you didn't freak out later when you found out where I lived."

“It’s okay. Where do you live?”

Maureen couldn’t help but predict the worst. He’d leave and she’d never see him again. Her mouth was dry. All she could taste was the aftermath of sweet from her root beer’s stinging smoky cherry. Her hands were a monsoon again. She just said it.

“I live in Meadow Garden. It’s an assisted living home. I’m bi-polar and schizophrenic. Without my medicine I’d probably be rolling around on the floor singing show tunes right now.”

Her eyes adhered to the ice in her glass. She wished she had more root beer.

“So what?”

“What do you mean, so what?”

“Based on what you told me, you just have to keep taking your medicine. That’s not so bad. Starving kids in India, remember?”

Maureen’s eyes told him she wanted to be with him forever. Her silence spoke louder than her own voice could ever be.

George slid his hand across the table. He rested only the tips of his fingers on hers. She closed her eyes and let out a breath that seemed to relax every muscle in her body. Then his skin ascended her fingers. His hands were smooth but not soft, masculine but not hardened by calluses, a man who could fix things around the house but couldn’t build a house. His whole hand covered hers. It felt like the warmest blanket enveloping her naked body in the middle of winter.

“Maureen, you’re far more beautiful than that photo.”

It was on, or so she hoped. Her stifled sex drive had returned. She had no idea how to respond to such a monumentally kind compliment. She’d never had one before.

“That was lie number three. Wasn’t it?”

He just looked into her eyes without a response. She decided she’d never seen such honesty.

Chapter Thirty-Four

After four months of dating, she and George made the plunge to leave their individual situations of dependency. They moved into a tiny one bedroom apartment in Dundalk – the only area in the Baltimore Metro they could afford that wasn't in a war zone. Even the Dundalk Vista Apartments were a stretch for them financially with his dismal unemployment benefits and her more dismal disability aid. They only had basic cable on a thirty inch boxy anti-flat screen they picked up for twenty bucks at Goodwill. They watched a lot of DVD's on a player also courtesy of Goodwill. Thankfully George was a big fan of Bogey and other old black and whites. She got him into *The Sopranos*. They ate a lot of mac and cheese and bologna sandwiches.

George worked every day to find a job. He half heartedly posted with recruiters in the financial sector. But he told her he didn't expect anything there. No one was looking for a guy close to sixty whose resume included losing his last clients millions. He did get a job selling insurance for a small local broker the second month they lived together. After three weeks his company went out of business.

On a Friday at six o'clock George was still searching the internet for opportunities, a search that had started at seven am. He'd also gone on two job interviews that day, neither of which George felt great about. In spite of getting nowhere over and over again he kept at it.

As she watched him her body curled into a ball on the couch. Her eyes became heavy. Her mouth sulked.

“Hey babe, how about instead of spaghetti tonight I bake my famous pizza sandwiches?” He asked. “We could cut up some green peppers and onions to put on them.”

She stayed motionless and silent.

“Hello? Anybody home?” He turned from the computer and saw her death curl.

“Hon, are you okay?” He left the desk and kneeled beside her on the floor. Her portly Prince Charming. She caressed his cheek.

“I watch what you do every day. I wish I could be like you, like I was before.”

A lesser man might have tried to say the right words. One false verbal misstep might send her into an even deeper depression that could last for days. A man with less cool might have pressed her with questioning. Her man just stayed beside her and listened.

“When I was selling yellow pages I had my off days just like anyone, but I got up every day and did it. Now my mind is just... When I think about a resume or actually going to a job and dealing with people I’m just overwhelmed. It’s as if my nerves were those of a child who’d never worked a day in its life.”

George put his hand on hers. She took a deep breath feeling pathetic about the question she was about to pose.

“Why did God do this to me?”

George’s eyes changed somehow. A new sinew occupied them as he responded.

“The same reason he made me bald. If I wasn’t I probably would have never met you. If I had those flowing luscious locks of the guy in the photo I would have been scooped up by Cindy Crawford back in the nineties.”

She sighed, the closest thing to a laugh possible.

“I don’t know anything about that yellow page salesperson. I love you as the person you are today, this moment.”

“You’re a good man, George.”

He got up on the couch and wrapped around her torso like a warm cat. She felt like napping in that exact position. She suspected he did too.

“I want to tell you something, Maureen.” His voice was sleepy but there was a purpose behind his words that told her he wasn’t surrendering to dreamland until he said his peace.

“I know I look like nothing bothers me. Believe me, I wish I could take you out to nice restaurants. I wish I could find a job. I figured out how to get through the disappointment a long time ago.”

She caressed his head lying on her hip.

“The past means absolutely nothing, ten years ago, ten minutes ago. There’s only now.”

She wished someone would have said that to her forty years ago.

“Jesus,” she said in a half sleep. “You sound like Socrates and Dr. Phil all rolled into one.”

“Yeah,” George said yawning. “I have my moments.”

They napped on the couch, his head on her hip, their hands united with warm still fingers.

The next morning after breakfast they took a walk around the large pond about a half mile from their apartment. It was a strange little paradise amidst a concrete purgatory. There were a few kids fishing even though the pond was never stocked with fish according to George. It had more floating beer cans than it did trout. It was still as peaceful a walk as they were going to find. There was a grassy bank on the furthest corner of the pond, below it near the water a tiny shore of stones. It was George's favorite place. She sat on a bench above and watched him skip rocks across the water. The sun was bright, creating a collage of illumination on the water's surface. As she watched the man-child skip rocks she thought about what George said the evening before – forgetting the past, embracing the moment. She'd been thinking about it all morning.

She had more energy that moment than in years and walked down to the water's edge beside George.

“Hey, what are you doing down here?” He asked, happy and surprised that she made it down for the first time.

“I missed you... So tell me how to skip rocks.”

“Okay. First you have to find a nice flat round rock. Anything else will just sink.”

George searched the bank but Maureen didn't. Instead she watched him with a knowing expression.

“I found a stone when I was a kid that was so flat and perfectly round that it skipped twenty-one times. Nobody has ever beaten my record as far as I know.”

“And I'm sure you have video surveillance installed at every lake, river and pond across the world to confirm this.”

“You don’t need proof when you have legend. A couple months ago I got a rock to skip fifteen times. I’m starting to wonder if it’s even possible to break my old record.”

“Modest bastard,” she said.

“You want a shot at the title?”

“Sure.”

She walked about the bank and searched for the perfect stone as George described it. She found the flattest most round rock in sight. She threw it side-armed as hard as she could just as George had done. It skipped once, twice, three, four times. It died at ten skips.

“You’re a natural.”

“Thanks,” she replied.

They skipped rocks for a long time. She was introduced to George’s ferocious competitive spirit. He beat her every time, although she came close to victory often.

The sun and the physical activity eventually sidelined them onto the grass.

“I bet you were one hell of an investment banker,” she said. George sat up leaning his forearms on his knees and looking out at the water, glistening with the sun.

“Not good enough,” he said.

Maureen knew his sorrowful look wasn’t about his own career’s demise. He didn’t regret losing his fortune and being relegated to living with his parents. His eyes mourned the destruction of the clients for whom he failed in his view.

“I’m positive you were a great salesperson.” That perpetual gleam returned to his eyes.

She thought about it. There were years of greatness sporadically in the beginning of her career and some more consistent great years in the middle of her career. Then of course came the internet accompanied by several years of apathetic mediocrity. Then the recession joined the internet and hopelessness had nowhere to go but toward mental breakdown.

“Maybe,” she replied. “Years ago. When I think back to it all, it’s strange... I wasn’t friends with any of my co-workers. But for some reason now I appreciate them. I met some pretty cool characters along the way.”

“I bet. Like who?”

“Where to start. There was Sammy Tolbert who used to come in as Santa Clause for all our office Christmas parties back in the eighties. He was skinny as a rail and drunk as a skunk. His Santa beard would hang off him and pillows would be falling out of his red coat. He would pass out joke gag gifts to all the employees. Amanda our nineteen-year-old secretary got a baby bottle. Stuff like that.”

“Human resources departments might not approve of that these days,” George said.

“No shit.”

“What did he give you?”

She thought back. There was a void in memory for a moment. Then it came to her. As she looked over the water she realized how her life-long self inflicted isolation had robbed her of what might have been some great friendships. In the water she saw the images of her fellow employees dancing at that party and pulling on Sammy’s fake beard.

“He didn’t give me anything.”

Maureen looked to the sky.

“Over the years I saw a lot of bullshit in my career. That’s all I saw. There were probably some great people that came and went who I never even talked to. Outside of Premi I never gave any of them a chance.”

George nestled against her and took her hand.

A bird soared so close to the water’s surface that it nearly crashed into it. She wondered why a bird would hover so close to danger. Looking for food, most likely. But just maybe it wanted to near a world that wasn’t its own, a world with possibilities beyond its carnal knowledge. After skimming the water’s surface the creature extended its wings. It ascended and dissipated into the clouds.

Maureen stood and walked toward the water.

“Are you okay?”

She searched her pocket and pulled out a small object that reflected a blinding gold light as the sun enveloped it.

“At least I have this to show for it all.”

“The Golden Eagle.” George gasped. “Why isn’t it in that case? Can’t it get damaged?”

“Relax. It’s fine. It will always be fine.”

She walked closer to the water.

“What are you doing?”

She kept walking.

“Maureen?”

She got to the water's edge and stepped into the throw with everything she had. As the Golden Eagle skipped across the cascading sun on the water's surface she counted each and every kiss it gave to the wet serenity. Never had there been a more perfect romance.

"Are you crazy?!" George rushed to her. They both were silent as they let the Golden Eagle finish making love to the water's surface. Its energy subsided and the gold rested, descending into its mate. Forever.

The water became gold as did the sky.

George looked at her solemnly.

"Sorry for asking if you were crazy."

"It's okay. I would have asked the same thing." She pulled him closer.

They walked across the bank enjoying the golden world around them.

"By the way, I counted twenty-two skips. I broke your record," she said.

"I only counted twenty-one."

"Twenty-two."

"Twenty-one."

"Twenty-two."

As they walked Maureen thought of the anger that existed deep in her psyche that revealed itself during and before her episodes. It seemed a lifetime ago, a completely different existence.

Ultimately the anger, desperation, and isolation that resulted in her episodes could be attributed to one word. Beauty.

George Bistrolesta was bald, overweight, slightly bow legged, and had one lazy eye. He was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

They often heard rap music blaring through the paper-thin walls of their tiny one bedroom apartment. Maureen began to enjoy the sound.

THE END