

The Night Shift
(Tales of Westgate #4)

by

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The Night Shift

One

I guess it's lucky that I committed myself to moving out to Westgate sight unseen to take the job, because my first look at the place was almost enough to make me wanna turn back. Not that it was such a bad little town – it was cute, in its own way – but after Toronto, it felt to me like a coma with buildings. Really small, old buildings. But this was my new start, and things were bound to be different, right?

So I met Sheila at the landlady's place to sign the lease and pay first and last month, and then a few days later Sheila brought a little rental truck to my apartment in Toronto's Little Italy and helped me move out my few boxes and few sticks of furniture. (Did I mention that Sheila is an angel? I will, often enough, so get used to it.)

I managed to keep my Honda Civic right behind the rental all the way down the highways and back roads, windows open and wind beating at my hair cuz my AC was busted. Finally we reached what I guessed they would call the outskirts of Westgate. I recognized a couple of factories as we cut through the industrial park – Sheila had brought me out here last time to show me her dance studio close by: my new day gig. On through, into a more residential stretch, and then I followed the truck onto Larkin Avenue and my new home.

The house was one of those little things they built in the sixties: kinda square, gray roof, siding mixed with bricks the colour of Cheerios, wide windows. Nothing fancy, but nothing pricey, so that worked for me. Sheila managed to back the truck all the way down the sloped driveway beside the house to the back entrance, which was the door to my apartment – I tell ya, I was impressed with how she could handle that thing, she made it look easy. All these years and she had skills I still didn't know about.

We figured we could use a breather before unloading, and Sheila said there was a cute little donut shop that she liked, with good coffee, a few streets away. So she got into the Civic and navigated me there. (But can you believe this? Here we were, 1990, and Westgate still didn't have a Tim Horton's we could go to – I mean, we were still in Canada, weren't we? It made me feel like a time traveller.)

We ended up at a little strip mall and went into Donut Villa. It was a small narrow

place, empty now except for us, with only those spinning stools at a counter to sit at, so we sat. A big, beefy, shaggy teenage guy was behind the counter, and he took our order without too much to say for himself. Sheila said this place had the best banana creams in the world, so I figured I'd check one out. After I got my coffee ready, I took a test sip and decided yeah, nice.

Sheila gave me a look as I lit up.

I gave her a look back. "Hey, I'm cuttin' back! Honest!"

"Uh-huh."

"I never had one the whole way out here."

She twisted that wide mouth of hers. "Yeah, okay, I guess that *is* better for *you*. Stick with it, girl."

I made a point of exhaling away from her. "Apology accepted." We both laughed a bit, and I felt warm inside. I missed her; it was good to be with her again. All those years we worked together in Brant Benson and the Glories – great times, long gone. (And I can see you scrunching your face up, thinking, "Am I supposed to have heard of them?" I doubt it, so relax.)

Sheila rolled her shoulders and neck. She worked hard with me today, and was going to again soon, but she didn't look all that tired. Even at forty, she still had a lot of stamina – which I guess is a good idea, if you're a dance teacher, right? She kept her figure pretty well, too. Her hair was maybe the only clue that any years had passed for us: she had her afro buzzed down to an inch thick now, and at the temples it looked like someone took a hint of white spray paint to it. Still a handsome woman, and still someone I looked up to.

"When you figure you gonna paint that joint, Ronnie?" she said. "You know you got to, right?" (Sheila was the only one allowed to call me "Ronnie" – I was "Rhonda" to everyone else, even Brant.)

"A.S.A.P., I hope!" The way I remembered it, the combined kitchen-living room was ocean blue and the bedroom chocolate brown – in a basement apartment with not all that much light, no less. This gave me a pretty good idea that the tenants were allowed to repaint, cuz no landlord in their right mind would choose those. And it also told me that I would need to change it soon if I didn't wanna go

nuts.

"There's a hardware store not far from the studio; you can get paint there."

I just nodded, and we ate and drank for a bit. I think the kid was giving us the eye once or twice, or maybe I just wanted to think that. But I didn't wanna ask Sheila to help paint: she was doing more than enough for me already as it was. I figured I could tackle it myself – hell, I was thirty-six and fit, and the place was little. Plus I was used to doing things on my own by now.

We talked a while about the schedule coming up. Today was Sunday, and she was giving me Monday off to rest, settle in, and go over my notes. Tuesday I would start teaching my first classes. Not many students signed up for any of them yet, but Sheila didn't look worried: she promised me they would come. I hoped so – I wanted to do something worthwhile. I wanted to feel like I was worth having around.

Finally we figured we'd better stop putting it off, went back to my place, and unloaded the truck together. My basement apartment had stayed fairly cool, even in the June heat, so it was an easier job than emptying out the old place was. It didn't even take an hour to get everything out of the truck. (I live light and simple, always did.) And Sheila insisted on helping me put my bed frame back together, and getting my bed all ready for the night, before we left. An angel, right?

I followed the truck back to the rental drop-off, then Sheila got into her car and I tailed her back to her apartment, just to say a proper good-bye. Pretty sure we both felt glad we didn't have to do this every day – maybe it didn't destroy us, but by now we were feeling it. I could see it in her eyes.

When she got out in front of her building, I got out, too, so I could go around and give her a big hug while I thanked her. She gave me an extra squeeze and kissed the top of my head. Then we pulled back to look at each other, and her eyes were so warm when she said, "It is so good to have you back, Ronnie."

My voice scraped a bit when I said, "Same here," and I had to blink back. She made me feel wanted. And I hadn't felt that in.... well, a few years.

When I got back to my place, I just stood for a while and looked around, feeling that spooky silence that always happens when you're alone and somewhere new. The house was built into an incline so that the front door was at ground level at the sidewalk, but the back door into the basement – my door – was also at ground level. So my windows along that wall were full size: there was even a sliding glass door from the living room out onto a patio. And it was still light out, cuz we were only a week or so away from the official start of summer. But the dark paint on those walls sucked up all that light coming in like some kind of magic trick. Yep, I needed to paint this place soon. Crack that whip, Rhonda.

I also needed to eat, but had to scavenge from what little I brought with me, so dinner ended up being peanut butter crackers, fruit, and instant coffee. (Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous, right?) There was a big grocery shop on my to-do list for tomorrow. But for this once, for now, this would do.

After I ate, I spent a while sprawled in the loveseat, sometimes glancing over some notes and sometimes gazing out the big living room window and patio door. It was a nice back yard. Cozy. Not huge: the patio took up a lot of it, and there was room for one tree, but a nice thick shade tree, at least. There was a hedge along one side, privacy fences along the other side and the back. Didn't look like anyone could see in. And it seemed like it got a lot of sun. It made me feel like I was gonna like being here. Even made me smile a bit.

After a while, I got a little tired of the silence. So I dug out a few of my tapes and my boombox and set them on my little bookshelf. That was a nice boombox – decent sound. Brant gave it to me when I left. And I had finally gotten to the point where sometimes it didn't make me think about him.

I stuck in a Supremes tape, started it up, and then I danced. Yep, maybe I was beat after spending a day moving, and maybe I was only dancing in second gear, but I danced. All by myself, in that dim little room. And I smiled big. God bless The Supremes: pretty much without fail, they still made me dance like I was twenty, and feel like I was ten.

Two

Sleeping in on a Monday felt sweet – I had to remind myself that evening shifts were my new normal now. All my life I've been a bit of a night owl, so this job was gonna be a better fit for me. After more fruit and coffee for breakfast, and digging out my yoga mat for a quick warm-up, I was ready to put my face on and hit the day.

I remembered that there was a grocery store at that little plaza where Donut Villa was, so I went there first, and spent a lot more on groceries than I normally would – but that's how it works when you're settling in to new digs, right? My cashier seemed friendly, so I asked her if there was a Sally Ann in town, cuz I had plans for it. She was so pleased to give me directions, you'd think that I owed her twenty bucks and just paid her back.

Once I was done, I did a quick scan down the length of the plaza, and realized that this would be a very handy place for me in future. It had all kinds of things I would need: a convenience store for after hours, a hair salon, a laundromat, and a little indie pizzeria as well as Donut Villa. I even popped into the stylist for a second to make an appointment for tomorrow morning, with a lady named Magnolia. Part of my plans for a new start included a new 'do – it'd been a while and I felt like I was getting stale.

I made a quick run back home to load up the fridge and shelves before my frozen things melted on me, then made my way down through the neighbourhood til I reached what Westgate called downtown. First thing I noticed was that it was way easier to find a parking spot than back home. Second thing was no meters: it looked like all the parking was free. I looked around for a second for any sign of the Pearly Gates, cuz I musta died and gone to heaven.

But once I got out of the car and stretched my legs, I realized it was a pretty pokey heaven. No sign of anything taller than a tree, really: not what I thought of when someone said downtown. Actually, it reminded me some of Little Italy. A lot of small indie shops, not many franchises, all cramped together in narrow old brown buildings that looked like they had been sitting there unchanged for fifty years. Not exciting, but cozy, at least. I guess.

In the Sally, I picked up a couple of lamps, cuz I clearly had not brought enough for my sweet little dungeon. Also scored one of those chaise lounges that had a

tight cloth seat instead of those plastic strips woven together. And a couple of fat trashy romance paperbacks for a quarter each, to read while I stretched out on that chaise lounge out on the patio. Westgate was becoming more and more like my paradise that way: I hoped these were good omens for my future here.

I headed back home without doing anything about getting the paint. Well, I did swing past that hardware store near the dance studio, but once I saw that it was one of those big box places, I decided to skip it for the time being. To be honest, I sorta preferred dealing with little funky businesses when I had the choice. That was one thing Westgate had going for it: lots of little funky businesses. (Plus, you should probably know this about me: I can be a procrastinator. It's my one vice. Along with cigarettes. And trashy novels. And sometimes partying too hard. Actually, now that I think about it, I guess I am mostly vice. But at least I got nice legs.)

After I set up my new lamps and put the chaise lounge out on the patio, where it looked totally at home, I made myself a decent lunch. Then I decided I was gonna take advantage of the gorgeous, hot, sunny day. I rummaged in my suitcases – (I needed to unpack my clothes, soon) – til I found my white bikini. Got changed, dug through the box of bathroom stuff, and took out my sunscreen. Slicked myself up, also grabbed a big towel and a fat book, slid open the patio door, and spread myself out for a long session of sun worship.

It was so peaceful: I couldn't remember it ever being this quiet back home. Just a few birds, once in a while what sounded like a truck a couple blocks away. For a while there was a lawnmower going, somewhere off down the street. Sometimes I took a slow casual read of a page or two, sometimes I let my mind wander to tomorrow and my classes and figured I'd go over my notes again tonight, sometimes I think I nodded off.

I heard a rustling over in the hedge, and I took a lazy glance over that way. Someone was peeking over the top of the hedge at me – he looked familiar. After a second, I thought it was the kid from Donut Villa yesterday. Couldn't quite see the bottom of his face. But maybe. He was taller than I remembered, though.

I just let my eyes drift shut again for a few seconds, then tried to sneak a look out the corner of my eye without him catching me. Yep, still there. And now I was

pretty sure it was him. Then I heard a few snips, like he was busy trimming the hedge, or maybe pretending to.

I decided that it was about time my legs got some more sunscreen, and I tried not to smile. I made a long slow show of deliberately squeezing the white goop into my hand, then lifting my leg, displaying it – pointing my toe and everything – and sliding my hand up and down it. Way slower and more thorough than I needed to be. I repeated the show with the other leg, and heard a little cough from behind the hedge.

Finally I turned my head just a little toward him and called out, "Hey, neighbour."

He jumped, and for a second it looked like he was gonna duck down behind the hedge and try to hide. But he stopped himself, cuz we both knew how dumb that would be, and he blushed a bit, and said, "Uh, hey."

I turned to the edge of the chair and stood up, slow, like I was doing a number on stage. For a few seconds I just looked at him, steady, and gave him a little smile. He blinked a lot. I started walking across the lawn toward him, a deliberate walk, a stage walk, meant to tell him and the world that I was the queen of this planet, and it was only my mercy that let him stay here on it and behold me.

While I walked through the grass, I said, "No school today?"

"It – " He cleared his throat. "Uh, it's finals now."

I stopped far enough away from the hedge that he could still see most of me. "Ah, right. So they got you doin' yard work when you should be studyin'? Tsk."

He chuckled, kinda uncomfortable. "Ahhhh, it's okay, I, I'm gonna study later."

"Good." I gave him a nod. "What's your name?"

"Dougie – Doug."

"Nice to meet you, Dougie-Doug. I'm Rhonda."

He tried to smile, and finally took a breath. "Hey."

I looked around me for a second, then right back into his eyes. "Seems like a nice neighbourhood so far, eh?"

"It's okay, yeah. Y-you're new here, right?" Good, he was trying to make conversation back, bless him.

"Uh-huh, very. So I might need you to, uh, show me the ropes sometimes. That okay with you?"

"Oh! Yeah! For sure, yeah."

"Great, thank you. So don't be surprised if I bother you sometime." I smiled a little bigger for him. "But I better not keep you from your work, right?"

"Um, yeah, right." And he made a couple of snips.

I turned and did my queen of the world walk back to the chaise lounge, positive that his eyes were glued to me just like before. Guys that age were so intense – I always got a kick out of it. I settled back down and got back into my book. But now and then, while I could still hear the hedge clippers, I'd pause and make a lazy stretch, without looking over that way. Finally, though, the sounds stopped, and then I couldn't see Doug any more. So I made a little sigh and let my belly relax.

And I could feel myself grin.

After dinner and dishes, I made a point of unpacking more, getting some of my clothes and bathroom things put away better. Last time I moved, I ended up living out of suitcases and boxes for almost a month – I didn't wanna stay in that rut. I gave my tap shoes a wipedown to get them shiny for their big day. Then I put some music on, settled in the loveseat next to one of the new lamps, and went over my notes again while I had a cigarette. (Okay, two.) I was more nervous about starting classes tomorrow than I really wanted to think about, but I reminded myself that Sheila coulda hired someone else. I knew that she figured I'd be good enough at this, so I figured I should listen to her. She wasn't dumb.

In between my tunes, I heard basketball sounds coming from the other side of

the hedge, which was kinda soothing somehow – summery. And sometimes I could hear footsteps of people upstairs moving around, but I was used to that. Otis Redding was on the boombox tonight – sometimes my shoulders would move in time with him. Once in a while, without meaning to, I sang along. Brant liked Otis, we used to do a few of his numbers, and so I found myself singing my backup parts on those songs. I used to sound so much sweeter back then, though. I blamed the cigarettes for that, but maybe there was more to it. Maybe it was time passing, too, I dunno.

Three

I set my alarm to make sure I didn't sleep in for my appointment on Tuesday morning, but it turned out I didn't need to. It was a kinda rough night and I slept spotty – a bit nervous about my classes in the evening, I figured. So I shut the alarm off five minutes before it was due to go, pulled myself together in a loose top and airy slacks, and decided to walk over to the little plaza and see this Magnolia. If she panned out, then this was a great stroke of luck, finding myself a new, local stylist so soon. It reminded me of so many other people I would need to look for in the next month or so: new doctor, pharmacist, dentist maybe. I knew of people who were willing to commute the hour-plus one way to go back to Toronto and see their old people. But that idea didn't sit so well with me, and to be honest I wasn't that dearly attached to any of mine. I'd just as soon get my needs met close by. And this morning was when I started that.

The name painted on the salon window read *Faux Naturel*: cute. Inside was all white and chrome and glass, trying hard to shake off the official Westgate style of small and brown. Their P.A. had dance music cranked up high enough that I almost expected spinning coloured lights inside to go along with it. Which reminded me: I needed to find out if this town had any dance clubs, cuz all work and no play makes Rhonda a cranky kitty.

Magnolia greeted me with a firm handshake and professional smile. She was a tall, lanky lady in black, with her bleached hair up in a poofy wedge that kinda underlined her, saying *yep, I'm tall, baby*. She had big sleepy eyes, a sharp nose, and a thin, sly grin that looked like *she* knew something that *you* wanted to – just wicked enough that I liked her.

She sat me down, draped me, and ran her long fingers over my hair like a breeze. "This hair is so thick and succulent," she said. "What could you possibly want to do to change it?"

"Time for a change anyway," I said. "Had these curls for years now. I mean, just cuz I teach dancing doesn't mean I have to look like *Dirty Dancing*, right?"

She laughed. "So then what were you thinking of?"

"I was thinkin' short, spiky, easy to take care of. In my dream it's like I towel dry, run my fingers through it, and I'm done."

She made a thoughtful nod. "Well, if you're okay with putting some product on your fingers first, then yeah, I can make that happen for you. You've got a nice head for that look."

"Why, thank you. And they probably already told you I want a new colour, too: I'm thinkin' sumthin like cotton candy pink."

"Whoa!" Magnolia's eyes got wide and she gave me a smile that looked admiring. "They should've warned me about you!" She kinda slapped the backs of her fingers against my shoulder. "No one told me I was getting a punk rocker in here this morning!"

"So can you make that happen, too?"

"Pretty much. I might recommend more like a magenta – a warm one – just so it doesn't get faded-looking quite so fast, but I'll let you see it and choose before we do it. But first the *Dirty Dancing* curls are outa here!"

So she laid me back into the sink for a quick wash, and I got that sweet footrub feeling and drifted a bit, because you do. Then a brisk towel-dry and I was sitting up watching her tower over me. Her scissors sounded quick and efficient, and her fingers in my hair felt like more footrub. I felt like I could do this every day, but my wallet disagreed.

"So you're new here, right?" said Magnolia without slowing down.

"Uh-huh. Just moved into town a couple days ago."

"Oh yuh? Where did you come from, then?"

"Toronto – Little Italy, up by St. Clair."

"Ah-hah." The way she said that and nodded told me that she didn't really know where that was. "So you came here to get away from all the hustle and bustle of the big city."

"I guess. Mainly cuz I got a new job here – starting today, actually."

"Oh wow. Well, congratulations. You said you're a dance teacher, right? Are you at that place up by the, um, industrial whatsit?" And she waved in the general

direction of Sheila's studio.

"Uh-huh."

"Yeah, that's the only dance teaching place in town that I know of. Might be the only one here, I dunno."

"Well, good," I said, "cuz I don't need competition."

She grinned. "I wanted to take ballet when I was little but I never did. My mother said I was too tall for it anyway. Is that what you teach?"

"Ah, no, I do jazz and tap."

"How cool is that?" said Magnolia. "And is that what you were doing back in Toronto?"

"Actually, no. Believe it or not, I was a receptionist at some consulting firm for a couple years – never had any idea what those guys even did there." (Somehow it felt a little too soon to start bragging about all those years I spent singing and dancing before that gig.)

She half-smiled. "Well, I bet you're going to have a lot more fun at this new job, Rhonda. And you already *look* more fun." She finger-fluffed my hair and turned me to face the mirror wall.

It was like she read my mind. It was exactly the length and the wildness I wanted. It looked like she had trimmed ten years off of me. I grinned big when I saw myself, and I could see her looking pretty happy with it, too. But then I noticed all my smile lines and kinda pressed my lips tight together and looked down. "That's gorgeous," I said. "Thank you."

Once she got the bleach in and my head covered up, Magnolia sat me off to the side next to a stack of magazines. Lots of old issues of *People* and *Us* and *Chatelaine*, so I was all set for a while. I didn't always know who these people were in them, but the stories were a bit of a hoot, anyway. So I parked a magazine on my knee and started flipping through slow. There was an ashtray beside me but I chose to behave. At least for my first visit.

Soon after, a slim young guy, maybe twenty, not too tall, came in and called out, "Hey, Maggie!" Magnolia turned and grinned when she saw him, then she called back, "Hey yourself, Robin." I couldn't help noticing how gracefully he walked, how he carried himself with confidence, across to her. He was wearing a black T-shirt with something on the front that I didn't get a good look at, blue jeans with bits of paint on them, cheap sneakers, and one of those cloth bucket hats guys wear when they go fishing – but the hat was all covered in dribbles and slashes of paint, in a zillion colours.

He pulled the hat off and I got a better look at his features, his mussed, white-blond hair. He wore it short and feathery around the sides, but piled up in a quiff on top. Not quite Billy Idol tall, but striking. And his features were so smooth and delicate, his skin so pale, he looked like a painting from a hundred years ago. I stopped reading and just gaped. This Robin was such a beautiful boy that I couldn't look away.

He asked Magnolia about coming in for a quick trim, and she said she could squeeze that in while she was waiting for me. She sat him down and draped him fast, then took the scissors to him for a dry trim. While she worked, they gabbed easily – I overheard something about "the store" which I guess was where he worked. He broke into smiles while he talked with her, easy and often. Gentle and relaxed. He didn't notice me watching him: his eyes were always either closed or looking at Magnolia's. When he was turned away from me, I looked at him in the mirror, as well as I could. I dunno what it was about him, but it was like a bit of magic.

They were done in what felt like only a few minutes. Magnolia offered to put some product on for him, but he said that he was only gonna put his hat on it and mess it up anyway. So he just paid her and headed out – but while he did, he glanced over in my direction and flashed me a quick, friendly little smile. And then he was out in the sun.

Once my bleach was rinsed out, I decided to listen to Magnolia's advice and go for the magenta. Pink enough, and it made more of a statement, maybe. While she was putting the dye in, I asked her if she still liked to dance.

"Oh yuh," she said. "I'm at The Station like two or three times a week."

"And that is?"

"Oh. A dance club – in the basement of the Ambassador Hotel, downtown. Maybe basement doesn't sound that great, but it's actually pretty good. Good sound, the floor is big, they have like theme nights and all that, and not too expensive. Oh, and the ceiling isn't low!"

"I can see how that would be important to you," I said.

She flicked her fingers at my shoulder again and grinned. "It's also a pretty easy place to meet guys, if you're up for that."

"As it happens, I can be."

She sighed. "Uh-huh. Meeting *great* guys is something else again, but, guys: yeah."

"Speaking of, who was that you were trimming a while back?"

"Robin? He's some artsy guy, comes in fairly often. He's, ah, a character, a bit off the wall sometimes – we have a few of those in town, I guess. But yeah, he's someone you notice, ya know?"

"Yeah, I, uh, I liked his hat," I said.

Four

When I got home after, still smelling like a perfume counter let off its leash, I grabbed a quick lunch. Nothing too heavy, though, cuz my tummy was still a little fluttery from anticipating. Afterward I figured that warming up and letting off a little steam at the same time would be a good idea, so I got my tap shoes on and went out onto the patio.

There was a lot of cloud cover just then, so I didn't have the direct sun baking me while I tried this – that's all to the good. I didn't plan to do too much, cuz I didn't wanna chip up the patio stones. (I needed to get myself a practice board pretty soon, I guess.) But there was a gorgeous breeze, and I rolled my neck and shook my shoulders out while my feet started up a smooth easy clicking. Once you got going with this, it was easy to zone out and find some peace.

Sometimes I thought about what I was gonna say to my classes today, and sometimes I thought about not much. I could hear birds over in the tree, and when they sang I tried to toss in little accents to go with them. At one point I could feel that I broke into a smile. This was all gonna be good. Maybe not perfect, but okay.

As I looked around myself, watching the clouds, I happened to notice someone over behind the hedge. Not Doug – but the same strong square face, the same pale gray eyes, the same sandy hair. But where Doug's hair fell down past his jawline and over his eyes, this hair was short, bristly, with some gray, and the hairline went back a ways. Dougie-Dad would be my guess. He was kinda glaring at me, as if seeing a person in the backyard next door was a shock, or an offence. Then again, I guess finding out you have a punk tap dancer next door isn't something you expect to deal with every day.

I called over to him without stopping, and gave him a little salute. "Hey, neighbour."

He scowled a bit.

"Oh, I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

He blinked, and just watched me like he was ready in case I decided to attack him.

Just then I heard footsteps coming down the driveway and Sheila's voice call out, "Ronnie?" Dougie-Dad turned to look toward her, then he made a retreat behind the hedge. I stopped dancing when I saw Sheila come round the corner. She was wearing an orange dashiki dress that kinda drifted behind her, and in one hand she had a narrow glass vase with a rose in it. She was saying, "Girl, when are you gonna get a phone?" Then she stopped dead and just stared at my hair.

I shrugged. "Bell guy is supposed to come tomorrow. He better."

She broke into a happy little laugh. "Oh, baby, I know you told me you wanted to go pink but I didn't know if you'd actually go for it! Ronnie, you look spectacular!"

I felt like I maybe blushed a bit. "Thanks. Um, what's with the flower?"

"Oh, this is just a little good-luck gift for your first day." As I thanked her, she handed it to me and kissed the air just above my head. "But mostly I came over to make sure you weren't sleeping in!"

I chuckled. "Not even close. But hey, what am I, a teenager, you gotta worry about that?"

"Well, you look like one now, baby!" And I admit, it sorta tickled me to hear that.

That evening, after eight, when the last kids went home and we all went back to get cleaned up and changed, Sheila said she was treating me to dinner out – a sort of combo celebration and debriefing, you could say. She invited Candy to join us, but that girl already had a date for the evening.

(And if you ever saw Candy, you wouldn't wonder at that for even a second. Picture a tall cartoon of a centerfold and give her a red bouffant, and that was basically our Candace to a T. But that blue-eyed airhead face would fool you completely: she had warm poise, was a competent ballet teacher, and a whiz at keeping the office organized on top of that. I knew that Candy was worth more to the studio than I would ever be, so bless her.)

I followed Sheila's car south to downtown, also trying to keep an eye out for the Ambassador like Magnolia told me about. As it happened, I did spot it shortly

before we arrived, and filed that away. I felt like I was already starting to get my bearings around here, cuz I saw other places I recognized – so now I thought I could find my way there from the Sally Ann. We found parking (even easier than I did at high noon yesterday) in front of a very settled-looking little restaurant and went in.

If this place ever had a dinnertime rush, that was clearly over by now: it was maybe one-quarter full, so grabbing a table was no problem. Even for Westgate, it looked old, although not run down. I could easily imagine my grandparents goin' a-courtin' in one of these dark wood booths. It felt homey, and unpretentious, and a bit funky in its own way, so I was good.

A cute brown-eyed gal, with thick black hair up in a banana clip, came by to take our order, and she admired my hair and treated me like an old friend. I was getting a lot of that in this town – it was maybe a bit surprising, but I could get used to it. She recommended their fish 'n' chips, and Sheila agreed that was a great choice here, so I let myself be led.

I took a sip of my coffee – (impressively good, enough to make my eyes wide) – while we waited for the food to come. "So how'd I do, boss?" I said. "Am I allowed to come back tomorrow?"

Sheila laughed, short but hearty. "I would say yes, girl. What I could see of your kids after they got out, they all looked pretty happy, and that's the main thing I worry about. So you *wanna* come back tomorrow?"

I grinned and nodded. "Yes, please, ma'am. I mean, yeah, I am glad to get those opening night jitters outa the way, but I feel pretty good about how it went."

Her eyes got warm. "Glad to hear that. I knew this was a good idea."

I took a swallow – I was getting a refill for sure. "My biggest worry was class size, but you already knew that. I mean, my four o'clock jazz was only three girls. None of the others were much more."

"And you already knew that's how it was gonna be, baby. Once word gets around how good this new lady is, it'll pick up. They'll tell their friends – you can count on it at that age."

"In a way, it's good, I guess," I said. "I learned everybody's name – I dunno if I

coulda done that this soon with a lot more of 'em, right?"

"Good point." Sheila gave me a little salute with her mug, then sipped. "Any real problems to report?"

"No, thank God. I had a little blip in seven o'clock tap cuz I was starting at square one. Which I had to, cuz there were a few brand new kids. And I needed to for myself anyway. But a couple of the others already had all that down, so they kinda rolled their eyes a bit."

"And so?"

"So I reminded them that practice builds character." Sheila snorted into her coffee and I grinned. "Yeah, that's what they said, too. But then I told them that I was doin' this basics practice just this afternoon – which you may recall was true – and tried to get them to focus on getting into the zone. Find the joy in it, like. And help support the new folks. I think maybe they bought it."

"That doesn't surprise me. Cuz you can sell, girl. A song, a feeling, an atmosphere: you could always make people get it. You can reach 'em. Why you think I hired you?"

"Old times' sake? Pity for an old abandoned alley cat?"

She gave her head a little shake. "Not even close."

When I got home I felt ready to unwind. I also felt like giving my feet a soak, but soon found out that I didn't know where my foot basin had got to – still had a couple of boxes to unpack, and too beat to do that right now. So I just curled up on the loveseat and rubbed them for a while, then settled in with my story of soapy intrigue and searing sex in American skyscrapers, having a smoke and listening to the crickets outside in the dark.

Around 10:30 I had the urge for a little bag of chips, and figured I could do with another pack of cigarettes, too. So I made myself get up, go out, and drive over to the plaza to hit the convenience store while it was still open.

Everyplace else in the strip mall was closed now, so it was all dark and quiet. As

I swung the car in to a spot in front of the Marty-Quick, my headlights swept over the windows of the grocery store beside it – and I noticed a flash of gold.

While I picked up my loot, I kept thinking about that flash – it got me curious. So when I went back outside, I walked over to the grocery store window to check it out. A few of the parking lot lights were left on overnight, and enough of that reached the storefront for me to make out what my headlights had caught.

It looked like someone had stencilled gold spray paint onto the window – the paint had sharp clean edges. It still smelled fresh. But I couldn't make out what it was supposed to be: it was just random blobby shapes, a small one here, a big wiggly one beside it. Maybe it was one of those random-looking gang signatures? I didn't think so, though. Then I stepped back from it a bit, and something changed, and I made a little gasp.

It wasn't just abstract. The gold shapes actually made the lit parts of a person's face. And the dark glass made the shadows. It was kinda ingenious. A larger than life face, that was yelling. And you could even make out an expression on it. It wasn't a yell of anger, or pain, or fear: somehow they made it look like someone defiant. Triumph, almost. There was something uplifting about it. So unexpected and so strange.

Then I noticed something small at the bottom right of the shouting face. More gold stencil, but this looked like hand lettering. It said:

THE
NIGHT
SHIFT

Five

The next morning I had an alarm set so that I could at least be up and put my face on before the Bell guy showed to hook up my phone. They told me to expect him "between eight and four", which only sounds crazy to someone who hasn't dealt with them before. I said I had to be at work at four and it better be sooner than that, but they acted like they never heard a peep from me. They were the only game in town, we both knew it, and they took full advantage of it. Gotta have a phone, though.

Imagine my shock when there was a tap at my door before eight-thirty. I was still just in my camel-coloured terrycloth bathrobe, that my folks gave me for Christmas when I was in high school (and it still fit me great, thank you very much). Not really prepared for gentleman callers, but what the hell.

I opened my door and there was a dumpy middle-aged guy in a steel-blue shirt and slacks, carrying a big toolbox. He looked about as awake as I felt. He just said, "So where ya wan' it?"

If he was cute, I woulda maybe followed up on an opening line like that. But instead, I just said, "Yes, good morning, lovely day", and gestured with my head for him to follow me. There was already a phone jack over by the side window of the living room, near my shelf. I could keep the phone on there, and the cord would reach over to the loveseat if I wanted. That sounded perfectly fine to me. So he squatted down over there, cracked open his toolbox, and got right to it.

I put some toast on while I waited for him. The coffeemaker was done by now, so I offered the Bell guy a cup. (Why? Cuz I am hospitable to a fault. Or a dumbass, considering how I didn't really wanna encourage him to hang around longer than he had to.) But he just muttered "no thanks" without even looking round. Fair enough, Bubba.

He kept working while I ate and had my coffee. At one point he went outside for a minute, then came back in and tinkered some more. By the time I took my dishes to the sink, he was listening to the receiver, then hung it up and looked up at me. "All good," he said, not even pretending to sound interested.

I thanked him, he got me to sign his clipboard, and he was on his way. Then I picked up the phone and listened to the dial tone. (Which I shoulda done while he was still there, but, like I said, it was early.) Then I picked up the whole

phone, along with the phone book, and carried them over to the loveseat. The phone book here felt a little odd to me: three cities combined into one volume and it was still a lot thinner than Toronto's. I perched the book on my knee, flipped through til I found the Westgate yellow pages, then started reading under Physicians.

I was mostly shooting blind here, but then one name caught my attention. Most of the doctors were just listed under their initials, but of the few that provided a first name, one of them was Judith. And I realized that I wanted to have a woman doctor. Back home I never did – I just always went to the same one I saw since I was a baby, the same one my folks went to. But even just the idea of a woman doctor made me feel more comfortable. And like it was a part of my new start. So I called Dr. Kremer's office and asked if she was taking new patients.

She was, and her nurse booked me in for next week to meet and greet and get registered and all. I figured once I saw her, I could also get her to recommend a pharmacist she liked working with. When I hung up, and realized I could now check another couple items off my to-do list, I felt all responsible and mature. Magenta punk 'do notwithstanding. So while I was on a roll, I got back to some more unpacking. And found my foot basin – crammed full of shoes, in the bottom of a suitcase. Naturally.

It was another beautiful sunny afternoon, and I had nothing that urgently needed doing between lunch and going to work. (Except maybe for buying paint, I remembered later – woops.) And so the bikini and sunscreen and chaise lounge got another workout. So far, life in the sticks definitely had things to recommend it.

I was buried in Chapter Twelve, where Demeter St. John has just locked herself in the records room with Vance Dusk, assistant to the C.E.O., and grabbed him by his tie, so at first I didn't really notice the basketball sounds coming from behind the hedge. In fact, I noticed when the sounds stopped and I heard voices saying "hey" in greeting. One sounded like Doug but I couldn't place the other. They spoke low, then at one point Doug said "Whoa, cool." A few seconds later, the conversation over there faded out completely. And then I heard a faint rustling.

I turned my head in that direction and there was most of Doug's head peeking over the hedge again. But this time there was someone beside him. Someone shorter, trying to peer through. I could just catch the very top of what looked like a fishing hat covered in paint. Now this was interesting.

I nodded. "Yo, Doug."

"Hey, Rhonda."

"How's finals goin'?"

I couldn't see him shrug but I could feel it. "I think I passed everything so far."

"That's good. Um, who's your friend?"

"Oh, uh, Robin. He just brought me a shirt."

"Oh yeah? C'mon around, show me."

I turned to perch sideways on the chaise lounge. I could hear them move through the grass next door as they went along the hedge and came down my driveway a few seconds later. Doug was in a sweaty white tee and what looked like maroon gym shorts. He was bigger than I expected, thick arms, built like a football player. And he was holding a gray T-shirt bunched loose in one hand. Beside him, Robin looked slim and poised in an oversized, short-sleeved, tie-dyed shirt – done up almost to the neck, even in the afternoon heat – and baggy, wide-legged white pants. We gave each other a quick once-over as they stopped and stood a few feet away. And I confess, now that I finally had the chance, I took a short subtle peek at their packages, which were okay. (What the hell, we're all adults here, right? If not, then put this down now. And go clean your room.)

I leaned forward and reached toward Doug, but was watching Robin's face. "So lemme see." Doug stepped in and handed me the shirt, which I held up carefully at the shoulders. There was a black line drawing printed on it, a cartoon of Karl Marx wearing those plastic Groucho nose-glasses. Cute, and really fancy work, it looked to me. Printed at the bottom right corner was some tiny hand lettering that read WROBIN.

I could feel myself smile. "This is really nice work," I said to Robin. "You made

this?"

Robin gave me a gentle smile back and nodded. "Silkscreen," he said. "Helps me make a little extra money."

Doug chimed in. "Everyone knows Robin makes the coolest shirts. I've got like four so far."

"Not all the same, though," Robin said. "I mean, I try to think up new designs all the time."

"Very cool," I said. As I leaned forward to hand the shirt back to Doug, I noticed their eyes drawn to my cleavage. God bless young guys. I sat back and said, "Maybe you could sell me one sometime."

Robin shrugged and pulled at his hat. "For sure. If there's one you like, then glad to, yeah."

For a second I just looked at Robin's face, as if I was trying to remember something, but mainly just so I could take it in. The way he spoke and moved, it was as if he had no idea what a work of art he was. Finally I said, "Hey, did I see you at the hair salon yesterday?" (As if I had any doubt.)

Robin grinned, showing bright, even teeth, and maybe he blushed a little. "Yeah, I thought I remembered you from there. But when I saw you, Maggie wasn't finished with you yet. You look great."

"Thank you, I think so, too – she does good work."

Robin nodded at that, and Doug blinked and said, "Oh hey yeah, did you do something to your hair?"

I pursed my lips a bit and turned to look at him. "Why, yes, Doug, I did. Very astute."

Robin snickered and said, "Yeah, real astute there, Dougie!" Doug gave Robin an elbow to the upper arm, but not too rough. Managing not to rub the arm, Robin took a step back and said, "I guess that's my cue to get moving. Things to go, people to do, all that."

I gave him a little bow with my head. "Well, it was very nice meeting you, Wuh-Robin. See you around town, maybe."

Again he grinned, bright like an old-time movie star. "Yeah, maybe, uh, Rhonda, right? Later, Dougie."

Doug just nodded and said, "Later," while Robin scuffled back up the driveway and gone.

I turned to Doug then and said, "And may I commend you in your taste in shirts." *And friends*, I wanted to add, but figured I should keep that to myself for the time being, and sit with it a while.

Six

The next morning, I felt like I had finally run out of excuses and it was time to go buy paint for the apartment. I mean, I certainly wasn't any more fond of those intense dark colours, even after getting better acquainted with them for a few days. So yeah, today we would make that happen. But I was gonna make an adventure out of it, as much as I could.

So I drove downtown, parked, and started wandering. Westgate made wandering easy: the sidewalks weren't crowded compared to back home, and the light traffic made it easy to cross the street whenever and wherever I got the urge. A lotta people nodded and smiled as we passed each other – sometimes I felt like I'd blundered into a Frank Capra movie slowed down.

It was relaxing: I just strolled up one block and down the other, seeing what was there, trying to get a sense of my directions so I could find my way around. Over there was that restaurant from Tuesday night, so I knew that the Ambassador was around that corner and up a block or so. On a whim, I went up that way for a closer look.

A poster near the front door said that, downstairs at The Station, Thursday night was Motown-slash-Soul Night; Friday was Disco Night; and Saturday was Rave Night. I guess I still had some things to learn, cuz that last one didn't ring a bell, but I started wondering if I might find my way down to The Station tonight after work, for the Motown. We'd have to see how my feet and my energy level held up.

I kept slowly, randomly walking around, taking in the sights, reminding myself that this was my new town so get comfortable. Before too long I came to a little park, just one city block, with people drifting around and an old statue-fountain in the middle, and it was all so quaint and charming that I wished I had a Mary Tyler Moore hat that I could toss in the air. The vibes of this place were already getting to me.

But in the back of my mind I remembered that I was counting on luck to make me trip over somewhere I could buy paint. And then, like three steps later, I did. King's Hardware, the sign said, and under that was Tools – Household – Paint. How about that?

So many of the buildings in this area were brown brick, but King's was old,

rugged gray stone, like at one time it used to be a very tiny castle or sumthin. Maybe an actual king lived here way back when, who knows? But the interior was fully renoed, all white walls crammed with a zillion metal and plastic items, long fluorescent lights, a tiny but competent store – funky enough to work for me.

I stopped a little ways in to scan the aisles and see if I could spot the paint section. Then I happened to take a look at the checkout counter and saw someone standing by the cash register, and suddenly I felt like I got hit in the chest, cuz things were getting spooky now.

Standing behind the counter there was Robin. What the actual? Three times in three days? I mean, what the actual?

When I could finally talk, I said, "Robin?"

He turned his head toward me fast and his eyes got big, and I could finally see how bright and blue they were. But he broke into a smile and said, "Rhonda! Now this is insane."

"That's one word for it, yeah." I stepped closer to the counter. "Geez, sumthin like this is enough to make you believe in fate."

He held himself relaxed but proud, his pale hair swept back, and just looked at me for a second, still with a smile. He was wearing a loose blue shirt, only the top button undone, and his name on a patch on the left pocket. He said, "Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Believe in fate?"

I couldn't help smiling back at him. "I'm, uh, reserving judgment."

He gave a light laugh. "Yeah, I guess that's me, too. But this is gonna make me think about it more, at least."

"For sure. Who knew you work here?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure I knew. Which reminds me." He stood at attention and

made his face go more serious and looked me right in the eye. "What can I help you with today, ma'am?"

I bowed as gracefully as I could. "Why, thank you, young man. I am, uh, interested in purchasing cans of paint, uh, with which to adorn my abode and boudoir."

"Ah, *mais oui* and *bon appetit*. Our establishment happens to offer that very item, and it is one about which I happen to know some things." He bowed back. "Not *many* things, or *useful* things, but *some* things."

"Most satisfactory. Lead on, *garçon*."

Robin escorted me to the paint section at the back of the store. I explained what I needed and he seemed to feel my pain about what the previous tenants did to the walls. He asked me the sizes of the rooms, which I gave him roughly as well as I could figure, and then he did calculations in his head fast enough to impress me. He helped me pick out a pale cream for the front rooms and something a bit more sandy but light for the bedroom – "guaranteed to bounce back a bit more light", he said. Being a good salesman, he talked me into an extra can of primer and one of the cream for the big area, "just to make sure".

The noise from the paint-stirring machine made it really hard for us to make small talk but that didn't stop us from trying. Then it took a few trips for us both to carry all the cans and paraphernalia up to the front so he could ring them in. I asked if I could leave them there for a minute while I walked back to my car and moved it closer to the store. Robin said he was happy to oblige.

Once I found a closer parking spot and went back into King's, I noticed that there was no sign of my paint. Or Robin. But before I could do more than blink, a hand came up from behind the counter and grabbed onto it. Then Robin's face peeked up, looking all scared and upset.

"Oh, god!" he said. "Oh, Rhonda, I – it was the barbarian hordes! They took the paint! All of it! I, I tried to stop them but there were too many! Too many!" Once he saw he had my shoulders shaking from laughing, he stopped and grinned his gorgeous grin.

"Yeah, damn those barbarian hordes," I finally said. And he helped me carry all the painting supplies out to my car without me even asking.

That afternoon was clouded over and threatening. (I knew I couldn't, and shouldn't, sunbathe every day anyway.) So I spent my before-work zone-time curled up on the loveseat with my book and a cigarette, enjoying the cross-breeze while I could still have the windows wide open, before the rain came.

By now I was at Chapter Twenty-Three, watching Demeter commanding the interior design consultants to transform her new penthouse office according to her every wish, while the chief designer Dorian Fanshaw burned for her. So I didn't notice the sound coming from outside right away. But finally I heard it: drums.

They sounded like they were coming from over past the other side of Doug's house – I guessed someone was practising in a garage down that way. But it wasn't like I could hear a garage *band*: nothing but drums. For a second I worried that I was in for an hour of loud pointless thrashing, but figured I could try to tune it out.

But after a bit, I finally realized that whoever it was playing them was actually really good. I'd worked with enough of them over the years that I had a sense of what I wanted to hear in a drummer, and this guy (or gal) had it. What a sweet surprise that was. They weren't just bashing away at random, trying to see how fast they could go or how many different things they could hit. It was like they had a full song in their head and were playing along with it, playing like a professional.

And a bit later, I realized that this drummer was getting under my skin. It wasn't just that their rhythm was bang-on solid, that the pace was perfectly steady and just the right speed... They had feel, too, impressive feel. That swing, that groove, that I can't explain but I know when I hear it. I'll just come right out with it: this beat was sexy.

I stopped reading and just drifted, got lost in that sound that never let up. I dunno if they were disturbing any of the other neighbours, but I was good to listen to this any time. After a while I finally realized that I could feel my heart, and I was biting my lip, and rubbing my knees together.

And then at last the drums stopped. And I squirmed where I sat for a few

seconds, then swallowed and said, "Whoa." Yeah, by now I was definitely in the mood to hit The Station after work tonight and see who I might find there.

At work that evening, I asked Sheila and Candy if any of them felt like checking out The Station with me afterward. They both said no cuz they were tired – like I shoulda been, I guess – and Sheila even looked at me like I was a bit nuts. But I was still in the mood for a good time, so after work I nipped home for a quick bite, freshened up, and put on my night face and lashes and my warm-weather clubbing outfit: white halter, black leather miniskirt, short gray cuffed bang-me boots, big hoop earrings, and my little gold cross. (I replaced the chain that came with it at my confirmation, with a longer one that let it hang in exactly the right place.) Now was my chance to find out if Westgate men knew quality when they saw it.

I managed to find parking about a block away from the hotel and got into a short line at the doorway to The Station. The doorman didn't see fit to do me the honour of I.D.-ing me – ah well. Once I got past him, the sound in the club really hammered me: that bass that rumbles in your gut and won't let up. Really good sound, just like Magnolia said. And yep, high ceilings, too.

I looked around to see if she happened to be there, but didn't spot her. It was crowded enough that even someone as tall as her could stay hidden without too much trouble. No sign of anyone else I knew. So I leaned on the bar, got myself a wine cooler, and scoped out the place, waiting for a song that ordered me to get out on the dance floor.

There was a weird freedom, being somewhere that nobody knew me. It sorta went beyond a new beginning, to kinda reinventing myself. Like, I could say or do whatever I feel like here. Some guy comes up and asks me my name, I could tell him "Demeter St. John" if I wanted to. Life suddenly felt bigger, full of possibilities. I savoured that feeling for a while.

As the night went on, I got out there and danced a few, mingled a bit, rested on the bar. A few guys came by to say hi. Seemed like all of them were middle-aged and maybe middle-okay-looking. A couple of them tried opening lines that just made me laugh and say "nice try, no thanks". But one guy, forty-ish, was simple and polite, and easy on the eyes, and we gabbed and he got me another drink, and we danced a few. His name was Gary, and for him I decided to be

Rhonda.

There was a time when we moved closer to one of the black lights scattered around the place, and he told me that it made my hair glow, which I couldn't see, but I thought that was hilarious. And he said he liked The Supremes, which earned him a few points. And his hands were reasonably well behaved, and that earned him a few more.

He was nice to spend some time with, but in the end nothing really clicked for me. When I decided to get going, he asked if he could have my number, and I told him that I just got it and didn't remember it yet. Which was true, but also handy.

I left way before closing time, because sometimes I do, especially when I know I need to drive. The night air was cool and fresh compared to inside The Station, and the quiet kinda rang in my ears. My keys jingling sounded too loud when I dug them out of my purse, and I threaded them between my fingers before I set off down the sidewalk. My little boots made a loud tap with every step, and I looked all around me, trying to peek into every shadow and around every corner. Then I saw a twenty-something girl walking along across the street, and she was moving free and easy and didn't look worried at all. So I let my shoulders relax and told myself that maybe this neighbourhood was safer than I assumed. Another thing about Westgate I could learn to like.

A few doors before I got to my car, I was passing a combo jewellery-watch repair store, all closed up and dark now, and something less dark caught my eye. I stepped a bit closer to the big window, and there was that big yelling face, painted in white this time. The paint smell was still fairly fresh.

The Night Shift had struck again.

Seven

Saturday was a bit of a change-up for me, cuz my classes ran from eight a.m. til three. That meant I needed to set my alarm for sure, and I wondered if I'd ever be able to make it to Disco Night at The Station on Fridays. Who knew, maybe someday a hot date would be worth a short sleep. Til then, carry on.

My Saturday classes were at least a bit bigger, so that felt encouraging. And one of my tap groups had someone unusually young, a girl about eight, which felt cute and kept things interesting. But by closing time I was ready to stretch out and rest a bit.

I stopped by the grocery store at the plaza on my way home, to pick up a few veggies. I noticed that their window was completely cleaned off by now: you would never know that Night Shift graffiti was ever there. A bonus for the store, that whoever it was put the paint on glass instead of bricks. Now that I thought about it, an unusual choice for those Night Shift guys. Or so I thought – not that I knew so much about the art of graffiti, right?

When I got home, I put my food away, cut myself a little bowl of celery sticks, and got changed. Here it was, summer just a few days away, and the weather could not be more perfect. The sky was clear, the sun was intense, but the air was not hot and not humid – we don't get many days like that around here. So what I changed into was my sun-worship bikini. Then grabbed my snack, a wine cooler, my smokes, sunscreen, and the last few chapters of Demeter's saga, and I laid out on the patio.

It was only a little while that I was able to hear the birds, before a dull roar started up on the other side of the hedge. Somehow, the sound of lawnmowers doesn't really annoy me: it's one of those Sounds of Summer that you just let wash over you. It's like what I guess you'd call ambience. In the winter, I kinda miss that sound.

I was reading something about Demeter facing a hostile takeover, which somehow felt like it was only put in there as a breather between sessions of her tussling with Vance. And then the roar of the mower stopped. I waited to hear the rumble of it being rolled back to the garage or wherever, but I didn't – there was just bird. I looked over that way and Doug was standing, looking over the hedge.

I gave him a smile. "Yo, Doug."

"Rhonda." He smiled back, kinda shy.

"Finished exams yet?"

"Two more, I think."

I nodded, then took a quick glance around my yard. I had an idea. "Hey, can you bring your mower around here?"

He blinked a lot, then after a couple seconds he said, "Ah, yeah, sure, okay." Then he disappeared back behind the hedge, and I heard that rumbling sound I was waiting for before, and then a louder rattle as the mower came down my driveway. He stood there, quiet, looking curious, and once or twice I saw his eyes flick down the length of the chaise lounge and back. He was wearing blue denim cut-offs and a sleeveless white tee that made his shoulders look big.

I propped myself up on one elbow. "So, uh, I dunno when my landlady is gonna get around to cutting my grass, but it looks to me like it could use it. I was thinkin' that maybe I could hire you to do mine? While you've already got your mower out?"

He looked a little surprised but nodded. "Yeah sure. I, you don't hafta pay me, I can just do it." He looked around my little yard. "Way smaller than our yard, won't take like five minutes."

I picked up my wine cooler and sipped from the bottle, watching his eyes. "Thank you very much. Maybe I can get sumthin for you anyway, we'll see." I glanced at the bottle, then back up at him. "Are you eighteen?"

Again he blinked. "Um, yeah?"

"Okay, honey. But if you were *nineteen*, you woulda said so. So I ain't gettin' you one o' these." I lifted the cooler up an inch. "But I can get you an ice tea if you want."

He blushed and made a little grin. "Uh, yeah, okay, thanks."

I went back in to the kitchen to grab a can out of the fridge for him, while I heard

the sputtering and cursing of Doug trying to start the mower. One of those old gas-powered jobs with a pull cord. When I came back out, there was a puff of blue smoke as the mower finally woke up again. I handed Doug his drink, and he said thanks and took a quick swallow. Then he set it down on the patio and started pushing the mower around the edge of the yard, while I stretched back out on my chair and watched him over my book.

It looked like this wasn't a fun job for him, but it wasn't hard either. He just kinda shrugged it off as he went along, and who knew where his mind went. I was impressed with what a small fringe he left around the tree. I dunno what it was, but that moment was all such Classic Summer, and he looked strong and young. And I felt a short twinge of something in me that was almost sad.

Then, when he was turning the corner of the patio, he swung the mower around and some of the grass blew up onto my shins and feet. I jumped up off of the chaise lounge, looking down, and said, "Whoa! Hey!"

Doug looked at me and his mouth fell open. "Oh! Sorry!" he called over the mower. "Are you – "

I waved a hand at him. " 'Sokay, 'sokay, don't worry." I didn't even try brushing my legs off: I knew that the sunscreen would make the grass stick. I looked at him and called out, "You finish up, I'm gonna go wash this off." He nodded and got back to pushing the mower along while I went inside.

I got in the shower and quickly washed. Everything – even my hair, cuz the dye was in it long enough now that I finally could. That felt good. Then I dried off in a magenta bath sheet, wrapped and tucked it around me, finger-fluffed my hair, and went back out to the living room. The yard was quiet now. Through the screen door to the patio, I could see Doug chugging the last of his ice tea and wiping his forehead with the hem of his shirt. I caught a glimpse of his chest hair: it didn't look thick, but it spread wide.

Staying inside, I called his name. He peered over toward me like he couldn't really see. I slid the screen open, and then he could see, and his mouth got small. "C'mere a sec," I said.

I turned and headed back toward my bedroom, looking over my shoulder to see if he was following. I noticed that he was stopped at the doorway to leave his shoes out on the patio, and then he closed the screen door when he came in.

His mama raised him to be a good Canadian boy. I gestured with my head to get him to follow me into my room.

I went to the far corner, where my purse sat on my dresser. "I wanna see if I got a little sumthin for you – yeah, I know you said, but I appreciate it, right?" I opened my change purse, then put it down and looked back over my shoulder again at him. "Aw, sorry, I thought maybe I had like a ten in here or sumthin." I already knew I didn't.

He stood still in the doorway and we just watched each other. He had this look, a bit like a squirrel wondering if it was safe to cross the road. Even in this dim light from these dark walls, I thought I could see his shirt trembling from his heart. I looked down and saw that I had his full attention. Finally he said, "That's okay." He said it very quiet – back here, we didn't need to speak loud to be heard.

Time slowed down to a crawl. Still with my back to him, talking over my shoulder, I said, "Be honest with me, Doug. You were thinkin' about this before, weren't you."

"About what?"

"Being back here. With me."

I could hear him swallow. "Yeah."

A warm flush washed through everything. I felt my smile pushing up the bottom of my eyes. I tugged a bit at the tuck in the front of my bath towel, lifted my elbows out a touch, and then felt it slide all the way down me to the floor. Not a sound.

Until I heard Doug swallow again.

Eight

Very slowly I turned to face him, trying to savour every moment as much as I hoped he did. When he saw me, he made a soft moaning whisper. He still hadn't moved a hair since he stepped into the room. So I moved to him, walking like the queen of the world again. I wondered if what he saw now was what he imagined when I walked to him on that first day.

I didn't stop until I was pressed against him and had my arms around him. It felt like holding a barrel, big and solid. Brant used to feel like this – I drew in a sudden breath and it was shaky. Doug hesitated a second, then put his big arms way around me and ran his hands over my skin. There was a sharp musk about him that reminded me of school; I thanked God that at least he didn't smell like Axe.

I looked up at him, saw his face more unbelieving than happy. Then I craned my neck up to him, finally he lowered his face a little, and I kissed him. His lips felt softer than they looked, and he tasted okay. I dunno how many times I heard people say that "kissing a smoker tastes like licking an ashtray". But Doug musta had no problem with ashtrays, cuz he went back in for seconds. And thirds.

Our mouths broke apart and I slid my hands over his wide back. Then I reached down to take the hem of his shirt and lift it up. He had to help me finish pulling it way up over his head and tossing it away, cuz I couldn't reach high enough. Then we held each other again, tighter, and he let out a sigh and kissed me. His heart was pounding hard against me, and I could feel the pressure of him on my belly.

I reached up to pet his hair, looked straight into his eyes, and spoke very soft. "Now I'm gonna give you another chance, to be *really* honest with me. Tell me the truth, and I'll make you happy you did. Right?"

He blinked and nodded.

I gave his chest a little kiss, then looked back up into his pale eyes. "Have you ever gone all the way with anyone?"

His forehead wrinkled and he blinked a lot. Then he let his eyes close and he whispered, "No." I couldn't tell if he was blushing – too dim. But *I* was, now.

"That's okay, honey," I said. I stretched up for a little kiss, then said, "That is no problem at all." Then I squeezed my hands in between us to rest them on his chest and give him a gentle nudge. He took a step back and his shoulders were braced against the wall.

Moving slow for him – for us – I sank to my knees and unfastened his cut-offs. Carefully I hooked my fingertips into the waistbands of his shorts, both pairs. I looked up at him, to see him looking down at me, his face still unbelieving but his eyelids heavier now. Then I looked at what I was doing, eased his clothes down, and he sprang up free.

I took a second just to look at him, while my hands pushed his shorts down and urged him to step out of them. I know I'm supposed to tell you about how jaw-dropping gigantic he was – but really he was plain ordinary, and that was fine. He was just fine, and I was happy.

I reached out a couple of fingers around the base of him and let out a whispering sigh. How long had it been? Then I slid my lips and tongue over his head, and I felt Doug tremble, heard him whisper curses. I slid lower, and oh God, the hot smooth skin, the scent and heat and power of a guy this age – it all made me feel like I was flying, and like I was in school again. And that is a feeling you can't buy.

I knew this wasn't gonna last long, but I also knew that any amount of it was worth it. My head rocked, slow and smooth, while I slid my hands up his chest and down his thighs. I heard Doug gasping and felt his body twitch... then he let out short strangled cries and exploded. There was a fair bit to swallow but I managed it. I held him in my mouth for a few more seconds, then straightened up so we could hold each other again. He was still shivering with aftershocks and his heart was wild. I reached up and kissed him: for the first second I could feel his whole body go stiff, then he relaxed when he didn't taste anything to be afraid of.

I kissed his chest and whispered, "C'mon, honey, let's get you over here to rest a sec." I let him steady himself on me as he staggered the couple of steps to my bed, then fell on it, letting out soft curses. I climbed in near him, propped up a pillow on the headboard, then leaned back into it and relaxed with my knees up. I let my hand rest limp between them, and finally he looked up at me, then followed my hand.

I smiled big. "Fair's fair," I said. "You can do it."

His eyes got wide. "I, I never..."

I reached for him, as much as I could, but he was down between my ankles. "I'll help you. It'll be good."

He just looked at me for a few seconds, licked his lips, and then started crawling closer to me. He kissed his way up the inside of my thigh – already getting into it, great.

I will say this for Doug: he was really good at taking instructions. Unlike a lot of guys I knew, especially that age, he listened and he really tried. With gentle taps and whispers, I let him know where to put his tongue, when to move it, when to ease up, when to stay right there and don't change the speed.... oh God it was glorious. For a beginner he had nothing to be ashamed of.

He started moaning and cursing into me, which added a little extra buzz inside. I was panting when I felt him easing off a bit, his jaw musta hurt, and I babbled out, "Oh baby please just a bit more I'm almost – ". Which got him back in at exactly the speed he knew I liked, and I heard moans which for a second I didn't know were mine. And then suddenly my abs clenched til they almost hurt, and I crashed like giant waves, and Doug was the absolute best thing in the whole world.

My chest and belly heaved with my breath, and I felt like noodles. I tapped Doug's head and asked him to rest just for a second. He snuggled his cheek into my thigh and looked up at me through his thick tangly hair, too dazed to speak. Then I asked him if he could do a bit more, cuz the next one wouldn't take nearly as long. He could, and it didn't.

Out of breath in the best possible way, I tapped on the bed beside my pillow and said, "God, that was so good, please, come up here." He climbed up beside me, I rolled over to him, wrapped an arm around his wide chest, and kissed him, deep and hot but not urgent any more. He reached for me, slid his hand over me, found my breast, kneaded it deep but gentle, ran his thumb over my nipple in slow circles. I loved how he wasn't too rough or impatient – I dunno if that was just his way, or if he happened to be naturally good at picking up what I liked. Either way, it was really nice.

I slid my hand down him, and when it got low enough, his whole body jolted and he cried out into my mouth. He was completely ready again, already – one of the beautiful things about this age. I decided to take charge for this: once again there wouldn't be much of it, and if I was the one controlling the speed, it might at least buy me a few more seconds.

So I nudged his shoulder over to get him onto his back, then I rolled onto him in a straddle, feeling him snuggling up behind my butt. He gave me a gape of what looked to me like pure wonder, and I smiled down on him, trying to get my eyes to say to his, *I like this. I like you. This is all good.* Then I lifted myself up off his belly, reached under me to take hold of him, and slowly lowered myself back down.

He was kinda thick, but after his mouth he had me so ready that it was no trouble to take in everything. I squirmed down to settle in, then sat still and watched him for a second, his mouth moving but not making a sound. I slid my hands up to his chest, and inside me I squeezed him a few times, making him moan. Then I started to rock on him, slow and smooth. He flexed under me and soon caught onto my speed and it was good.

I knew he would never last long enough to get me over again this way, so I just enjoyed the feeling of him inside, while he ran his hands up to my breasts, down around to my backside. I felt like a goddess riding him, ageless, immortal, and worshipped. I wished there could be more, but I knew that his youth was a different kind of pleasure for me. He lasted a little longer than the first time, but not much, and to feel him and watch his face when he came was a beautiful thing.

Carefully I eased off of him and snuggled beside him again. In between his panting, he gave me little kisses, and they were tender and sweet. I brushed his hair back away from his eyes. "Please tell me you liked it," I said.

He barely had the energy to nod once and try to smile. "So much."

I looked in his eyes, so bright, so alive. "Told'ja I'd make you happy."

He swallowed and panted. "Yeah, you did."

I rested my head on his shoulder and breathed in his teen musk some more. I

put my arm around his chest: he felt so big, and solid, and *there*. Finally I said, "I bet you play football, right? You look like you should."

I could feel him shaking his head. "Nuh-uh. I like basketball okay, though." I could hear the boom of his voice through his body. "Coach bugged me to go out for football for like ages, but no way."

"Howcum?"

"Don't wanna take a chance breaking anything. I mean, I need my limbs."

"Well, that's not something I hear someone say every day. Whaddaya mean?"

"I play drums, eh?"

So this was our neighbourhood drummer. This was the guy with the feel, the guy who got that beat going, that... whoa. "Oh, I, uh, I think I heard you the other day. You're good."

"Wow, thanks." I could feel him stroking my back, slow and tired.

"No, I mean, you are seriously good. You in a band?"

"Ah, not yet. But I wanna be. I heard there's a couple guys at school wanting to put one together, I might ask them."

"Good. Go for it, Doug. A good drummer is the hardest thing for a band to find. They'd be lucky to have you."

"Thanks," he said again. The memory of those drums came back to me... and then I got whispering to Doug about something I wanted him to do for me, and I guided his hand down me, and gave him more directions, and he listened to me, and his strong fingers were even better at this, and I lost count of how many times he brought the crashing waves back. He looked like a kid with a new toy, like he'd discovered his new mutant superpower or sumthin.

Finally, gasping, I had to beg him to ease off. Then I noticed he was ready. Again. I nodded and gave him a kiss – this time was gonna be just for him, he already gave me so much. So I let him roll me onto my back and shift himself onto me like he wanted, I reached down to give him a little guidance, and then

we both let out a soft sound. I wrapped my legs around him and we rocked together hard and deep. His rhythm was so good, he surprised me with how nice it felt. Of course it wasn't that long before he released, wild and powerful, and I wished that I could release with him. I felt so much tenderness for him, even more than I expected. I wasn't sure if I should tell him that.

I let him rest on me, his elbows to either side keeping his full weight off. We exchanged a few kisses and I petted his hair. Then a voice came from far away outside, a woman's voice calling, "Dougie?"

Doug jerked his head up. "Oh shit."

I giggled and patted his shoulder. "It's okay, honey, no worries. Go, go. You're good."

At least he thought to ease out of me gently before he jumped out of bed and snatched his clothes up from the corner. While he yanked them on, he looked like he was torn between wanting to say something to me, thinking of what to say, and running. He stopped in the doorway, looked back and forth, and finally just said, "Uh, uh, I'll see ya." Then he dashed away.

I called after him, "Yep, you will." I heard the patio screen door slide open and shut fast and hard. I could picture him scrambling to get his shoes on. Then I heard the rattle of the lawnmower as he pulled it all frantic behind him, back to his house.

Everything was very quiet. I just lay there, and felt. A lotta things, some that I didn't think I could name. There was a hint of a smell coming from the sheets beside me, and I rested my nose there for a while. And then I fell asleep. Not a long sleep, it ended up being a nap of an hour or so, but the deepest and most soothing sleep I could remember in I don't know how long.

No dreams.

Nine

Sunday morning was when I ripped that band-aid off and got down to painting. The day was cloudy and a little cooler, and the air still hadn't gotten humid yet, so I was not gonna find a better day in June to get a job like this done. I knew that it had to be done in stages, and could take a few days – I hoped the weather would hold for all of it, but that's usually too much luck to ask from Ontario. Still, today was the day to get cracking.

First I slipped on my ratty old tracksuit, which already had a few paint smears on it from earlier apartments. If Doug could see me in this, then my raw allure would drive him mad, you can bet. Then I put on inspirational music: a Best of Motown collection, perfect to keep me moving.

I went out along all the kitchen and living room walls, laying out sheets of newspaper at the bottom, and moved my little bookshelf into the middle of the room. Also dragged the fridge away from the wall as much as I could: obviously that hadn't been done in quite a while, and the thing was a brute to move. But I told myself that Rosie the Riveter's arms ain't got nuthin on mine.

I also laid newspaper over the kitchen sink and counter, then cracked open a primer and gave it a stir. I knew before I started that these walls would need more than one coat of primer, but I figured if I got the first coat done this morning, then give it the afternoon to dry, I might have time to squeeze the second coat in after dinner and get all of this step done today.

The living room part went fastest, big stretches of roller work. Before long I didn't really notice the smell all that much anymore. Sometimes I sang while I painted. The fussy brushwork around the kitchen cabinets, standing up on a chair, is what took the most time. I didn't do neat enough work to be a pro, but neither did the folks before me, so I could live with it. Besides short breaks to flip the tape over, I stopped for a coffee and a smoke once or twice, and then the big part was done. While it was drying, I went back to my room, moved the furniture out a ways, put papers over everything, and started on the first coat in there.

While I was back there, I heard a knock at my door. I laid the brush on the tray and went out to see. Through the screen I could see Doug standing there, holding a weed whacker and a big tangle of extension cord.

"Yo Doug! Wussup?" I said through the screen door.

"Hey," he said. "Uh, I, I was thinking that the edges of your yard didn't get done yesterday and I was just doing ours, so yeah."

"That's, um, I would really appreciate that, Doug. If you want to. Thank you very much." He stood for a second like he was waiting for more. "There's an outlet out there somewhere, I'm pretty sure."

He looked in my eyes for a few seconds, then over to the side, and said, "Yeah, I see it. Um, so okay yeah." And he walked away to plug in and get started. I watched him til his work was really under way, and then I went back to my room for more priming.

Like I said, my yard wasn't big, so after about five minutes Doug knocked on my door again. So I went back and looked at him through the screen again.

"All done," he said. He looked a little flushed. Or blushing.

I peeked around him. "Looks great," I said. "Thank you again, very much. You are a good neighbour."

He stood like he was waiting for something, and I felt like I needed to step carefully. Then he said, "What's that smell? Are you painting?"

"Yeah. Perfect day for it." For maybe a second, I debated asking him if he wanted to help. I mean, who doesn't like having a hand with a job like that, right? But I also thought that, if I didn't watch it, he'd be living in here by the end of the week, and I didn't think that was best for either of us. Before he had a chance to think of volunteering, I said, "But count yourself lucky that you get to be out there, and not stuck in here smelling this all day."

"Uh, I guess." His shoulders fell a little bit.

After another awkward pause, I said, "I should let you get back to studyin' probably, right?"

Finally he turned toward his house. "Yeah, that's a good idea, I guess. Um, I'll see ya, eh?"

I called after him, "Definitely!" And I heard him trudge across my grass to the

driveway and up.

While I went back to my room and primed it, I was thinking hard. Someday, not sure when, I was gonna have to sit down with Doug and have a serious talk, like adults. And I wanted it to be a talk that wouldn't hurt him. If I was lucky, we could both come away from it kinda happy, even. Yesterday afternoon I made things complicated for us – I knew that even at the time. But that didn't mean I regretted it. And I hoped I wasn't going to.

After lunch, while I was waiting for the first primer coat to dry, seemed like a good time to go do my laundry. So I bundled it up in a couple of garbage bags, gathered up my supplies, loaded everything into the Civic, and made the short hop over to the plaza. The salon was closed for Sunday, but all the other places were open, and about as busy as Westgate ever got.

Once I carried my stuff closer to the laundromat, I noticed silver paint on the window. The Night Shift again? I went for a better look. At first glance it looked like a lot of thin curvy shapes, kinda flowing. But once again, when I stepped back a bit, the shapes pulled together into a picture: this was a big willow tree, with the small figure of a person lying under it in some grass. And behind the top of the tree were a couple of faint sprays without a stencil, to look like clouds. That same Night Shift signature was stencilled at the bottom right. So whoever this gang was, they had more than one logo. Or more than one idea. I shrugged and took my things inside.

If I didn't look outside, I could almost imagine that I was back in Toronto again, cuz laundromats all look and smell and sound the same, wherever you go. Or so it seems to me. It was warm and steamy inside, because laundromats are, and the front and back doors were both propped open wide. Someone had a shaggy little dog tied up in the shade out behind. I had to sit and wait a couple minutes for some washers to free up, but then plunked my change and soap in and we were off to the races.

I sat in a tiny plastic chair and pulled out my fat novel, but before getting back into it I took a look around. The people in a laundromat were pretty much the same wherever you go, too. A graying, tired-looking lady in walking shorts, with her hair up in a bun, loading an awful lot of kids' clothes into dryers. A pair of college kids, sat close together, smoking and playing cards. A big soft old guy in

a flat cap and plaid shirt, sitting right beside the front door, smoking and staring at the floor, all zoned out. I don't think I saw him move the whole time I was there, except to lift his smoking arm up and down, and then light up a new one when he needed to. I'm not even sure if he was actually there to do his laundry. I've seen magazine articles that say a laundromat is a good place to Meet People: well, let's just say I have my doubts.

By the time my wash was done, I had finished the epic tale of Demeter St. John: she was celebrating a successful merger with Vance Dusk behind closed doors in one of the too-many rooms in her northern west-coast mansion, and so all ended well for our plucky heroine. I left the book on a countertop, my donation for one of my future laundry comrades who might be stuck in here bored for an hour or so. Once again I waited a few minutes for free dryers, then I claimed them when they came open and settled back with a smoke.

For a while I just let the constant drone of the machines hypnotize me. Then some movement at the front door caught my eye. A slim young guy was pulling a bundle buggy, overstuffed, into the laundromat. I recognized him immediately – the painty hat was a dead giveaway, even if that face wasn't – but rather than call out, I waited to see if he would see me. I felt like I was starting to believe in fate a little more still.

After scanning the place for about a second, Robin saw me, smiled and waved. I did the same back, and he wheeled his cart over and sat beside me. He was wearing one of those gray Karl Marx shirts, too big, some dull green thrift-store wide-leg pants, and that hat of his, which he pulled off. "So hey, how's the painting going?", he said.

"Pretty good – I just got started today, actually."

His blue eyes scrunched up with his grin. "Yeah, I can tell."

I blinked at him. "How so?"

He reached up over my head, and I could feel his fingertips tickling the very end of one of my hair spikies. "You got a couple *leeeetle* flecks of it riiiiight here."

I flinched and said, "Damn. I thought I was bein' careful."

"Naw, it's okay. It's really teeny – no one will notice unless they're looking really

close."

I gave him a side eye. "Oh. So you were lookin' really close."

He blushed a little, and even managed to make that look like a beautiful colour on him. "Oh, I'm just naturally very observant. It's my artist's eye." Then he let out a gentle laugh.

I smiled, then looked over, then gave him a nudge. "Oh hey, machines openin' up – go go go." He bounced up and went. Survival of the fittest in the laundromat jungle, right?

After he loaded his washer, he flopped back down next to me and said, "You're doing the primer now, eh?"

"Uh-huh. First coat should be dry soon, but you were right – it's gonna need two. Gonna do that tonight, I hope."

Robin pressed his lips together and made a thoughtful nod, then said, "You want some help with that?"

My eyebrows went up. "What, you?"

"Sure, why not? If you're talking tonight, I've got nothing going on."

"Wow, that is incredibly generous of you, Robin." (Was this just some ingrained friendly thing going on in this town? Something in the water, maybe?) "I, uh, I'd have to be crazy to turn down help. Are you sure?"

He gave me a very steady and serious look. "Hey: I sold you the stuff – I need to make sure that you treat it right. Otherwise I might have to take it back."

That gave me a laugh. "Okay, officer," I said. "Then how about I wait for your stuff to dry and then I can drive you home with it?"

He blinked hard. "Ahhhh, no, I, I don't wanna put you out. And, uhh, I got a couple things I gotta do on the way home anyway. Don't worry, I'll, uh, I'll meet you at your place after dinner. Cool?"

I frowned a bit. "Sure, cool. If you want." So he had nothing going on but he had

things to do? No time to wonder about that then, cuz my dryer buzzers went right at that moment. So I thanked him again, bundled my hot clothes back into their bags, and headed out. During the drive home, I noticed that I felt little flashes of that schoolgirl feeling again, just from the idea of spending more than a few minutes with Robin. I tried to tell myself that this wasn't fate – it was just paint.

Ten

First thing I noticed when I was back in my apartment was the primer smell, but very soon after was the light. Even the one coat of primer was enough to make it so much brighter in here: it made me really excited to see the final result. Which would be another day – after tonight's repeat of primer, there was still the real colour to put on. But I felt freer inside than I ever had in this room before, like I could really breathe at last.

After dinner I made sure to do my dishes and wipe the table up right away – I didn't want the place looking any messier for Robin than it needed to be. And yeah, when you remember that everything was covered with newspapers, I was probably overreacting, but such is life. At least I realized that it would be ridiculous to try and doll myself up, so I stuck with putting my painting track suit back on, and I hoped that my smile would be brilliant enough all on its own. And with any luck he liked veggie sticks, cuz I didn't have much else in the house to offer in the way of snacks. A little dip, maybe. (I hear that some people are always ready for guests that might drop by – maybe someday I could visit that planet.)

Around seven I heard the knock at my door. When I looked through the screen, the first thing I noticed was Robin's hat. I could also make out a huge T-shirt hanging on him, splashed with so much paint that I couldn't tell you what colour it started out, and gray sweatpants with almost as many holes as paint smears. Clearly he was ready to work.

I opened the door and gestured him inside, saying, "Welcome to my humble abode."

He took a slow look, up and around, taking in every wall and nodding. "Off to a great start, very good work," he said. Then he looked at me from the corner of his eye and gave me a fox grin. "For an amateur."

I snorted at him. "Oh, you've been doin' this since you were three, I suppose."

He pretended to look haughty. "I've been painting most of my life, I'll have you know." But then he let his mouth go crooked and said, "But not rooms – hardly ever." I made like I was gonna swat him and he flinched. "Well hey, I work in a paint store. I gotta make out like I know my stuff, y'know?"

"Well, ya fooled me!"

"Seriously, though, Ms. King trained me well enough that I know what I'm talking about in the store, but the actual doing is something else. But I assure you that I can do this without making a godawful mess."

"Good enough for me," I said, and held my hand out for him to shake. He hesitated for a blink or two before he took it. His hand was smooth and warm enough for me to notice it. Then I swept my arm over to indicate the trays and rollers and said, "Shall we dance?"

He bowed, and immediately decided that he was going to tackle the high brushwork around the cabinets and ceiling edges. "It's easier for me, I'm taller," he said. And although he wasn't way taller, he had a point, and I was glad to leave those to him.

Once in a while, I caught his hips swaying a bit to the Motown soundtrack I was playing again. Once in a while, I caught myself singing along when I was focused on my roller and forgot that I had company.

"I like your voice," he called out, looking at the corner of the ceiling, not at me.

"My voice was shot years ago," I called back.

"And before that?"

"Umm..." I dunno why I felt a bit shy about telling him. "I sang around Toronto for a while. Mostly I was a backing singer, but once in a while I went solo."

"Very cool," he said, still looking at his work. "But not surprising: even that little bit I heard sounded like experience. I bet I would've liked you back then, too." After a couple of brushstrokes, he said, "Who did you back up? What did you sing?"

"Stuff like this: R&B, soul, a little lounge stuff sometimes – no one you ever heard of."

"Very cool." He stepped down carefully off of the kitchen chair he was using as his ladder and said, "I'm taking a break – I could use a drink."

"Yeah, me, too." I rested my roller on the tray, stood up, and rubbed the small of my back. I looked over at him and said, "Are you eighteen?"

He looked back at me. "I'm twenty."

I gave him a nod and a little smile. "Then I got some wine coolers in the fridge still if that suits you."

"What kind?"

"Uh, strawberry and peach."

He perked up. "Peach sounds peachy!"

"Yeah, it would." I turned away toward the fridge to hide my smile and got him one, plus a strawberry for me. I took mine to the loveseat and stretched out in it, while he grabbed the other chair from the kitchen table and dragged it over closer. I offered him a cigarette but he just said "no thanks" while I lit mine.

I exhaled and watched him pull his hat off and perch it on his knee. His hair stood up wild, white gold, and I could see the blue of his eyes so much better. "So when you were sayin' you been painting all your life, you mean like art, right?"

He took a swig from his skinny little cooler bottle and nodded. "Yeah, I always liked art, as far back as I can remember. Painting mostly, but I do some printmaking, too. Well, I told you I print those T-shirts, right? But some, like, art prints, too."

"Is that your major in school?"

"If I was *in* school it would be, I guess. Not sure that I really need to be."

"How you figure?"

"I dunno, I..." He looked down a second, then drank a bit more. "I guess I feel like I already know what to do, sorta. I mean, I'm doing it. So I don't really need classes?"

I shrugged. "If you're happy like this, then okay."

"Oh, come on, now," he said, "that's too much to ask!" And he broke into a big laugh, but I felt like it had an edge in it. The cynicism of youth, maybe. "I mean, there are some people who do things that I'd like to know how to do, but *school-school* I was very glad to get out of."

Trying to steer things away from getting too heavy, I said, "I'd like to see your stuff sometime. I mean, all I know so far is your Karl Marx drawing."

He grinned. "Yeah, a lot of people like that one – I think that's my best-selling shirt. But I do a lot of different things... you really want to see?"

"I think so," I said. "I mean, I'm kinda interested in art." I was interested in *his* art, at least. I couldn't resist adding, "Maybe you got some etchings I could come up and see." And suddenly I wondered if I was already not-totally-kidding about that line.

But the line went over his head. "Oh, no, I've never had the chance to do etchings – all that equipment and money, no way. I share this amazingly grungy little studio downtown with a few other people. Just enough room for a silkscreen and an easel, really."

I sipped at my bottle. "Maybe I could see it someday."

"I'm sure that could be arranged, ma'am," he said. To me, he seemed kinda tickled that I would even want to.

Robin was a serious worker, and he could handle a brush and roller at least as well as I could, so the second coat was finished before dark, even the bedroom. He spent most of the time asking me more questions about my musical career, and I told him about Brant and Sheila and Clarice, and lounge singing and cage dancing, and he seemed to drink it all in. I enjoyed his attention, and it was only later that I realized he mighta been trying to steer the conversation away from himself.

When the last corner got covered, he insisted on gathering up all the brushes and rollers and washing them up for me. "Let me know when you're ready to put the colour on and I'll come back," he said over the sound of the water.

"Aw, no, I couldn't impose on you like that." I stood and watched his arm moving back and forth while he scrubbed – he wouldn't let me near the sink to help.

"Well hey," he said into the sink, "I'm not going to put a gun to your head about it – I'm just putting the offer out there for you. You let me know."

"Thank you, Robin. And thank you again for all your help tonight. You gotta at least let me drive you home."

He shook his head. "No no. It's a beautiful night, and I like walking. It's fine."

"Are you sure?"

He kept speaking into the sink. "You will find that I usually am." And I think he chuckled, but it was hard to hear over the splashing.

Eleven

My appointment with Dr. Kremer was on Thursday morning – not too early, thank God. I drove across downtown to an area where it looked like a number of old factories and warehouses had been converted into office spaces: I saw signs for lawyers and accountants, besides the one for the doctor's office. Some parts of town needed to struggle harder to stay alive in the modern world, I guess.

I made a point of arriving a little early, cuz old Dr. Bernhardt back home showed no mercy to anyone who came late – he'd give your slot to whoever was next and you could sit there and wait until he could squeeze you back in. The receptionist – Sue, a curvy brunette with big blue-rimmed glasses – seemed pleased to see me being punctual, and she handed me the clipboard, stuffed with a sheaf of forms, that I was expecting. Filling in my registration papers took me a good twenty minutes, some of it spent staring into the distance and blinking while I tried to remember which childhood disease I had in what year. Made me wish I studied for the quiz.

Then Sue ran some tests on me, since it turned out she was not just the receptionist, but also the nurse and whatever else was needed: she did everything here that wasn't actual doctoring. She weighed and measured me, took my blood pressure and temperature, got samples from me, made me look at a chart with a giant E at the top and another one with circles filled with red and green bubbles. Then she sat me back in the waiting room and assured me that the doctor would be with me shortly.

And sure enough, it was only a minute or two before the doctor's inner door opened. A gray-haired lady came out, eyes on the floor as she crossed the office, mumbled a goodbye to Sue, and went outside. A younger lady in a dark blue pantsuit stayed in that inner doorway and beckoned me inside. Much younger, younger than me even, I was pretty sure. Dr. Kremer was very short, with thick auburn bangs, wire-framed glasses on a strong nose, and a little smile that looked prim but real.

We shook hands, said we were glad to meet each other, and she sat me down on her examination table. She told me that she had received my file from Dr. Bernhardt's office and had no concerns with it, then asked to do a couple more small tests. She listened to my heart and lungs, peeked in my ears, and tapped the bottom of my knees. Then she invited me to sit in a real chair beside her desk.

She looked down at the folder on her desk for a second, then right into my eyes, and I somehow got the feeling that she really liked her work. Maybe because she couldn't have been doing it for that long yet. "Well, Rhonda, I have to tell you that you are in unusually good condition. But with you being a dancer, I guess that's not surprising."

"Dance *teacher*, now, but yeah. I been lucky, I guess; my health has always been okay. Pretty much the only time I saw Dr. Bernhardt was to get my pills renewed. And that's basically why I wanted to see you – I mean, I'm not worried about anything wrong with me."

She glanced at my forms again. "All right, we can renew that prescription for you. Don't want you going without, do we?" Then she looked me in the eye again. "Now you do realize that that isn't the only kind of protection you need nowadays?"

I gave her a big exaggerated nod. "Yes, doctor, I absolutely do realize." (If it seemed like there was any chance that Doug could be carrying something serious, I woulda given him sumthin to wear that day.)

She peered over her glasses at me. "Just like you realize that I am going to nag you about the cigarettes?"

"I admit, I don't always follow that advice as close as I do the other thing with the protection. But I *am* cutting down."

She jotted something down. "For today, let's just take it as read that I gave you the smoking lecture and you were properly contrite." She glanced at me out the corner of her eye and made a little grin. Then she took a little prescription pad, scrawled on it, and tore off the sheet to hand to me. "That's for your pills."

While I took it and thanked her, she picked up another pad and scrawled again, then handed me that sheet as well. "And this is a referral for Dr. Gallant – an optometrist. He's a good one, and I like him."

I blinked at the paper a few times. "Optometrist?"

"I think you should get your eyes checked. Going by what Sue wrote about how you did with the eye chart."

"My eyes are fine!"

"Really?" Dr. Kremer blinked. "No trouble reading?"

"No! And I read all the time!"

"Not even holding things farther away?"

"I – " And then I had to stop and think for a second. And realize that, actually, yeah, over the last year or so, I was holding books and things farther away than I used to. I just never thought anything of it.

Dr. Kremer closed her folder. "Well, I can't make you go, but you have that if you need it. Might make you more comfortable. Don't want you getting headaches later."

"Uhhh, okay, yeah, thank you." I folded the referral and tucked it in my purse. Then I waved the prescription a bit and said, "Oh, can you recommend a good place to get this filled?"

"Yes, but Sue has his contact info, so check with her on your way out." She stood up, so I did, too, and we shook hands again. "Remember I'm here when you need me, Rhonda."

"I will, definitely. Thank you." And I went out into the office and had a quick word with Sue to get the pharmacist's address and phone. But all the while, there was a little voice in the back of my head, cursing about the very idea of me needing glasses. Maybe it was really dumb of me, but I actually felt offended.

If you think that I went right out of that office and drove over to see Dr. Gallant and set up an appointment with him, you haven't been paying attention. I did, however, immediately head to the pharmacy Sue recommended: a funky little place downtown, full of dark wood much like that restaurant I visited with Sheila. The pharmacist was a big quiet guy with shaggy gray hair and a squinty smile, who almost rolled out a red carpet for me and insisted that I call him "Junior, everyone does". In other words, he fit right in, here.

Junior put a few months' supply of my pills in a white paper bag for me, then spent a few minutes quizzing me in a near-whisper, making sure that I wasn't having any troubles, common or not, with side effects. I guess this was his way of getting acquainted, but I appreciated his attention to detail with a new customer. It gave me a good feeling about him – I felt like Dr. Kremer and Sue steered me straight.

When I left the pharmacy, I realized that I more or less knew where I was – about a block down and around the corner from where Robin worked. So I figured I could spare a minute to wander over and say hi. I mean, it was a nice day, and there wasn't anyone else around here that I knew to say hi to. That's really all there was to it.

I walked up to the corner, past another coffee shop that wasn't a Tim's, a music store, some kind of New Age bookstore, a shoe repair place, til I came to the corner and peeked round. And yep, I called it: there was King's Hardware a few doors down. It gave me like a sense of accomplishment to be learning my way around. A puny sense, maybe, but still.

When I walked in, the door chime sounded and Robin turned around from where he stood back in the aisle. He saw it was me, immediately stood at attention like a ramrod, clicked his heels (or would, if sneakers could click), and made a stiff bow. "Madame!" he called out, then marched up to me til he was standing in my personal space. He came to a stop with a foot stomp. Then he spoke all low and confidential. "Are you here to report misbehaviour on the part of our products? Was one of the rollers insolent, perhaps?"

"Uhh, not at all, *garçon*: every item you sold me is a perfect gentleman."

Robin frowned and blinked. "How odd," he said. "I would expect beauty such as yours to lure at least *some* of them from off the straight and narrow..." (And would you believe I actually blushed at that? Just a bit.) "Um, so why are you here, then?"

"Honestly was in the neighbourhood and just stopped in to say hi."

"Ah, I see." He flashed me a big grin. "Hi!"

I had to smile back. "Hi."

"You're not finished your painting already, are you?"

"No, I never work that fast on sumthin like that."

"Well, good! Because I said I wanted to help, and you never called me!"

"It wasn't time to call you. And it only occurred to me right now that I couldn't call you even if I wanted to: I don't have your number."

He gave me a look like we were part of a conspiracy that was fun to be in.

"Ahhh, so you're asking for my number *now*."

I blushed again – good Lord. "Are, are you in the book?"

He looked down and started heading toward the counter. "I'll just, uh, give it to you. You drive a hard bargain, madame." He got hold of a pencil and scratch pad, scribbled on it, and handed me a phone number written below a name printed in block letters: WROBIN.

I blinked at the paper. "That's not how you actually spell your name, is it?" Then I folded it and tucked it in my purse – and it was only later that I realized I had never had a man talk me into taking his number that smooth and that fast. I guess I musta really wanted it.

He gave me a crooked little smile. "It is when I want to have fun. Now you should give me yours. Just to be fair."

"I do want to be," I said. And I did want to be. And I did give it to him, because by now I remembered what it was. This time, I noticed, right in the moment, that no man had ever gotten my phone number so smooth and so fast. Things seemed to work different in this town.

I had been thinking of saving the final painting for Sunday again, when I would have the most time. And I mentioned to him that's what I had in mind. Maybe that would plant it in his brain, and he might show up, like a knight in shining armour with a roller. But I still wasn't sure if I wanted to go so far as to actually call and ask him. Maybe I'd just leave that to fate.

Twelve

After work that night, I felt like going dancing – even after putting in hours doing it with my students. Part of it was that Sheila and I still hadn't gone out to have some fun together since I got into town. I even told her: if Candy wasn't gonna do her job and coax Sheila over to The Dark Side, then it was up to me. (And, after all, it was Motown-slash-Soul Night again.) Part of it may have been that it was something I could do that didn't need glasses. My nose was still out of joint after that business at the doctor's office in the morning.

I was honestly a little surprised that Sheila agreed to it, but pinned her down as soon as the okay came out of her mouth. She said we'd go home to have a quick bite, because the food at The Station was not much to try and build a proper dinner out of. Then she'd come by my place to pick me up and take us there. This told me that she was choosing to be designated driver tonight – so don't expect her to get crazy, and do expect her to wanna go home at a decent hour. It also told me that she wouldn't mind if I had a couple extra tonight – maybe she could tell I was in the mood for that after this morning.

One thing I appreciated about Sheila was that she didn't need to drink to have a good time and be fun to be with. I didn't need to either, although I will bet you there are people who would be surprised to hear me say that. People like that can't tell the difference between need and want. And they are dumbasses.

Sheila kept up with me on the dancefloor – it was so much more fun this week, when I had a partner for every dance. Once in a while the DJ would play a song that used to be in our set, and for those ones we would sing along and do our routine, as slick as if we just rehearsed that afternoon. (Well, okay, almost.) We even gathered together at a make-believe mike stand, without even thinking about it. That got us some looks and a few claps – it was a kick. Sheila had a way of making the years just melt away for me.

Magnolia was there that night, and she took a minute to push her way through the quicksand of guys around her, to come over to our table and say hi. She made a point of telling me what a great job she did on my hair, and I pulled her and Sheila over to one of the black lights so they could see how it lit up blue. Sheila laughed til I thought she was gonna pull sumthin.

Another one of Our Songs came on, so Sheila and I got back into show mode and had a blast for a few minutes. After it was done, there were a few cheers and claps – and then a slap, not too hard but sharp and clear, right on the backside of my leather miniskirt.

I whipped around fast to try and catch the joker who pulled that stunt – and for a second I just stared, like I needed to make sure what I was seeing. Finally I yelled out over the booming bass, "Dev?! What the actual?!"

Yep, that wolf grin could only be Dev O'Leary. "Hey, I tried callin' ta you guys about ten times, hah? Gotta get yer attention *somehow!*" He looked to me like he was glad to have the excuse. In his non-spanking hand he had part of a scotch, just to make sure I recognized him. He looked at me, kinda tickled and confused at the same time, and said, "And what the hell did'ja do to yer *hair*, Rhonda? You goin' all punk rock on me or *what?*"

"Dev!" Sheila called out. "What the hell are you doing way out here where the boonies have boonies?"

He cocked his head and some of his shiny hair fell toward his eyes. "I got business out here." No surprise to anyone: Dev was a guy who never stopped thinking about business for very long. He worked at the agency that booked Brant Benson and the Glories up until a couple years ago, so we all used to bump into him once in a while. But in Toronto we would expect it – not Westgate. "So hey, where you guys sittin', hah?"

And so Dev tagged along back to our table, and stole a chair that looked empty from one of our neighbours. He put his drink down and stuck a hand in his jacket. "Well, fancy running into you ladies out here – what a treat!" He pulled out a pack of smokes, which was enough to get me going into my purse for mine.

While I let him give me a light, I said, "How about next time you wanna get our attention, you come closer and talk louder? That works for me."

He shrugged and grinned. "And some things work for me."

Sheila sputtered into her diet coke. "He knows better than to pull that on *me*, baby." Her eyes twinkled while she looked right into his and said, "I'd have your arm bent up behind your back so hard, I'd get you punching the back of your

own head!"

Dev exhaled and gave her a nod. "And I don't doubt that for a second, Sheila." He glanced around at both of us with a look on his face like *well isn't this nice and cozy*. "Too bad Clarice ain't here, hah? The Glories, all back together again – wouldn't that be great? Ahh man, you ladies were the best, I'm tellin' ya. Oh, Brant, too, he was great."

Sheila looked down at her drink when Clarice's name got mentioned. "Well, she was always one to keep to herself, kinda quiet. But it's been years since I've seen or heard from her. Or about her, even."

"Same here," I said. "I ask around sometimes but nobody knows nuthin." It was weird, how after Brant finally left the biz, Clarice seemed to vanish without a trace. Kinda disturbing, when I let myself think about it.

"Ah yeah." Dev blinked and his mouth twisted a bit, then he took a drag from his cigarette. "Tell ya what: when I get back to the office, I'll talk ta Morley, see if he knows someone who can dig around a bit. Least I can do, hah?" I nodded and Sheila said a quiet thanks.

"So you said you had business out here," I said. "Like what?"

Dev leaned back and rested an elbow on the back of his chair, like he was happy to have a chance to talk about himself. "First off and most important, I brought in my best suit for a coupla repairs." (I thought the black suit he had on didn't look so bad.) "I know a guy out here, we go back a ways, best tailor around. The guy is like a craftsman and an artist – I wouldn't wanna trust my stuff to anyone else. Price is right, too.

"But on top o' that, I'm doin' a little scoutin' for the agency, puttin' feelers out, awright? We book acts in places as far out as this – farther, even. Like I was just at the King Eddie before this, makin' sure they're happy with the acts we send out. And now I'm thinkin' that maybe *this* place might wanna work with us, start bookin' live music, hah? I'm gonna have a word with these guys."

I nodded at his drink. "So does that mean your scotch is goin' on an expense account or sumthin, Mr. Business Trip?"

Dev tipped his head back and laughed. He wiped one eye and said to me, "Aaa,

yer a natural, Rhonda. Lemme know if you wanna job with the agency, I'll put in a good word with Morley for ya. Ha! Geez!" He finished off his scotch. "But, like, look around: there's enough people here that like this sound, right? *You* guys do! Well, there's this new girl we just started booking, just turned old enough to start playin' the licensed places – her sound would fit right in here, classic soul. I should get these guys to give her a shot."

I had to say this for Dev: he was always fulla ideas. A real go-getter. And he believed in himself – or at least he always gave that impression.

He looked at me and said, "But now how about *you*, hah? I never expected to run into you out here, either!" He waved his cigarette at Sheila. "I mean, Sheila I knew about, startin' her new business out here, I heard about all that. So what, you out visitin'?"

I downed the last of my G&T and looked him in the eye. "Actually, Dev, I have moved out here. Just a couple weeks ago. Started workin' for Sheila now."

"Really?" His eyes lit up like this was the most wonderful thing he'd heard in years. "Well, hot damn! I been thinkin' about doin' that exact same thing myself! Keepin' an eye out for apartments out here, hah? I mean, the rents out here are incredible compared to back home!"

"Don't I know it," I said, not sure how I felt about this new twist.

"I mean, geez, it'd be worth it to me ta commute in to the office if I could save that kinda money. Like, I don't mind a bit o' drivin', right?"

I could feel one corner of my mouth go up. "And here was me, thinkin' I could get away from you if I hid out, way the hell out here."

His laugh was sharp and cackly. "Aw man, you kill me!" Just then, Martha and the Vandellas started playing, and Dev gestured at me with his smoke, like he wanted to poke my arm with it. "Hey, I love this one – come dance with me."

My mouth fell open a little. "The hell I will! After you provin' you still don't know how to watch yer hands? Dumbass! You ain't no better than you were at that A&R party at the Sheraton."

Dev looked mildly stunned. "Wha–? C'man! That was two three years ago!"

"And that makes a difference how?"

Sheila stood up then, and gave a little tug on his shoulder. "C'mon, Mr. O. – I'll do the deed with you." She glanced down at me and tried to hold back a smile. "*I ain't a-scared of this weasel!*" I had to snicker.

Dev said, "Yeah! Now we're talkin'!" while he followed Sheila into the crowd on the dancefloor. But he looked back at me and gave me a wink – maybe his way of saying *no hard feelings*, I dunno.

The rest of the evening was relatively quiet. After the one dance, Dev came back to the table to say a quick goodbye and headed off. Later on, Gary came by, but when he saw I was there with a friend he didn't stay around more than a few seconds to say hi. Sheila had a few questions about him after he left – I hated to disappoint her by not having anything juicy to share. But I wasn't gonna make stuff up just to feed her curiosity, either. Although maybe it'd be more fun all round if I did? Ah, to be young and wild and adventurous again...

Thirteen

After work on Saturday, and before dinner, was another hot, gorgeous stretch of sun on my patio: to me it looked like a very clear invitation. So I got bikinied up and sunscreened up and took my latest fat book out to the chaise lounge for a while. But I turned the chair around a little, so that my back was to the hedge. I was still getting full sun in that position, but I could sorta hide from Doug a bit if he was out. I wasn't looking to catch his eye any more than I had to. At least today.

Not that I was afraid of him now, not really. But I did worry about him thinking I was sending out invites. I still needed to think about what to say to him, if it got to the point where he was pushing for more from me. I knew he would be looking for it more often, and more urgent, than I was – he was a teenage guy, after all. It seemed to me like a good idea to get everything out in the open with him, before it reached the point where I invited him back to my room again. Which I wasn't ruling out.

Anyway, I wasn't gonna be afraid to tan in my own yard, Doug or no Doug. And if he said something to me, I would answer. And I would be nice. But today, if we could just pass each other by quietly, that'd suit me for the time being.

As it happened, that is how it went down. While I was reading, there was a time there where I heard basketball sounds. (A lot more backboard than net, it seemed to me.) And sometimes those sounds would stop, and I thought I heard a rustle at the hedge. That happened a coupla times. But he never said a word, and that's where I left things. Maybe *he* was still wondering what to say, too. Which in a way could be good, cuz it might mean he was not so insensitive, like a lotta younger guys can be. And which in a way might be not so good, cuz if he was sensitive, I'd need to be even more careful how I handled him. No wonder I wanted to step lightly.

Soon, I got lost in this new book, watching Ravenna Montblanc, Architect to the Stars, vacationing on a beach in Monaco, and I didn't notice when all the sounds next door stopped completely. But I knew that this guy who tripped over her beach bag, Mr. Black-Haired Blue-Eyed Tan, who claimed to be a baron – I knew he was up to sumthin. Or soon would be.

I didn't sleep in all that late on Sunday. I was actually looking forward to tackling the final coat of my paint job – looking forward even more to moving the furniture back where it belonged and getting rid of all these newspapers laying around all over. I debated waiting for Robin to show up, but I really only half-believed he would. So after brunch I just started tackling it on my own. If he showed up partway through, he could help out with the rest. If he showed up after I was done, then he could sit for a while and admire my handiwork. It'd just be nice if he chose to show up, whenever and however.

I hit the bedroom first, to give the paint smell the most time to ease up a bit before I went to sleep. (I was saving the kitchen til last, hoping that Robin would get stuck with it.) Once my room was done, I wanted an excuse for a break. So I took a quick drive over to Donut Villa to pick up a half-dozen. I figured it'd be nice to have something to offer my guest if he came – if he didn't, then more snacks and day-olds for me, right?

When I pulled up and parked at the plaza, I noticed something painted on the window of Gina's Pizza next door. It was getting to the point where I was expecting to see these things by now. Of course I was curious about it, so when I got out of the car, I went over to check that out first.

I didn't need to read the signature at the bottom right to know who made this: those abstract shapes were a style I was beginning to recognize. New picture, though, and a new twist. When you stood back and squinted, these shapes turned into a big portrait of a face – not a shouting one, just very calm, looking straight ahead. But one side of the face was a man's – short hair, mustache – and the other half had long hair and eyelashes and lipstick. And the man half was spray-painted in pink, and the woman half in blue.

I still didn't know what the point of these Night Shift paintings was, or if there even was one... but for me there was always something about these pieces that stuck with me, made me think. Haunted me, even, but not in a bad way.

Doug was on duty behind the empty counter, and I could see him perk up when he noticed me. "Hey, Rhonda!" he said, blushing a little.

"Yo, Doug. Can you gimme a half-dozen assorted, just whatever you know are the good ones?"

He gave me a proud little smile. "They're all good here. But yeah okay." He reached for a box, then looked back at me again. "Are you still painting your place?" I guess the fact that I was still wearing my painting outfit was a good clue.

"Heh, yeah, I don't like to rush."

He gave a slow nod while he loaded the box, like he was saying *tell it like it is, sister*. "When do you think you'll be done?"

"This afternoon, I think – I hope."

"Ah. Ya know, I'd help you if you wanted, or I would if I didn't hafta work."

"That's okay, Doug, you already helped me a lot, remember?"

He closed the box. "Well, uhh... maybe I could come see it when it's done? Sometime? I bet you're making it a lot brighter in there like you said, eh?"

I dug in my purse for my wallet. "Sometime, yeah. Give it a while for the smell to go away, be nicer." I handed him a five. "So you must be done exams now, right?"

He blinked, like the change in topic caught him off guard. "Oh! Oh, yeah, a couple days ago." The cash register rung when he got my change.

"How do you think you did?"

"Pretty good, I think." He licked his lip and nodded. "Pretty sure I passed."

"Good man." I picked up my box and turned to the door. "Later – don't work too hard, right?"

He called after me, "Yeah, you, too."

Just as I was leaving the parking lot, I saw a figure walking lazy down the sidewalk – a figure who was unmistakable for me by now. I stopped the car just

before I got onto the street, honked, leaned out my window, and called out, "Yo! Wuh-robin!"

Robin stopped sudden, looked over to me, and grinned. Same painty outfit as last Sunday, same messy hat shading his face. He didn't call or wave, just sauntered over to my door. "Hey," he said, "guess where I'm headed?"

I smiled back at him. "Hop in, Picasso, I got a roller waitin' with your name on it."

"Music to my ears," he said while he walked around to the passenger door.

I lifted the box of donuts off his seat and moved them to the back, but he watched the box like a cat watches yarn. "Those are for later," I said, "you gotta earn 'em."

He sat down, closed the door, and then saluted me. "Aye-aye, cap'n!"

When we got in my apartment, Robin reached into a pocket and headed over to my shelf where the boombox was. "Hey," he called back over his shoulder, "I brought some music over – is that okay?" And I saw him pull a cassette out of his paint-pants and plunk it onto the shelf.

"Um, yeah, sure," I said. I went over to the kitchen table to put the donuts down. I figured I could handle a while of heavy metal or whatever he was into, so long as I could watch him and hear what he had to say for himself. I heard him take my tape out, put it in its case, then open up his, slip it in, and click Play. Then he went right over to the tray and brush and roller waiting by the kitchen, and got straight to work on the fussy stuff he knew I didn't like.

I didn't recognize the music that came on, but it wasn't metal. It was a kind of smooth hypnotizing rock, good drums, and a singer who sounded low and calm and very English. I cranked it up to hear it over the oscillating fan, then kept an ear on it while I painted the living room, in between little blips of conversation with Robin. A lot of the songs reminded me of some of the gentle, pretty, sixties rock I liked, like The Byrds or maybe Love. Some of them didn't grab me so much, but mostly this stuff was okay.

When Robin took a quick break to flip the tape over, I wandered closer to him, watched his face and hands – then looked down at the tape case. It was a painting, green and white splashes and dribbles of paint that looked a lot like his

hat. And, for whatever reason, there were a couple of slices of oranges laying on the painting – I guess that was art. And big block letters that said **THE STONE ROSES**.

I shrugged and watched him walk back to the kitchen cupboards. "Where'd you hear of these guys?" I called to him.

"Y'know, I don't even remember, exactly? Just came out last fall. But they're my faves, I love 'em."

"Not bad," I said. "They're English, right?"

Robin watched his brush move extra careful along the edge of the cupboard. "Uh-huh. Really big over there right now."

I said, "Cool," and went back to my work. After I dunno how long, I heard something a bit different that really caught my attention. Still smooth and kinda dreamy, but also really funky, drums outa James Brown, sweet bass groove, scratchy wah-wah guitar that gave me an itch to dance. So strange to hear all that going down and then the voice on top of it sounding so relaxed and so... white. And the song just went on and on, and I could feel myself moving into another zone. Finally I realized that my roller had stopped moving, and I called over to Robin, "Hey, I really like this one."

"Ya do?" I thought I heard him chuckle. "Yeah, this is 'Fools Gold' – their big hit over there. So you're into this, huh?"

"Yeah, I wanna hear it again once it's done." It'd been a while since I heard something new that clicked with me like this.

"Okay then, Rhonda, one of these days we are going to Rave Night at The Station, you and me!"

"Oh, is this what rave is, then?"

"Kinda sorta. They play lotsa different things at Rave Night: stuff like this, electronic, acid house, a lot of things from England – it's all good dance music. I go pretty much every week."

"Well, this is good ta know. I know some acid house and yeah, it's fun. I, I really

had no idea what rave meant, but it sounds like my thing, the way you tell it."

"If you like to dance – and I know you do – then you will love it. And I can pretty much guarantee you they will play 'Fools Gold'. So how about it?"

"Yeah sure, it sounds like fun sometime."

"This Saturday?"

Oh yeah, the sign said it was Saturdays. "Wha–? Uh, well, I, uh, I gotta see how I'm doin'. Saturday's my long day at work, I might be kinda beat. We'll hafta see."

"C'mon. This Saturday unless you're dead."

I was facing the wall, rolling paint, so he couldn't see me grin. "Okay, then, yes." And just like that, Robin was already asking me out on a date. And I was already saying yes.

"Attagirl," he said.

Fourteen

I figured we were more than halfway through, and maybe we coulda finished before too long if we pushed onward, but I felt like taking a smoke break. And the work was hot enough that a drink wouldn't hurt, either. So I rested my roller in the tray and offered to make Robin a shandy.

"Does this mean donuts finally, too?" he said.

"Mmmokay, twist my arm. I won't make ya wait til it's all finished. Bring 'em over to the coffee table."

Robin stepped down off the kitchen chair parked beside the cupboards, and carefully rested his brush on his tray. "Wuh-Rhonda," he said, "you are a gentleman and a scholar."

"Two wuh-rongs don't make a wuh-right, buddy," I said.

I poured us a couple of hefty-sized drinks and carried them back over to the loveseat – but, once again, Robin dragged a kitchen chair over beside the coffee table and sat there instead. The glasses got sweaty almost instantly, which made them look extra refreshing. I handed him his, sat in the loveseat corner nearest to him, and we clinked our glasses in a toast before tipping them back.

Before I lit up, I just looked around slow, admiring our work. It was looking really good in here now. I mean, any colour would be an improvement to what those folks before me tried to pull, but this one I felt like I could live with for a long time. It was almost spooky how well Robin could help me pick it out, almost like he knew my tastes better than I did.

I put my drink down and watched Robin while I lit my smoke. He was looking around at the paint job, too, and it seemed to me that he was okay with it. We just kept The Stone Roses playing while we stretched and took a breather. I mean, I'd be able to listen to my own tunes any time I wanted – plus, knowing that he loved this music, it felt right to hear it while I was watching him and spending time with him. Like it helped to complete his vibe, maybe.

Robin leaned over in his chair to catch more of the fan when it swung around toward him. "This is turning out all right," he said. "We make a decent team."

"Decent enough." I reached for my drink again.

"So, we still have your room to do after this?"

"Ah, no, I did that this morning. We're in the home stretch now."

Robin bent forward toward the donut box, opened it, then looked over at me. "Aha. Afraid to be alone in your boudoir with me. I see. Makes sense."

I sputtered into my shandy. "What about when I had you back there helpin' with the primer last week, dumbass?"

He batted his eyelashes at me. "Oh, I don't think you actually *had* me, back there. Pretty sure I'd remember that." Then he gave me a wicked fox grin.

I laughed, shook my head, said "geez", and drank some. I wasn't gonna tell him about the little flutter he gave me, just from putting the idea in my head for a second. Not today.

While he bit into a chocolate glazed donut, he stood up, then rolled his shoulders around and wandered over to my little bookshelf. "So, you read some," he said.

"Some," I said. "I realize how pathetic that looks." There were only about five books there, including the high-flying intrigue of *Ravenna Montblanc*, already in progress.

He looked back at me. "How d'you figure? I'm not one to judge, usually."

"I do read a lot," I said, "but I don't keep a lot. I pick up trashy romances from the thrift store or the sale cart at the library, for like a quarter or a dime, and when I'm done I donate 'em back."

He turned back to the shelf. "Ah, so you're not a devoted student of the classics."

"Not as such. I admit, I'm just lookin' for kicks 'n' giggles."

He picked one up and turned it around while he looked at it. "But I notice you

have a few here all by the same author?"

"Ah, yeah." I smiled. "My Aurora Windermere collection: those are the only ones I keep. She's my absolute fave."

He looked at me again with his eyebrows up. "You have fave trash? Interesting."

I drank a bit more. "Her stuff ain't so trashy, really, I don't think. I dunno, I just think she's really good. I like her characters, and her stories ain't so dumb. They stay with me afterward, and I wanna read them again... and I can't usually say that about other people's."

Robin nodded, put the book back, and took another bite of donut. "I'll take that as a glowing recommendation, then."

"I hear she has another one out, but I ain't seen it cheap anywhere yet." I was starting to think that, after I was done with Ravenna, it might be time to go back and watch Cedric the privateer do battle with the Spanish galleons again.

Robin sat back down and gave me a serious look. "It's nice when an artist connects with you. That's something I always respect."

I blew smoke away from him and said, "So who connects with you? What do you read? I figure you gotta read sumthin, a guy like you."

He ran a hand back through his blond quiff, and made himself look like an adventure somehow, all wild and blowing in the wind. "These days, I'm mostly reading books about artists, like painters. If I can find something written by the artist himself, even better. I love finding out how they think about it. Stuff like that inspires me – and I can use all the inspiration I can get, eh?"

"The other day you were sayin' I could come see your studio sometime."

He took a careful sip of his drink. "Did you want to?"

I nodded. "Uh-huh. Someday. Maybe I didn't make that clear enough before."

"Oh, I thought maybe you did. Or maybe I just hoped." He gave me a shy smile and blushed a bit.

"Yeah, well... keep me in mind, right?"

"I do – I mean, I will." And he blushed more.

Finally we made ourselves get back to work, and just as I figured, it wasn't too long before the last corner got covered. (Before dinner time, even.) We cheered and stretched and pushed the smalls of our backs. Once again, Robin insisted on doing all the clean-up, and once again that didn't take too much of an arm twist.

After he finished washing up the equipment (and then his hands and arms as well as he could), he grabbed his hat from the kitchen table and parked it back into position. Then he shuffled over to the boombox to get his tape out, and said, "As always, Wuh-Rhonda, it has been a true slice." While he stuffed the tape case back in his pocket, he turned to me and gave me a deep bow.

I gave him a little curtsy back. "And as always I thank you for all your help, Wuh-Robin. At least this time everything is done, and I won't have to call you back for more of this."

He blinked and looked thoughtful for a second. "Then I, umm... I hope you can think of something else to call me back for. Sometime."

"I will make a point of thinkin' o' sumthin. So, can I at least drive you home this time? You been workin' hard."

He gave me a smile, kinda breezy and carefree, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Nope. I'm good."

"Okay." I nodded slow. "Well, at least you got your hat to keep that sun off your delicate complexion, right? How long a walk you got?"

He shrugged. "Not so very. And yeah, I never leave home without my Reni hat." I didn't know what he meant by that, but I just let it go for the time being. I dunno, maybe I was afraid of sounding old and out of it if I asked.

"Right on. So, uh, thank you again for being so much help, and I hope I see you soon."

"My profoundest pleasure," he said, and he turned to the door. He looked back over his shoulder at me. "But remember, you'll see me on Saturday night."

"Ah yeah." I could feel myself break into a big smile at that. And it was gorgeous to see his big smile back at me before he went out into the sun. After that, the room felt very quiet. The whole world did. But it was a sweet quiet.

Fifteen

After work on Wednesday, I swung by the plaza on my way home to get milk. I passed by the pizza place on my way through the lot, and noticed that the graffiti on their window was gone. No sign of The Night Shift on any of the other windows along the strip, either. For the time being – but who knew when those guys might strike again?

When I parked at home and took the milk to my door, I saw there was a package stuffed in my mailbox, big enough that the lid wouldn't close all the way. I took it out and saw that it wasn't in an envelope, just bundled in a paper bag from a bookstore downtown. But I figured I could wait til I got inside to find out what was in it.

But I was too curious to wait until after dinner. As soon as I had the milk in the fridge, I was rattling that bag, and then pulling a book out of it. Once I saw it, I just stood stunned for a second: it was the new Aurora Windermere, a brand new copy.

My chest suddenly felt all warm and flooding. This had to be Robin – who else would know that I wanted this? I couldn't believe what a sweet gesture this was. Again, before even making dinner, I dug his number out of my purse and went over to the phone. I had to thank him, and I didn't wanna wait.

A tired lady's voice answered hello.

"Hello," I said, "can I speak to Robin, please?"

"Ah, sorry, he, he's out right now. Who's calling?"

My guess was this was his mom, and suddenly I wasn't sure if it might complicate his life, having older women leaving messages for him, so I just wanted to back off fast. "Oh, never mind, I'll try back later, thanks." And I hung up. I never even thought that he might still be living at home, but so many people that age are.

Then for a second I had another thought: if that was his mom, it was entirely possible that she was only a few years older than I was. But I just went no. No, I wasn't gonna freak out about some people thinking this was weird. I wasn't gonna be afraid of other people's opinions and let them wreck this.

And what *was* "this", anyway? A young guy I met a couple weeks ago, is all. I hardly knew him. But already I knew that he was talented and creative. And funny. He seemed smart. He seemed to like me, but why, I didn't know. And damn he was beautiful – a work of art, God's masterpiece. And I was lucky enough to be in the right time and place to be able to behold the Lord's work.

Could there be more to it than this? How much more did I want there to be? I didn't know, yet. All I wanted was to be in the moment with him. When he was around, time stopped mattering. Time stopped moving.

Well, if my luck held out, I could very well see him in person before too long, and I could thank him then. Which, when I thought about it, is what I'd prefer anyway. And it wouldn't be any later than Saturday night, right?

After dinner I decided to put *Ravenna* on hold and dig into Ms. Windermere's latest, which I was sure would be better. I parked my butt in the loveseat, my coffee on the table in front of me, and my new book in my lap. I confess, I peeked at the front pages to see if there was an inscription, but no, I was just being silly. Then I flipped to the beginning of the story.

Before I even finished reading the first page, it sank in that I was gradually pushing the book back toward my knees, and then trying to hold it out past them. This position wasn't so comfortable to read in, but I had to admit that I couldn't make out the print so good when it was closer. Did this book have really tiny type or sumthin? I actually got up and brought it over to the shelf, to compare it to my other Windermere books. No, the print was the same size in all of 'em.

Damn.

For some reason, this ticked me off enough that I didn't feel like reading anymore. I didn't wanna wreck reading my favourite writer with my bad mood. Now what I really felt like doing was dancing. So I went back in my room to get changed, telling myself that, like it or not, I was gonna call Dr. Gallant the optometrist in the morning.

Damn.

I knew better than to call Sheila about this at the last minute, plus after just going last week, she wouldn't be up for it again so soon. But I was good on my own. I debated going to the King Eddie for a change – didn't wanna get stale, right? – but once I parked and got outa the car, the noise was enough to change my mind. Could easily hear it out on the street and a few doors down, and it was too loud and too metal for my tastes. So, tonight, back to The Station once again, my new home away from home. A little voice in the back of my head told me that my budget and my liver could not afford to keep doing this as often as I'd been. I told the voice I was just finding my feet and settling in, so calm down.

Wednesday night happened to be New Romantic Night at The Station, so I heard a lotta songs I remembered from my clubbing days, back when Brant Benson and the Glories were at their peak. (Or what passed for it.) We were playing nice places, fairly often, and the money had picked up some, so I had fond memories of those years. When I heard Duran Duran and Human League, like I was hearing now, I remembered having some laughs with Sheila. And I didn't remember having any worries, even though I realize I must have had. Rose-coloured glasses, right? Next time I came on a Wednesday, I'd ask Sheila farther ahead, cuz I bet she'd enjoy this, too.

I danced a few songs, made eye contact with a few guys, looked around to see if there was anyone I knew. For a while, nothing. At one point I saw someone who looked like he might be Doug's dad. Hard to be sure when I only saw part of a face once before. And why a guy that age would wanna be here with this music, I didn't know.

He looked over and spotted me – I guess the magenta hair made me easier to recognize – then his eyes got a bit bigger and he turned away quick. A girl went after him, like maybe they were together. And to me she looked pretty young to be Doug's mom. I shrugged. Could be nuthin to it. I could be way off base.

It ended up being a real quiet evening. No interesting men, not that many drinks. Mostly what I did was sit with myself, think, and gradually make peace with the idea that I was gonna need glasses. Once I made myself realize that I was being kinda silly, and I just needed to roll with this, then I was ready to go home.

When I got back to my car, I figured I should sit for a while and let my head clear

some more before I got going. So I rolled my window down to let the cooler air in, turned the key partway so I could put the radio on, and punched in an oldies station, down low. (At night the Toronto stations came in a bit clearer.) Then I got myself a smoke and just sat peaceful, watching the street in the night.

Downtown Westgate was pretty quiet this time of night. I knew there would be an uptick in an hour or so when the bars let out, but for now, long stretches where there was no one. Every now and then, one person walking by alone, maybe a couple out for a stroll in the dark. No one hurried; everyone seemed relaxed, unlike Toronto a lotta the time.

I thought I heard something, like a hissing, just for a few seconds, but with the radio on it was hard to be sure. Couldn't make out where it was coming from. Then I saw some movement in a shadow a few doors ahead of me, and a figure came out into the streetlights. Slim, not too tall, dressed all in black – what looked like a black baseball cap, even. And they were carrying a big black rectangle, what looked like a suitcase... except, when they turned, I could see how skinny it was, and I realized it must be one of those what they call art portfolios. It seemed like whoever it was looked my way – maybe they could hear my radio – and froze for a second, then made a run for it across the street and into an alley, and that was the last I could see.

This got me suspicious. I had a feeling. I took my keys and got out of the car. Judging by the way my legs felt under me, I was good to get back on the road now. After I checked this out, at least. A little way past the jewellery store was what looked like a realtor's office – I could just make out photos of houses up inside the window. But covering over some of those photos was spray paint, smelling very fresh, looking wet where it caught a hint of a streetlight. Maybe light blue – hard to tell when it was this dim. But I could make out the stencilled shapes: they made a mountain, with a giant hand crashing up through the top of it from the inside, reaching for the sky.

I had finally caught a glimpse of one of those guys working The Night Shift. And, even though it sounded silly, even to me, that glimpse made me feel like I was standing at the edge of something big and exciting.

Sixteen

Thursday morning, I had two calls to make. One was to book an appointment with the optometrist. (Yes, I actually followed through on that one. Give me a second to take a little bow.) That was for a coupla weeks from now – I jotted it down and stuck it on the fridge. In the meantime, I would stick with reading about Ravenna Montblanc's romp in Monaco, which had easier print.

The other was a short call to Toronto, to talk to mama. With the long weekend coming up, I wanted to see if her and papa were going up to the cottage then – it'd be rare for them not to. Once I found out they were, I shamelessly wrangled an invite out of them to go visit on Sunday. (She seemed completely unfazed by how brazen I was.) Summers in the Muskokas were gorgeous, not to be missed – a chance to listen to the lake and smell the pines.

So the plan was for me to get there around mid-afternoon on Sunday, stay overnight, and then face the crowds on the highway back south on the holiday Monday, which I was willing to endure. In theory, I could leave after work on Saturday and get up there for a late dinner and two nights' stay. But for one thing, twenty-four hours was about my limit for being in the same place with my folks – after that, we inevitably started to get on each other's nerves. It was nicer and better for everyone involved if we could avoid that.

For another, I already had a previous engagement for Saturday night.

A good thing about working a long day on Saturday, at least this week, was that it kept me occupied and helped the time pass. There was a cute little moment when that real young girl, name of Amy, came over to me at the end of class, looking all proud, to tell me how her mom got her a practice board for at home, just like I said. (Which reminded me that I still needed to get my own, but I forgot to tell her that part.)

While we gabbed, I had a chance to ask her what got her into tap in the first place. And she told me all about how her mom got her watching Ginger Rogers movies, and Ginger was kind of her hero. And I told her that I was still dreaming of being as good as Ginger someday, but that I bet she could do it if she kept practising. Which made her light up a little, and made me feel good.

I thought that was cool, how something from so long ago could still connect with someone that young. Not everyone was interested in Old Stuff, but there was always someone who was. It was comforting, somehow, to think about the way some things manage to get passed down over time, and survive.

When I got dressed for clubbing that night, I went the extra distance, so Robin would know I was trying. I swapped out the white halter for a light blue one that I knew would glow purple under a black light, and added a studded belt for an accent on the leather mini. And for him I wore fishnets – maybe not every guy had a fetish for fishnets, but I had never yet met a man who didn't at least notice 'em. And by God, tonight Robin was gonna notice me.

For whatever reason, he said that we should meet down at The Station, and he'd wait outside for me. I guess he recognized my Civic even in the dusk, cuz when I cruised past the doors he gave me a big wave. And while I crawled farther down the block looking for a space, he started walking brisk down the sidewalk to meet me.

I ended up parking in front of that realty office where I saw The Night Shift the other night – their window was cleaned right off by now. Robin came flapping right around onto the street so that he'd be beside me as soon as I got out of the car. His outfit floated behind him: oversize tie-dye T-shirt that fit him almost like a minidress, and huge blue wide-legs below that. No hat tonight – his hair drifted in the warm breeze almost like tall grass. And man he looked fired up for the evening, his eyes wide and bright, his smile even more so.

"Yay, you made it! You look amazing!" he said, almost bouncing on his toes. He looked like he was ready for a good time, and like I was part of it.

I had to smile back. "Wouldn't miss this," I said. "Oh, and before I forget, thank you for the book – that was so sweet!"

In the dim light it was hard to be sure, but I think he blushed. "You figured it was me, huh? Did you read it yet?"

"I, ah... soon. Once I finish this other one."

"Awright!" Robin led me back around onto the sidewalk, toward the club. I

looked over at the realtor's and said, "Hey, do you know anythin' about this graffiti gang I keep seein'?"

He looked over at me and blinked. "Say what? 'Graffiti gang'?"

"Some gang is spray-painting graffiti onto windows all over town. I thought you mighta noticed it cuz it's like art, what they do."

While we walked, he looked down and blinked some more. "Uhh, not sure I remember seeing anything like that. What brought this up?"

"Oh, that place we just passed, I saw 'em paintin' that window a couple nights ago. Or one of 'em, anyway."

He looked me right in the eye, then, a little concerned. "Oh yeah?"

"But they already cleaned it off, so I can't show ya what I'm talkin' about. And before that, I saw one on this place right here."

The rumble of music and babble of voices got louder when we came closer to the doors of The Station. "Well... this isn't much of a town for gangs, really – never was, as far as I know," he said. "But maybe you still wanna be careful, okay? Maybe things are changing."

"Yes, sir," I said, and he smiled again.

Once again, they didn't I.D. me but they did Robin, and then we got swallowed up by the lights and heat and pounding sound. Rave Night was way more high intensity and high energy than Motown, and the way Robin described it to me before didn't really prepare me for that side of it. I could feel the bass in my bones. The club's light show was way more active and intense than I saw before. Lots of the dancers were waving glow sticks. Robin said that it wouldn't be too crowded tonight with so many people already away for the long weekend, but to me it looked and felt packed. Not that I minded – it just added to the party vibe for me.

Acid house was blasting and the dancefloor was jammed with people losing themselves in it. To me they all looked about Robin's age; many of them wore the same sort of roomy clothing he had on. Some of them were blowing referee whistles; some had face paint. Their dancing was mostly what I would have to

call free form, but it felt like they left all their inhibitions out in the street. This was a place where people knew how to cut loose and feel good: it felt like my scene.

We squeezed in at the bar, cuz there were no tables to be had, and ordered coolers to start us off. Then we tried to babble over the noise. I noticed the bar staff were selling a lot of bottles of water, which made sense to me with a crowd working this hard on a summer night. I was sure Robin and I would go through more than one of those ourselves, while we were here. Before we even made it onto the dancefloor, he already looked like he was in his element, like he loved the music and loved life. The pure young energy of him made my heart pound before we even got moving.

But soon we did get moving. He swept me away with his freedom and his energy, we swayed and squirmed, sometimes he'd grab my shoulders and swing us around and laugh. Sometimes I'd grind my backside into him and feel a little flutter when he'd push back. No matter how wild he got, there was always a graceful beauty about every move he made – he was the most incredible man I had ever seen.

After a long while, I needed a drink and a rest, so I dragged him back to the bar. I grabbed another cooler but he just wanted a water this time. He chugged it back and then wanted to hit the floor again, as if the fast synthesizers playing now were a lure. I needed more time to lean on the bar and breathe, but he was so eager, I told him to go on ahead. He crushed me in a big hug and I think he kissed the top of my head. Then he pushed on back into the crowd, dancing with everyone and no one.

A little ways over, I saw someone who reminded me of that black-haired waitress from the little restaurant: she looked like she was dancing with a taller girl. Robin ended up drifting over that way and dancing with the two of them for a few songs. I could see them all laughing and bouncing around each other. It looked like these were girls he was already friends with – I guess it would figure that he'd have a lotta friends. I wished I could keep up with him better. But for the time being, I just watched, and felt the beat wash through me and get into my blood.

And then a funky rhythm started in, one that I recognized now, and Robin whipped around to look at me and scrambled his way back to my side. He panted, "Please, you gotta tell me that you're rested up enough now!"

I laughed, and felt my fingertips brushing my throat, and I think I was blushing. I called back to him, "Yes!" And he grabbed my hand tight and yanked me onto the dancefloor for my Stone Roses song. It happened, just like he promised me.

We were surrounded by people swaying easy, some with their eyes closed. In this place, a song like this was almost a slow dance. Robin leaned in and said, "Show me your moves!"

A beat like this seemed like it would work with some of the numbers me and the girls used to do, so I picked one of our old routines and made it fit. He grinned, watched me for a few seconds, and then started trying to mirror what I did, like we were our own little backing group. I'd never heard such a pure laugh of such pure joy as what he gave me then. And suddenly, I was flooded inside with warmth. This moment, this music, this man – this was living. This was life. I was alive. God, I was so absolutely alive.

When the Stone Roses faded into the next song, Robin grabbed me in another powerful hug, almost lifting me off the ground. And kissed me again, but on the mouth. So quick that for a second I wasn't sure it happened. "That's what I was waiting for tonight!" he said.

I looked in his brilliant eyes. "Yeah, me, too." But I had a feeling he was talking about the song.

Seventeen

We stayed at The Station long enough to have a couple more drinks and wear ourselves into a soggy frazzle. Finally I told him I was beat, I'd had enough, and needed to get outside; even though it looked like he was having a blast, he didn't argue about leaving right then. He helped shoulder a path for me through the crowd and escorted me out to the street. We walked back toward my car, but, after we passed a couple of doors, I stopped, leaned back on a wall under an awning, and reached for my smokes.

"I'm not ready to drive just yet," I said. "You know anywhere around here we can just chill out for a while?"

Robin looked up for a second, thinking, then smiled at me. "Come see my studio," he said. "You said you wanted to, right? It's only like a block or two from here."

My eyebrows went up. "Really?"

"If you want. Most likely no one else is there now, so it'll be quiet, at least. But I warn you, it's pretty stuffy up there – I'm not sure how much actual chilling out you'll do. I wanna show off my stuff, though, so c'mon!" He still seemed kinda bubbly and eager like he was at the club, and I admit I could feel my own adrenaline was up a bit.

I patted his shoulder. "Lead on, *garçon*."

And he led. Backtracking away from my car, past the club again, and on down the quiet street. Finally we came to a narrow old door right beside the New Age store, where he stopped and got out his keys. He fussed with the lock, rattled the door open, flicked on a light, and gestured me up an old cramped staircase.

By the time we got to the top of the stairs, I noticed that yeah, it was hot and thick up here – reminded me of my folks' attic. The tail end of my drinks made it feel a bit like a dream. There was more keys jingling as he unlocked the upstairs door, another flick of a light, and we squeezed into Robin's art studio.

Not sure what I expected, really, but in old movies artists always work in these huge empty lofts with giant windows and a naked lady on a little riser. This place was long and narrow – I would swear I could touch both walls at once. But the

ceiling was high, with bare lightbulbs strung along it. The walls were a kind of pinkish brown, something that I didn't see anyone getting inspired by, but it looked like years of artists had splashed every other colour in the world on them at some time or other. Halfway down one wall was a sink that wasn't white anymore. There were tables and easels and stools crammed wherever they would fit, tubes of paint scattered everywhere, brushes, palettes, papers, charcoal sticks. In one corner was a pile of clay on a table, near the beginnings of a head being sculpted. No sign of a little riser, but I guess I could provide the naked lady if somebody needed one.

Robin led me through to the far end of the room, near the only window, and turned on a little fan sitting beside it. Then he cocked his head, spread his hands, and said, "This end here is my little kingdom."

Down here the smells were stronger, paint and chemicals. I saw an easel with a partly painted canvas on it, an abstract thing that looked like rectangles of stained glass. Other canvases were stacked along the bottom of a wall. Paint in tubes, bottles, jugs. Brushes, cloths, pencils, jars of dirty water, a big brown roll of paper towel. Black portfolios leaning on another wall, a sleeping bag crumpled up in front of them. Right at my elbow was a table with a pile of T-shirts, most of them still in clear plastic wrap. There was also a contraption I didn't recognize: it was like a heavy wood frame, attached with hinges to a big painty board. The middle of the frame was covered with what looked like sheer whitish fabric stretched tight.

He saw me looking at it and stepped closer, brushing up against me. "My silkscreen," he said. "Ever see one?" I shook my head, and he told me how it worked, showed me the green plastic film he used with the frame, the little knife he cut the film with, explaining the inks and varsol and rubber doohickeys that helped him print pictures for framing, or T-shirts, or anything he wanted. To me it seemed kinda like magic, interesting enough that I stopped thinking of how it felt being pressed against him – sometimes.

But I also watched him while he talked. And I could see in his face, and in the way he moved now, and hear in his voice, that this place was where he was at home. This was his world. And somehow seeing him in it made him even more beautiful.

When I spoke, it came out so quiet I was almost whispering. "This is very cool," I said. "Could I maybe come watch you do this someday?"

He looked at me like I just gave him a small but sweet surprise. "You really want to?"

Right then I felt like I was falling into his eyes. "I really want to," I said. And then I leaned in, lifted my chin up, and kissed him. For a split-second it felt like he might be pulling away, but then he took hold of my shoulder and kissed me back. Definitely longer than back at The Station. I finally got a sense of what his lips felt and tasted like. And now I knew I needed a lot more.

At last he moved back a touch, and we breathed and he looked in my eyes, and he blushed, and slowly started to smile. After a few seconds, he said, "Well, now I *have to* let you come watch." He looked over at his easel. "Was there anything else you wanted me to show you? Not all of it is any good, but – "

"I do want to," I said. "I mean, I ain't gonna pretend I know so much about art, but what I can see of your stuff around here, I like. But you were right about it bein' really hot up here – I gotta get a drink."

Robin wiped his forehead with his hand. "Yeah, we probably don't wanna stay up here too long tonight. I could go for a cold one, too. Where should we go?"

I hesitated, touched my lip with my tongue. Then I watched his eyes carefully and said, "My place. I'm good to drive now. And it's cool and quiet there."

His mouth got a bit smaller, and I could barely hear him say, "Okay." He still had his hand on my shoulder, and he used it to pull me closer, and this time *he* kissed *me*. I reached around him to hug him, making sure this kiss was even longer. His body felt firm and hot, and his shirt was damp but I didn't care. He made a soft sound into me and I pressed my chest tighter on his.

I moved back from him, swallowed, and said, "God, it is too hot up here for this." I reached for his hand and pulled. "C'mon, honey, let's get those drinks – I'm parched."

And we made our way slow down the rickety stairs, and took a casual stroll back up the street to my car, like we were in absolutely no hurry at all. Putting on a show for each other.

When we got to my apartment, I flicked on just the small lamp over on the shelf, steered Robin into the loveseat, put the fans on, grabbed us a couple of peach coolers, slipped on a Smokey Robinson tape, and then finally settled in beside him. In the soft light, he looked like an angel. The world felt like it was glowing, and I almost didn't want this moment to end... except that I could imagine even sweeter ones soon.

We clinked our bottles in a toast, took a few swallows. Then Robin looked around, trying to act all casual, and said, "I really like what you've done with the place." Then he looked at me with his fox grin and said, "The paint job in your kitchen looks *amazing!*"

I sputtered, then slid my free hand up his arm and rubbed his shoulder. "I shall give you the name of my interior designer."

"I would appreciate that very much."

I nodded, and set my drink down on the table. Then I reached for his, took it and set it beside mine. "Later," I said. I leaned forward and slid my hand behind his neck. Then I felt him leaning forward, too. "Later, okay?"

"Much later," he murmured, a hair away from my lips, and he took hold of me just below my shoulder, and we kissed like the earlier ones were just warm-ups. (I got no sense from him that he minded ashtrays, either.) We reached around each other and pulled tighter together, and we kissed like we were starving. His tongue was slow but not timid, sweet, and I gave mine to it with a low moan. The music got muffled under the sound of my pulse and our breathing.

Our lips parted and I nuzzled his neck, his hands wandering slow over my back like they were trying to remember every part of me. My blood roared in me, wanting his hands everywhere, his mouth, all of him. I glanced down, rubbed my hair into his shoulder, and I could see that the hem of his big shirt was bunched up, enough that I had a view of his fly. And it looked to me like he wasn't waking up there yet.

Now I knew that some guys, even young ones, could be a little gun-shy at times, especially with someone new, and maybe could use a helping hand. And I was generally glad to do that for them, but for Robin I felt like I would do anything on earth. I raised my face to him again and kissed him, hotter, deeper, and I

squeezed a hand between us to rest it on his stomach, rubbing slow and gentle. It felt firm and flat and I said "ah God" into his mouth. One of his hands wandered up into my hair, pulling my lips harder onto his, and then my hand on his belly started to slowly slide down.

And Robin jumped like I stuck his fingers in a light socket. Next thing I knew, he was standing a couple feet away from the loveseat, not quite looking at me, and crying out, "Aaaah!!" His arms and legs were spread wide, he stood stiff, his eyes kinda jittering around, eyebrows up, forehead crumpled, mouth gaping, gasping. He made choked little sounds and finally said, "Oh god. Oh my god. I." Finally he looked at me and I swear I saw panic in his eyes, or terror, or pain. He fanned his hands near his head like he was waving away bugs. "I'm sorry I'm really sorry. Oh god. I." Then he clapped one hand over his mouth, turned away, and bolted for the door. "I gotta go. I'm sorry!"

He banged the door open, tore across my lawn, and then I heard him scrambling up my driveway like there were hunting dogs after him.

I have no idea how long I sat there staring at the door, gaping almost as big as he did. After what felt like minutes, I finally said, "What. The. Actual."

Eighteen

That night, it took me longer than usual to get to sleep. I replayed the evening in my head I dunno how many times, trying to see where I did something wrong. Maybe I was just dumb, but I couldn't spot it. So maybe the problem was him. In which case, what could I do, except wait and hope I could talk with him about whatever it was? I mean, I felt bad for him, being so obviously upset and all, but I recognized that it was out of my hands. Best thing for now was give him a little space – it sure looked to me like he could use it. Thinking along those lines finally let me drift off.

That didn't stop my mind from coming back to it the next morning, off and on, while I ate, and packed, and got gas and cigarettes, and hit the bank machine for travel money, and then peeled outa town and onto the highway leading northeast to cottage country. With the windows rolled down, the hot wind ruffled my hair and muffled the radio and gave me a taste of freedom.

After about an hour, I joined onto Highway 11 heading north of Toronto, and the trip started to look more like how I remembered from earlier years. This was always a gorgeous drive, wide views of wooded hills rolling by, open and clean. Especially now, when the traffic was relatively light: most people who wanted to hit the Muskokas had left on Friday and the 11 would be a zoo then.

Almost everything I passed – an old barn surrounded by sheep, a truck stop – triggered memories for me. When I was living at home, me and the folks would make the trip up here a few times every summer. Back then I took it for granted, not realizing how many people didn't own a summer home on the lake. Maybe my folks wouldn't own one, either, if not for the fact that papa picked up the property early on, and knew how to build his own place, and had friends who could help with that. In any case, there was a lot of my childhood tied up in that cottage, and the roads leading to it. It was sweet to be able to go back for a while.

Another hour, farther north, and the woods sometimes made way for stone cliffs, rugged and pinkish – some of them looked like people had blasted right through the hills to put the highway down. The air got a bit cooler, and I had to fuss with the radio tuner to find stations it could pick up. Another hour, and I went past signs for turn-offs, to little places like Gravenhurst and Bracebridge. For most of my life, small towns like that were just places I would drive through, or around – back then, I had no idea I would end up choosing to live in one.

Eventually, I started seeing the road signs warning about deer crossings change to moose crossings. (Had never actually seen a real live moose, but I still always hoped.) I turned off the highway onto winding back roads, through forests and over steep rises that circled steeper hills, past the little general store and gas station that still looked exactly the same... and then, deep in the trees, I spotted the white mailbox, with "Pirelli" in black letters, that stood on a post beside the driveway. The mailbox looked fresh: mama repainted it on her first visit of the year, every year. She said it gave her something to do when papa wanted to fish.

I guess mama heard my tires on the driveway when I pulled in, cuz she was standing in the back door, waving and smiling while I parked. When I got out, stood up, and waved back, I could see her mouth drop open, which made me grin – I hadn't told her about the new hairdo yet.

While I reached in the back of the car for my bag, she made her way slow down the couple of steps and toddled over to give me a bearhug. She was still pretty strong. I squeezed her back and kissed the top of her head.

"Did you have a good trip, honey?" she said. "Roads were good?"

"Yes, mama, traffic was easy, no problems."

She nodded seriously. "Good, good. So now what's going on with this hair? Is this what everyone is doing in that village you move to?"

I laughed while we started heading back to the steps. "No, mama, no, people there look at me about the same as you did."

She gave a little laugh, but shook her head. "I don't know what your papa is going to say about this. But it is so good to see you anyway, my honey."

"Me, too," I said.

Papa was sitting at the kitchen table reading the paper when we came in. He looked up as soon as he heard the door, and then I found out what he was going to say about it: "Rhonda! What the hell!"

I laughed. "Good to see you, too, papa."

His mouth crumpled up like he tasted something bad, and he shook his head, but his hand beckoned me over to him. "Come, come give your papa a hug, my baby."

I put down my bag, went over, reached an arm around his shoulders, and pressed my cheek on his hair. "How you keepin', papa?" I said.

He reached around and gave my back a couple of pats. "Oh, about the same, you know. I need more help these days. Remember Rocco, that new guy I hired in the spring? He's good, takin' some o' the load offa me. I tell you, baby, I should retire, it's way past time."

I took a step back and looked him in the eye. "You been sayin' this for what, fifteen years now? You ain't never gonna retire, you can't fool me."

He chuckled, and picked up his cigarette from the ashtray near the paper. "Ehhh, what would I do with myself, hah?"

Mama came to my side and leaned on me gentle. She said, "Drive me crazy even more hours every day, is what." Then she looked up at me. "Come sit, honey, time to eat." Around mama, there was no other time.

After dinner, I helped mama with the dishes; then we joined papa on the back deck. Which was more like another room added onto the cottage, all enclosed and screened in: you needed that, with the mosquitoes as bad as they were up here. Papa told me that in the evenings we used to toast marshmallows over a campfire in the back yard here when I was little, but I could barely remember that. At some point, the bugs got so bad that you couldn't enjoy yourself outside at night. But on the deck, you could still hear the lake brushing the edge of the back yard, and see the stars, and smell that delicious pine breeze, and watch the lights of cottages across the lake make long wiggly reflections on the water.

Papa sat with his paper and smokes and a glass of wine; mama had a glass, too, which she kept away from the crocheting in her lap. Something pink, which she added a couple of loops to in between long pauses. Back home the folks usually watched TV in the evening, but up here they didn't look like they missed it much.

Somewhere out on the dark lake, a loon called – which, even after all these years, was still, always, one of the most magical things I ever heard. Mama said, "Oh, honey, if you could see the look on your face when you hear the loons. Just like when you were little."

I looked over at mama and smiled. "It still makes me feel like when I was little."

Mama smiled, too, and the small lamp beside her made the lines in her face look soft. "So, how is your new job going, Rhonda? Your friend Shirley is good?"

"She's fine, and so far I am loving working with her." (I gave up correcting mama on names, years ago.)

"That's good, honey, that's good."

Papa spoke up. "So she doesn't mind you comin' into her business lookin' like a circus, hah?" He gave a short laugh.

I picked up my glass and sipped at it. "Actually, she really likes it. And so do I."

He shook his head. "I could see you bein' so wild back in school. I mean, I didn't like it, but that's just how it is. Still, I woulda thought you'd outgrow that kinda thing by now, hah?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, papa. I'm still wild, I guess."

While he sighed, mama said, "And maybe any nice men out in your new village?" Credit where it's due, it took her a few hours to get around to that topic.

I said, "And sorry to disappoint *you*, that I'm still not engaged."

"Well hey," papa said, "if she didn't find one in Toronto, where all of them are, then what can you expect? And what does it matter, anyway? I mean, when she *does* find one, she doesn't marry him."

"So, do, do you ever hear from that Brent?", mama said.

I shook my head. "No, mama, not for a couple years now." I wasn't sure why she asked, making it sound like she sorta was hoping that I did – she'd always made

it pretty clear that she never approved of my being with Brant. Did she feel different now, now that it was too late? I dunno.

She just said, "Ah," looked down, and made a couple of crochet loops.

Papa laid the newspaper back a bit and turned to look at me. "But you doin' okay in your new place, hah? You would tell us, right?"

I gave him a little smile. "Yes, papa, I'm doin' great – I love it there so far, I do."

I saw him relax a bit. "'At's good, baby," he said, and then lifted the paper up to read it some more.

For a while I watched him. I saw how he held the paper farther away from him, trying to read it. How tired his eyes looked, how his hair looked grayer and thinner and moving back. And I got thinking how if he retired now, it would hardly count as retiring early anymore.

And I looked at mama, and I saw how her hair was gray and thin, too, saw her squinting through her glasses, moving her crocheting back and forth to make it out better, fussing with it more than she used to... but she didn't look unhappy about it. I tried to just enjoy being here with them now, sharing the beautiful night, appreciating them in this moment while I had them. I mean, I thought I always did appreciate them, but I wanted to make a point of doing it more.

Nineteen

That night, I slept on the fold-out, out on the deck, just like I always had since I was little. And, just like I always had, I loved it. Not that the thing was so comfy, but it didn't *hurt* to sleep on, at least. No, what I loved about it was when I first woke up. All I had to do was lift my head a little, and I was looking out at the lake, all fulla sparkles from the sun. And the breeze was fresh, and I could hear the birds, so many of 'em, and that was the moment I really felt like I was on vacation. But a lot shorter vacation this year, though, cuz I needed to head back in just a few hours. Still, this was one of my favourite moments, and I sat for a while and just drank it all in.

Mama made us sausage and eggs for breakfast, and I helped her clean up while papa grabbed his fishing rod and bag and wandered off, down the shore and around the bend. Then I got changed, grabbed a towel, and met mama down the back yard, where she was sitting in one of those big Muskoka chairs that papa built, three of 'em. I went in for a swim – the water was almost too cold, even in summer – and I talked her into at least coming out wading with me for a few minutes.

She walked into the water up to her ankles, giggled, and wandered along the shore, looking down. "No fish," she finally said. "I remember there used to be fish right here."

I swam in a bit closer to her. "Think there's any down where papa is?"

Mama tossed her head back and laughed, something I didn't often hear her do. "Oh, honey! If that happened, then maybe he might catch one, no?" Which got me laughing back: sometimes papa would tell stories of fish he caught right here in this lake, but as far back as I could remember, I never saw a thing to back any stories up.

"Maybe the loons ate 'em all," I said.

She shook her head, like she was taking me too seriously. "Ah, no, Rhonda. If the loons are still here, then there must still be fish somewhere."

"Very wise, mama," I said.

She looked at me with a smile in her eyes. "Your mama is a smart girl, my

honey. Don't you forget." Then she turned around and shuffled back to where she left her sandals in the grass.

After a little while, I came back to shore myself, got my towel and dried off, then wrapped myself in it and sat beside mama. She was already back into her crocheting, in fits and starts. There was a break where we both just sat, not moving or talking, just gazing out over the lake. It was a moment that reminded me why I loved to come up here: when life gets you busy, you forget how much you need this kind of peace.

But finally I broke that peace: I looked over at her and said, "Hey mama, did you... um, were you ever on like a date where suddenly the guy just like took off on you?"

For a few seconds she just blinked at me, looking confused. "What are you saying, Rhonda? Did this happen to you?"

"Oh, my, um... Candy, the other girl I work with now. She was tellin' me about sumthin."

Mama nodded. "I, uhhh... well, honey, remember, I never went on so many dates when I was a girl. Really just with your papa, right? He never did nothing like that to me."

I cocked my head and nodded to her.

Then she glanced over to the side for a second, then back at me. "But there was this time where I ran away on a date."

That made me sit up straighter. "Woh really? You mean, like, with papa?"

She nodded, and made this little grin, kinda embarrassed, kinda pleased with herself. "Oh yes. This one time, not too long after I met him. He would take me places where we could go hear the bands and dance. Those were happy days, honey. He was still excited about being back home from Europe, after the war, and still a little full of himself, maybe.

"So this one night, we were there at the dance, and he starts drinking more than I usually see him, and oh he wanted to dance. He was really in the mood for it, that night. Now, you know I like to, too, or back then I did. But I got tired and

wanted us to go sit. But no, he's having none of that, and keeps dragging me back to the dancefloor. Sometimes he's grabbing my arm too hard and it hurts, and he won't listen. By now I'm not really having much fun anymore, right? And I was pretty mad at him. And so when there's a minute where he's busy talking to his friends, I just sneak away out the back door and I go home. Took me two hours walking, all by myself at night. Now I don't want *you* doing that, Rhonda, remember! The streets in Toronto were a lot more safe back in those days, I was okay, but don't try that now!"

I tried not to grin too big. "I won't, mama."

"Good. So I go home and tell your mimi what happened, and she sends me up to bed where I can just lay there and be mad for a while. The next morning, she tells me how Sal came to the house later on, looking all worried about me, and she gave him two earfuls about it – you remember how mimi could do that, right?"

"Oh, yeah, I caught the earfuls from mimi more than once." Suddenly I was flooded with missing mimi.

"Anyway, she sends him away and tells him to come back tomorrow with a big fat apology." Mama giggled. "And he did. And then it was my turn to give him another earful. I tell him about how he's going to listen to me and show me some respect, or else he can go dance with some other girl. And he did better after. He tells me that that day was when he knew he would marry me. Because I knew who I was, and what I wanted, and I made sure he knew it, too. He says he respected that."

I looked at this little gray-haired woman with a lap full of yarn and said, "You are a real ball o' fire, mama. Always were."

She gave me a firm nod. "You got that right, my honey."

Just then we heard footsteps in the grass, and turned to look. Papa was coming around the bend from behind some bushes, his fishing rod on his shoulder. I saw he was wearing a hat like Robin's, only his was plain beige and not so "wild". What I didn't see was any fish.

"The Suttons," he said. "John and Lois. You know them. I was just down by their place and they're gone. Some new young couple there now, bought it from

them. These new guys were nice enough and everythin', but still."

"Well, the Suttons are getting on a bit, Sal, remember. Older than us."

Papa shook his head, sat in the other chair, and sighed. "I hope nuthin happened to them. I forgot to ask."

We all sat quiet for a moment, then I said, "So, papa: mama was tellin' me that she got you to marry her by, like, earning your respect. How about that?"

He looked at mama with a pretend scowl. "Were you tellin' her the Disappear At The Dance story?" Mama giggled, and papa looked at me and shrugged. "Ehhh, it's basically true, my baby, yeah. But I bet she didn't tell you that the *real* reason I married her is cuz she was the most beautiful gal in town. Still is, hah?" He gestured toward her with his palm forward. "I mean, lookit her." She blushed and looked down at her crocheting. Then he turned to me and said, "And *you* could be beautiful, if you showed yourself a little more respect."

I cleared my throat. "Careful with that flattery, papa," I said. "My head'll get big."

I had a lotta time to think on the drive down south. The 11 was like a long parking lot already, and I figured by the time my folks were heading home it'd just be that much worse. But we all knew what to expect going in, so no big shock.

Maybe mama's story had something to do with what happened with me and Robin. Did I maybe somehow not listen to him? Not respect him? All I could think was that, if I did, it wasn't deliberate. If I hurt him by accident somehow, that was something I could easily apologize for, and try to make right.

But the only way that could happen, was if we sat down together, and talked it out, and he told me what was going on. And I didn't know how long it would be before he felt ready to do that. If he ever did. However this turned out, I was pretty sure it was gonna be a learning experience for me.

I didn't always like those. But such is life.

It was dusk by the time I finally reached Larkin Ave and pulled into my driveway. But I noticed a car sitting parked in front of the house, which didn't happen all that often. What really got my attention was smoke coming out of the driver's window – but at least it looked like cigarette smoke and not "oh no the car's gonna blow up" smoke. Still, seeing someone hanging around waiting in front of my house got my guard up.

I stopped at the bottom of my driveway and watched behind me, up to the street, while I got out of the car. I was glad that I thought to leave the light on over my apartment door before I left town, so at least it wasn't so dark back here in the yard. And the night was so quiet that I could hear a car door open, very clear, up on the street. And then I heard it close. And then I heard footsteps, hard-soled shoes that echoed.

The silhouette of a man appeared at the top of the driveway, the streetlight behind him. A big man. It looked like he was wearing a suit – most men wouldn't, on a day as hot as this. He just stood still and looked at me. Smoke lifted up from his left hand and the light caught it.

I still had my keys in my hand, and I shifted them in my fingers, pointy ends out. Otherwise I didn't move. It couldn'ta been as long as it felt like, that we both just stood there, watching.

And then he said, "Rhonda?" A deep voice I recognized instantly, that put little trembles in my stomach and knees.

"Brant."

Twenty

Brant dropped his smoke on the driveway and ground it out under his shoe, then carefully walked down the slope til he was just a few feet away from me. I could barely make out his features now, in the night with the bright light behind him. But I didn't need good light to know that face by heart. "You look good," he said. "Kinda different, but good."

"Whatta you doin' here?" I said, not feeling as upset as I always thought I would be, when I imagined this happening.

"I was just hoping to have a word with you. A few words. I mean, I understand that you're tired after a such a long trip. But I won't take long. If that's okay."

Right then, my tiredness was the last thing I was feeling or thinking about. "Um, uhhh.... yeah, sure, I, uhh.... come, c'mon in." I got my bag out of the back of the car, and then my hands shook a bit while I unlocked the door. "I, I dunno why you couldn't tell me you were comin', I mean, here I am now all sweaty and gross and now I got company?"

"The truth? I was afraid if you knew I was coming, you'd bolt." Maybe he wasn't wrong. He chuckled, low, the way he always did. It told me that he felt a lot more at ease in this situation than I did. But that was always his way.

I dropped my bag beside the loveseat, then went around and put lights and fans on. "You hungry? I'm starvin'," I said.

"Actually, yeah, I could eat a bit. Been a while. Thank you." It felt strange, for him to not say "baby" right after that.

I clattered around the kitchen putting sandwiches together, which felt a bit to me like I was stalling for time. Ham and lettuce: I didn't need to ask him if that'd be okay. I got us a couple of beers to go with it, and then plunked myself across the kitchen table from him.

For a while we just looked at each other, and now I had a better chance to see how he was. He looked tired; his face was a little puffy, under his eyes, his chin, and a bit more of his hair was gray. But someone who didn't know him so good might not notice he was any different. And the light still made those beautiful highlights on his skin. His cologne was the same one as always, and just as

overdone. I even recognized his suit, but not the tie. I dunno, if he had worn a tie that I gave him, I think I'd feel like he was trying to play me. Maybe. I dunno. I didn't know if he even kept any of those ties after I left.

"You should take your jacket off," I said. "Open your tie. It ain't that cool in here." He shrugged and did what I said. "Why you so all dressed up on a hot day anyway?"

"I was trying to make a good impression. That still matters to me, believe it or not."

I bit into my sandwich, then talked around it. "It's not like we can fool each other, right?"

"Not for long, anyway."

I swallowed. "So how did you find me?"

He picked his beer up. "Sheila. I still talk to her, once in a blue moon, see how she is. I never wanted to lose touch with her – with any of you, really."

I just blinked. Sheila never mentioned talking to Brant. But then, she never denied hearing from him, either. She just said nothing about it, and I never asked. I guess she figured it might upset me to hear about him. And she might be right. He wasn't a subject I really wanted to discuss that much, with anyone other than myself.

He went on. "Gave me your address, and said that you were up at the cottage this weekend, which figures. So I had an idea about what time to expect you back, and I took a chance."

I was a little surprised at how fast I was going through my sandwich – a situation like this felt like I maybe shouldn't be able to eat, but here I was. "Okay, so *why* did you find me? *Why* now, after all this time?"

He took a swig from his bottle and set it down. "Would you believe me if I said I wasn't completely sure? I mean, I still don't know if this is a good idea. But so far, it's not going as bad as I was afraid it might."

I gave my head a little shake. "I'm nuthin to be scared of, Brant."

His low chuckle again. "Ya think? You are a ball o' fire, bay– um."

That expression made me perk up, and remember where I got it from. "Yeah, well, I come by that honestly," I said.

Brant tucked the last corner of his sandwich into his mouth, and rubbed his eyes. "Here's the thing, Rhonda: I'm planning to go away. Sometime soon, probably, not exactly sure yet. I wanted to see you again before I do. Hopefully that makes some kind of sense to you."

I could feel my eyes get wide. "Not all of it does, no. You love Toronto – that's why you stuck with it all these years. Why would you wanna leave now?"

He sighed. "I do love it. But I'm also maybe tired of it. Or maybe it's tired of me. I, uhhh.... I know I'm not gonna make it there, ever. Been working a day gig for a couple years now. I just feel like I'm done, here. Time to try someplace else."

"Like where?"

"Dunno. Montreal, maybe. Vancouver. I know people in both places." He made a half-smile. "They say B.C. is kind to old bones."

I shook my head and tisked. Normally people would say something like, "I'll miss you". But I already missed him: changing where he was really wasn't gonna make that big a difference. So I just said, "It'll feel weird, thinkin' of you not bein' there."

He reached back into his jacket pocket and got his cigarettes out. "Yeah, it feels weird to *me* when I think about it, too. Trust me, this is not a decision I'm making lightly."

I picked up my beer and stood up. "C'mon, let's sit over here." I settled into the loveseat and reached down into my travel bag on the floor, to get my own smokes out. With a soft wheeze, Brant stood up and brought his own drink over. Once he squeezed in beside me, there wasn't all that much room between us. But I made sure that there was at least some.

I let him give me a light and then we both sat back. For a minute, we just sat together and looked at each other. It felt a bit like he wasn't really there, like he

couldn't be. Then he made another half-smile, and a little gesture toward my hair. "Now if you had done that back when we were all together, I would've had to make the other girls do theirs up the same as you. That's a terrific look for the act. But maybe it wouldn't sit with Sheila too good."

"Heh, maybe not," I said. "But she likes it on *me* okay."

He gave me a serious nod. "She should. You look really fine."

"You, too." I took a sip from my bottle. "So whatchoo been doin' with yourself all this time?"

He stretched one arm up and out. "I landed one of the all-time classic gigs: night watchman in a factory. Money's not bad, it's quiet, and I've been there long enough now that I get benefits. Can't kick. A shame to leave it, really."

"But you got to?"

"But I got to. I need to look at the larger picture." I saw him look over toward my boombox and for a second his eyebrows went up a little.

I thought about asking him if he ended up staying with what's-her-name or not, but then I realized that I didn't care. Or I didn't want to care. I had no idea which answer would make me feel better about any of it. So instead I said, "You don't sing anywhere anymore?" The idea of that felt like a crime to me.

"Just in the shower. But I don't go over so well there." He tipped his head down a little and gave me his here-comes-a-zinger look. "I think the shampoo bottle only likes rap." I just let my eyes close and shook my head. Me and Brant didn't always see eye to eye on what qualified as a zinger.

He rubbed his eyes and sighed. Then he lifted his hand toward me, like he was gonna touch my shoulder, or my cheek... but then he stopped and put it down again. "You know, Rhonda, when I was driving down here, I had this idea of what all I wanted to say to you. Like I was almost writing a little speech in my head. I sounded pretty impressive, let me tell you. And now that I'm here, it's all gone. I can't think of anything that I didn't already say three years ago."

I looked at the wrinkles in his forehead – more than I remembered. My eyes felt hot. "We probably already said everything there was to say. It's okay."

"I just...." He rubbed his lips for a second and blinked. "I really am sorry about everything. Now more than ever. I never meant to hurt you, and I'm sorry I did."

"I know, Brant. And I believe you, I do. But you never got it. I still hurt anyway. You being sorry and not meaning it doesn't make the hurt go away. It just means I don't get the pleasure of being mad at you, ya dumbass." I gave him a little smile that felt sad, and he gave me one that looked sad.

He turned away from me, and I could hear one of his joints crack. "Well, I needed to say it again, anyway. So thank you for letting me." He took a big drag off his cigarette and then crushed it out in the ashtray. "And, like I said, the main thing was letting you know I was going. I wanted you to hear it from me."

I nodded. "Thank you. I appreciate you comin' all this way to tell me in person. When I think about it, I wouldn't really wanna hear about it any other way."

"I was hoping you'd feel that way." And then he stood up, and, without even thinking, I was on my feet a second later. "Anyway, it's late," he said, "and it's a long drive back."

I swallowed. "Uh-huh." He shuffled back over to the kitchen to grab his jacket and shrug it back on. Then he went to the door, with me about an inch behind him. He touched the door handle, then turned to look me right in the eye. I looked back, and I felt like I could see a whole world in his eyes, a world that slipped away long ago.

Finally I said, "Am I gonna see you again before you go?"

"We'll see how that goes," he said. "I'll keep you in mind."

And then, as if we rehearsed, we both reached around each other at the same time, like we always used to do. And hugged tight, and quiet, and long. There was that big barrel feeling of him against me again, and I blinked hard. Letting go still didn't feel any easier.

He gave me an extra-tight squeeze that pushed my breath out – a strong man, always – and I felt him kiss the top of my head. Then his hands on my shoulders eased me away from him, and he turned and went out to the driveway without looking back.

I stood for a while, then went around and turned the lights out. Left the fans going, the air felt good. I didn't feel like dancing now, or listening to music, or reading, or trying to sleep. I just sat with a cigarette, and finished my beer, and looked out the window, and listened to the crickets. Funny how loud they could sound, sometimes.

After that smoke was done, I had a couple more. Listened, and looked out into the dark.

Twenty-One

I was unusually glad to be back at work the next day, cuz my classes helped take my mind off things. And my mind definitely had enough things to be on.

The more I thought about Brant moving off someplace far away, the more I got the idea that maybe that might help give me some kinda what people call closure, I guess. Even though, practically, I knew it made no difference, when I wasn't seeing him anyway. And yet, a part of me was somehow not all that shocked when he showed up last night. Like deep down I was always wondering, or maybe wishing, cuz I knew that he wasn't all that far. Maybe, if he moved away and it became way less likely that he could suddenly show up, then I could finally let go that little bit more.

I wondered at him driving all the way out here just for that little talk. But I didn't wonder a lot: he was always a pretty sentimental guy, and he had his own ideas about what felt right. So, when ya get right down to it, that was very much the sort of thing he would do. And I knew that he did it because he cared. Through everything, I never really doubted that Brant cared for me – it just wasn't caring in the way I needed from him. That was probably the bottom line, right there.

Still, it felt very strange, to think of Toronto without Brant Benson in it. Like, there are some changes you can predict pretty easy, and others you never woulda seen coming. This was one of the second kind. Life sure can throw you curves.

When I got home after work that night, I took a chance that I had left enough breathing room by now, and decided to call Robin. To let him know that I was ready to listen, if nothing else.

Once again, that tired lady who might be his mom answered. Once again, she said he was out. (A guy like that having an active social life didn't surprise me.) This time, I left a message: I asked her to just tell him that Rhonda called. All she said was "okay", and then she waited for me to hang up. So I said thanks and did that. No idea if she would choose to, or remember to, give him the message. No idea what he would do about that message, if and when he got it. But there it was, anyway. We do what we can, right?

The next morning was Wednesday, and my appointment for my eye check-up. Dr. Gallant's office was downtown, about two blocks past Junior's pharmacy, so once again I was seeing a lotta places I was learning to recognize. Funny how much you can start feeling like you fit in, even after only a coupla weeks.

I went through the usual new-office routine of filling out a clipboard full of registration forms, and then the receptionist escorted me back to the doctor's cramped little office. He stood up from his desk when I came in, and greeted me with a smile that was a little too beautiful to be courteous-and-that's-all. He was like a middle-aged guy on a TV soap, tall with a smooth voice.

I was expecting the eye chart with lines of letters getting smaller and smaller as you go down. What I wasn't expecting was how many of those charts he had, and how many times he would get me to go through them. Covering one eye, and then the other, and then while he held a zillion different lenses in front of my eyes, or sometimes two sets of lenses stacked together. With every run-through, we got to the point where the tiny line I was trying to read just looked like a string of Bs. He said he was mostly interested in that point: that these tests were designed to make you fail eventually, but the important thing was where.

Finally he sat at his desk, wrote on a little prescription pad, and then swivelled his seat around to look at me and clapped his hands onto his knees. "First the good news," he said. "You can read the giant E at the top just fine."

"Well yeah, I was pretty sure that one would be on the test so I studied for it."

He laughed, louder than I woulda. "Smart lady. And the bad news is, um, not actually what I would call 'bad', even. What we are dealing with here is a mild, a very mild instance of presbyopia."

"Howzat?"

"Presbyopia." He grinned. "Sometimes I like to call it 'Presley-opia', or 'Elvis eyes' – makes it sound cooler!" He laughed again; I just shook my head. "Strictly speaking, there isn't technically anything wrong as such with your eyes. They've just gotten tired."

I blinked. "What, so you're sayin' I should rest 'em more?"

"Ah, no. This is just what normally happens to everyone's eyes, sooner or later. In your case, it happens to be a bit sooner."

I sat with that for a second or two. "You mean my eyes are gettin' old."

"Basically, yeah." He made one firm little nod. "Even though the rest of you is holding up remarkably. If you don't mind my saying so." (How he managed to say sumthin like that, and just sound matter-of-fact and not wolfish, I dunno. He was good.)

I rubbed my forehead and scowled. "I, I ain't even forty yet!"

He reached behind him, grabbed my papers, and read them over quick. "You're, ahhhh, thirty-six? Okay." He put them back on the desk and looked at me. "Yes, this doesn't usually happen before forty, you're right. But it *does* happen *sometimes*. I mean, I'm not going to phone the Guinness Book about this."

I sighed. "So, just my luck?"

He nodded. "Just your luck. But listen: from what you showed me here, I would say that you are getting by fine with everything else in your day, and just having a little trouble with reading, am I right?"

"That's about it, yeah."

"Well, Ms. Pirelli, from what I can see, you have an awful lot going for you. I seriously doubt that a pair of reading glasses is going to mess all that up."

I couldn't argue with that. I didn't wanna admit I couldn't. I just looked off to the side and took a breath.

Dr. Gallant stood up. "Now, I know your eyes are good enough for you to have noticed that we have glasses for sale out in reception. You aren't obligated to buy them here, but you are certainly welcome to." He handed me the little prescription slip. "If you want, you give that to Tajinder and she can help you look through our frames, pick out a pair you like, and then we can have your glasses ready in a couple of weeks. Totally up to you."

I stood up, too, and sighed. "Um, I guess I'll get them here. No reason not to, right? Okay, so, uh, thank you, doctor."

He gave me a little bow. "If you want to get checked again in a year or two, or if you notice any other problems, then I expect to still be here. You have a good day."

Tajinder the receptionist was sweet and gracious and helpful and she seemed like she liked her job – basically, she was someone who belonged in Westgate. She made suggestions, but thought that every frame design looked beautiful on me – because I had such a great face, she said. What I was seeing, every time I looked in the mirror with a new pair on, was my mama.

Finally I settled for a pair with small lenses and silver wire frames, just cuz I felt like they faded away most and drew the least attention to themselves. I still figured I was gonna have to work up the nerve to read in public with these things, anyway. Tajinder said I made a wonderful choice, then wrote my order down and told me she would call when they came in.

I walked out of the optometrist's lost in thought. I woulda sworn I was too young to have Elvis eyes. On the other hand, I was looking forward to being able to read my new book.

I realized that, if I felt like walking a few blocks, I could, if I wanted, drop in at the hardware store and see Robin at work. Part of me ached to see his face. But most of me knew that would be a dick move. I mean, I know how I would feel, if I was upset with someone, and then they came in and cornered me at work, like I'm supposed to just drop my job and have a Serious Talk About Our Relationship. So no, there was no way I would pull sumthin like that on him.

But the aching part of me wondered if, or hoped that, he could feel me thinking about him now, and could feel that I wanted what was good for him. And I felt incredibly silly, to be thinking and acting so schoolgirl about him. But, in a weird way, it was the schoolgirl stuff about it that I also kinda liked.

Twenty-Two

The next day was hot, summery, sunny, and perfect. I made a point of having lunch a bit early, to give me a couple of uninterrupted hours on the chaise lounge before I had to get to work. Me and my book were serenaded on the patio by birds, an airplane way in the distance, and some basketball sounds from next door. I guess if Doug was working Donut Villa today, his shift didn't start til later.

I was still working my way through that story about Ravenna Montblanc, holding the book far down past my tummy. By now, Ravenna had fallen in with that baron – name of Marcel, it turned out – and found out that he was in fact a notorious cat burglar. I had gotten to the part where she was now training with him to join him in his criminal career. And I gotta tell ya, the speed with which she was picking up these demanding skills, well, let's just say I was finding that a stretch. But what the hell, it was fun, and she and Marcel were diving into the sheets every other chapter, so lead on, *garçon*.

Then I was interrupted by a nearby thump – a thump with a soft ring in it, which to me sounded like a basketball. I looked over quick to see one of those bouncing off my grass and dribbling to a stop near the corner of the patio. Looked like Doug's ball had gotten flung over the hedge. I heard his voice from over that way calling, "Oops sorry!" And I heard him shuffling around the hedge to come down my driveway. I set my book down.

He trotted into my yard, picked up his ball, then stood and looked at me. "Sorry," he said again. He was wearing his gray Karl Marx shirt, dark with sweat, and those maroon gym shorts again. Some of his hair stuck to his forehead and his neck. I saw his eyes flick down my body and up again.

"No worries, Doug," I said. "As you can see, I am unharmed." He nodded and smiled, a bit shy. "Get your report card yet?"

"Ahh, no. Pretty soon, though. Tomorrow, I think." And then he just stood, like he was waiting for something, any reason to stick around. And I thought I noticed signs of life in his gym shorts. Suddenly it seemed to me that this was as good a time as any to stop putting things off.

"Hey, are you busy now?" He shook his head, and I could see the light blaze up in his eyes, like someone flicked a switch. "I mean, I wanna talk to you about

sumthin. 'Zat okay?"

He blinked, and his mouth fell a little. "Uhhh, I guess, sure."

I stood up and gestured my head toward the door. "C'mon inside. This is, um, kinda personal and I don't want everyone listenin' in." As I went into the living room, I noticed that he stooped by the door to rest his basketball on the ground and slip off his shoes before he followed me.

I could feel his eyes on my backside while I walked to the fridge. "You wanna drink?"

"Sure yeah. Please. Thanks."

I grabbed a couple of ice teas and took the cans over to the coffee table. "Have a seat there," I said, "I'll just be a sec." I heard him settle into the loveseat with a quiet whuff and pop one of the cans open. I went back to my room to throw on my old terrycloth robe, then came out and sat beside Doug, with space between us just like I did with Brant.

He looked me over and his eyebrows got puzzled. "Are, are you cold?" he said.

I glanced down at the robe, then up and direct into his eyes. "No, I just wanted to cover up a bit. I mean, yeah, it's not like you haven't seen it all before." He blushed hard at that, and I couldn't help but smile. "But I just figured that too much skin would distract you from what I wanna say. Am I right? Huh?"

He looked down and rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, prob'ly."

"Okay then. Now, first off: you chucked your ball into my yard on purpose, didn't ya – admit it."

Doug blinked fast. "Wha–, uhh, what?"

I cocked my head at him. "If your net was up near the hedge, I'd be able to see it peekin' up over. But I don't. So it's over on the other side o' your yard, and when you're shootin' hoops, you're tossin' it away from me. No way that ball is gonna get bunged over in my direction by accident."

He swallowed. "Right."

"So you were lookin' for an excuse to come over here."

He just nodded.

I rubbed a fingertip between my eyes, then reached for my can, opened it, and took a swig. "Doug, I see you lookin' at me. Sometimes I say hi, sometimes I just let it go. I don't wanna make a big deal out of it. I mean, it's not like I mind so much. It makes me feel appreciated, actually. I...." I took another swallow and set my drink down. "I know you want it to happen again."

Doug swallowed hard and his eyes got shiny. His voice got low, almost a rough whisper. "I have never wanted anything so bad. It's all I can think about."

"I get that," I said. "And I hope you ain't mad at me, or upset with me, that I haven't asked you over again."

"Well... no," he said. But it sounded to me more like he didn't wanna admit that, even to himself.

"Y'see... when we were together before, I wasn't like payin' you for cuttin' my grass. I did that because I wanted to. That's really the only reason anyone needs. And the only reason that's ever good enough. So I wanted to. And it was wonderful, you were wonderful, and I got no regrets. But since then, I, I just haven't wanted to."

He didn't look mad at all, more like confused. "Why not?"

"Cuz I – " I stopped and shook my head, had a bit more of my ice tea. "No. Here's the thing, Doug: it doesn't really matter why not. If someone doesn't want to, they don't want to. And they don't have to. Some people think that, if you tell 'em no about anything, then you have to give 'em a reason that they approve of, before they'll accept it. Like you need their permission to say no. That ain't how it works with people. That's just bull. Please don't be one o' those guys."

Doug just blinked, and avoided my eyes for a bit.

"Now I know you prob'ly find that hard to understand, anyone not wanting to. Cuz you *always* want to, right?"

He laughed, kinda embarrassed. "Like I said. It's all I can think about. When I'm at work, or watching TV, or trying to get to sleep at night..."

"You're young," I said. "And very healthy. But trust me, the day may come when even *you* don't want to. And if it does, even you are allowed to say no. And it won't matter why."

He shook his head. "I can't even imagine that happening."

"Yet. Things change, people change. Just remember that everyone's different. They don't all feel like you do, or want what you want." I reached over and rested my hand on his shoulder. His eyes went straight to mine. I left my hand there, and let him feel that it wasn't going anywhere else. "Doug, you are a good man. You're kind, and, and you listen. You are gonna meet girls who just don't want to. They have every right. Or you are gonna meet girls who want to with someone else but not with you. They have that right, too. People are allowed to want what they want. You gotta respect that. Ya follow me?"

He nodded, gentle.

"And, and ya never know when you are gonna meet a girl who sees that you respect that, that you respect *her*. And that you listen. You give her enough time to see what a good guy you are, and you'll make her really happy. And she'll make you happy."

He nodded again, and it really seemed to me like he was trying hard to take it all in. I meant what I said about him listening.

I let go of his shoulder and set my hand in my lap. "It took me a lotta years and a lotta mistakes to learn all this stuff. I'm just tryin' to spare you all that if I can. You got lotsa time, honey: you're young. Just be cool."

Doug took a coupla big swallows of his drink, then held the can in his lap and just looked at it. After a while, he said, "Are you ever gonna want to again?"

I sighed. "Oh, honey...." I rubbed my eyes, and when I was done I saw that he was looking right at me again. "The most honest thing I can think to tell you is maybe. I'm not sure. I... look, I'll tell you a secret: a few days ago, an old boyfriend of mine came to visit me. Somebody I thought I was never gonna see again. And, for the longest time, I always told myself that, if by some miracle, I

ever had the chance, I would be on him again like I dunno what. And then he actually does show up – and I didn't do it. I didn't want to. And I dunno if I could even explain to myself why not. So I don't always know."

Quietly he said, "Okay," and just watched my eyes. I had my suspicions that he was starting to feel like maybe getting mixed up with me was way more complicated than he ever expected.

I shrugged. "I will tell ya this: if I do want to, I will let you know. Loud and clear, so that there ain't no possible mistake. Fair enough?"

He made a crooked half-smile. "Fair enough."

I stood up and made sweeping motions with my hands. "Now c'mon, I'm kickin' you out. I gotta get ready for work." He stood up then, shook his hair out behind him, and shuffled to the door. "But thank you for hearin' me out, right?"

"Ah, fer sure," he said, and reached for the door handle.

But I rested my hand on his arm to stop him, and he turned to look down at me. I stretched up a little and kissed him on the cheek. "Remember, I meant what I said: you are a good man. And I'm glad I know you."

Doug said "thank you" so quiet that I almost missed it; then he opened the door, squatted to pick up his basketball, slipped his shoes back on, and headed out to my driveway.

Twenty-Three

That night and all the next day were relatively quiet. There's a lot to be said for a quiet life. But when part of that quiet was not hearing from Robin, I wasn't so keen on it. Once again, my classes were a welcome way to keep my mind occupied.

There was one little blip in an otherwise uneventful Saturday morning, that maybe wasn't quite so quiet. After nine o'clock tap, my littlest student Amy clicked over to the corner to change her shoes before she left. Other times, she would come over to me first with some bit of little-kid gab, all chatty, but today she seemed kinda subdued. So I went over and squatted beside her, my back to the others to give her a little shelter.

"Amy, you feelin' okay?" I said.

She looked at me for a coupla blinks, then back at her shoes. "Yeah."

"Ya sure?"

She looked me in the eye again, and for a few seconds said nothing. Then: "Am I any good at this?"

That kinda caught me off guard. "Of course, honey, you're doin' fine! Don't I always tell ya?"

Amy licked her lips. "I mean, I can't do those things the bigger kids do. I bet they all think I'm stupid."

I shook my head. "Amy, honey, you're just gettin' started. Most of those older kids have been doin' this for years already. So yeah, maybe you don't have as much practice as them yet.

"But that doesn't matter, awright? You're here to try 'n' have a good time learnin' to do sumthin fun, that's all. Most people never try nuthin, so, good for you. And I tell ya, those older kids are not thinkin' you're stupid. Honestly, they ain't thinkin' about you at all: they're thinkin' about how *they're* doin', and wonderin' if *they're* any good."

"Really?"

"Yep, trust me." I put a hand on her shoulder. "Listen, if any of 'em ever says anythin' to you, you come tell me, right? But I promise you they won't. Not in *my* class they won't. So don't worry and just have a good time here. Right?"

She let herself smile a little, and I heard her let out a breath.

I stood up. "There ya go. See ya next week."

I watched her gather up her tap shoes and carry them to the door where her mom was waiting for her. And I couldn't help thinking about how being a kid wasn't always so easy.

So then I finished my other classes, wrapped up for the weekend, and finally decided to take matters into my own hands. I had a plan for the evening.

I still wasn't interested in cornering Robin or forcing his hand. But what harm was there, I thought, in going down to The Station tonight for Rave Night? And just hanging out? Have a few, maybe dance a bit, look around... see if I happened to spot him if he showed up. And if I saw him, then I could maybe wave or sumthin so that he saw me. And then leave it to him to make the next move, if there was gonna be one. That way, at least, he wouldn't forget that I was still around.

I thought it was one of my more subtle plans. Which should give you some idea of my standards, right?

The night wasn't as stifling hot as last Saturday; when I got out of my car, a few doors down from the club, it was almost comfortable out. But inside was no cooler than last week, on account of body heat. It looked like everyone away for the long weekend before was back in town now, and ready to rave. It definitely made for an energetic atmosphere, but elbow room not so much.

I leaned on the bar again, sipped on a Tom Collins, and looked around me, feeling that steady bass pounding in my insides. Glow sticks waved, whistles blew, bodies hopped and squirmed. Some of them were dressed skimpy, some

loose and baggy. All of them looked like they were having a blast... and all of them looked so young.

Gradually I started to feel that I didn't fit in here so good, without Robin's coattails to ride on. I'm not saying that anyone gave me weird looks or nuthin, but no one asked me to dance. After standing there for what felt like close to an hour. Maybe I had gotten spoiled by the other theme nights on those other evenings. Maybe I should just push out there and dance on my own, if I really wanted to. I told myself that, when they played Stone Roses, I would. I ran my hand back through my hair, and then fluffed it up, like I was trying to get noticed.

And then, all of a sudden, I saw him. To me, he stood out like he was lit up inside.

It looked like he was with a group of another guy and two girls. At least, the way they danced close together, and bumped into each other, and bent close together to talk and laugh, made it feel like a group. The other guy, taller, was wearing one of the Karl Marx shirts. But actually, Robin wasn't doing so much of the talking and laughing. In fact, he didn't seem quite as up as last weekend. He was sorta swaying, with his face raised a bit, looking up into nowhere. Like he was communing with the cosmos, or trying to get lost in the vibe.

Should I push through the crowd and go to him? Well, that wasn't part of my master plan, right? I just watched him, and felt my heart pound and my throat get tight. Waiting to see if he'd look my way. Leaving it in the hands of fate. Even though me and him didn't quite believe in it.

He was still drifting in the music, and his face lowered and turned in my direction. I gave fate a push, by putting my arm straight up and waving, like I was back in class and knew the answer.

His eyes got round. So did his mouth. And then he turned to the side fast and pushed his way past his friends and through the crowd and disappeared. I let my hand fall back down, and felt my shoulders drop, too. It's not like I hadn't thought something like that might happen. Even so, my chest felt heavy inside.

I turned toward the bar again and ordered another Collins. Then I sipped at it without looking around much, listening to music that I shoulda been enjoying a lot more than I was. Man, if only I felt like dancing tonight...

When I was about halfway through my drink, I heard a voice. Not yelling, but really close beside my ear, so I could hear it over the roar of the music.
"Rhonda?"

I turned quick, and there, only a coupla inches away from me, were those beautiful blue eyes blinking, that fine perfect nose, those soft pale lips that he was just barely biting. I felt words catch in my throat for a second, then I called out, "Are you all right?"

Robin nodded and said, "I'm really sorry."

I swallowed hard. "It's okay," I said. "Can we go talk somewhere?"

He started to answer, but then cocked his head for a second, reached out to grab my arm, and pulled me away from the bar. "In a minute, promise!" While he dragged me deeper into the crowd, I noticed the intro of the new song playing – he heard and recognized it faster than I did.

I was willing to put things on hold for a bit. Long enough to dance with him to "Fools Gold". And, suddenly, a mopey evening became wonderful. At least for the length of a song.

When my song blended into the next one, I looked at him and said, "I still wanna talk."

He nodded seriously. "Let's go out," he said. And we did, into the cool and quiet. For a second we stood, a little ways past the door, and I just looked at him. I had a funny feeling, like I was trying to balance myself on something narrow.

"I, uh...". He ran his fingers over his chin. "I wanna go to my studio again. It's not as hot there now as last time, it'll be okay. Let's talk there."

I nodded and watched his eyes. "Whatever you want. Whenever you're ready. Lead the way." And we walked down the street, not busy but not deserted, and up the narrow staircase, and into the long warm crowded room full of smells and colours. Robin flicked the fan on, pulled the stool out from his easel and offered it to me to sit. Then he sat back on the windowsill and watched me, looking a little nervous. I just waited. It felt like a good while.

Finally he said, "I've been spending all this time trying to figure out what to say to you. I mean, I got your message and everything. I didn't forget about you. Don't think that."

"I didn't," I said. "I figured you just needed some space to yourself, right?"

"Well yeah. A lot, I guess. And when I saw you tonight, I kinda freaked, sorry. I literally ran into the bathroom and hid." I tried to hold back a little smile. "But after I sat there a while, I thought, fuck it, this is just gonna give you the wrong idea all over again. And I can't keep doing that to you. So then I thought, okay then, enough space. Gotta face it sometime – might as well be now. And then I came back out."

We both blinked. "So what happened that night? What'd I do? I – "

"Nothing!" He reached out, like he was gonna touch me, then let his hand fall again. "It, it wasn't you. I, I'm sorry I let you think that all this time, but no. God no. I..." He swallowed, looked down, and sighed. Still looking at his knees, he said, "Okay look. First thing you gotta keep in mind is, I was kinda high that night. I mean, I usually pop a little something for Rave Night." He looked up into my eyes again. "I did tonight, too. I, I guess I hoped it'd help me forget. But now I'm finding that it's just making me, uh, feel you more. Like I know how confused and maybe hurt you must be, and like I gotta do something about it to make you feel better. I wanna make you happy – you have no idea how amazing you are when you're happy." And he smiled, a pretty smile, almost like he didn't realize it had snuck onto his face.

I pressed my lips together a second. "Well, I, I thought we were both pretty happy that night. I thought we were maybe startin' ta click, y'know?"

He swallowed again. "We... we were, yeah. I, I just let myself get carried away. Swept up in it all, like. I mean, it's not like I was so high that I had no clue what I was doing. More like, everything felt so... good. And I just let myself go with it, eh?"

"Uh-huh?"

"I mean, I'm pretty sure you could tell that I, uh... um, I... wanted you. And I did. I *really* did." He took a breath. "I still do."

I wanted to say, "Me, too," but I just bit my lip and watched his eyes.

"But then..." He looked down, and rested his fingertips on his belly. "When, when you touched me, I, it was like I suddenly started thinking again. And I remembered. We, um, we hadn't, uh, talked yet. And we really needed to, first, or else things would be really awful. But I was spaced enough, and, and carried away, like I said, that I forgot. And all of a sudden it all caught up with me, and then, well, all that happened."

"You, you need to give me more here, Robin."

"Yeah, I, I know. I said we needed to talk first. We're doing that now. I...." He looked down, sighed, a little shaky, and rubbed his hands up and down the tops of his thighs. "I'm sorry, this isn't easy for me. I, I've never really needed to talk about this with anyone, except my family, and, and I guess my doctor. I...." Then he looked in my eyes, and he was blushing bright, and his eyes were shiny, but they were steady and determined, and so was his mouth. "I was born in a female body. I still have it."

Twenty-Four

For a while I just sat there, watching Robin's face, feeling like I was a bathtub and the plug just got pulled. And then, I couldn't help it, I found myself looking, slow, up and down his body, spending a little extra time on his chest and his crotch. And he said, "Yeah, I know."

My eyes made their way back up to his and I licked my lip. After a moment, I said, "Okay. You, uhh, you do a convincing job. I think so, anyway."

He cocked his head, and there was a little something like hope in his eyes. "You, you aren't freaked out?" I saw him take in a breath, and I realized it was the first big one I had seen him do since we got up here.

I sighed. "Well, I ain't gonna lie: you kinda caught me off guard here. But, I told you I spent all those years playin' the clubs in Toronto, right? We met a few, uh, trans— transgender? — people there. One or two that I *knew* of, anyway — could well be more I didn't. So it's not like this is totally new to me."

"That's... that's a relief, kinda," he said.

"But I do gotta tell ya that this is the first time I was ever so, uhh, closely involved with someone that way. So this is, is gonna take some adjusting, for me."

He nodded hard. "I understand."

I waved a vague hand. "So, like, it seems to me no one around here, uh, knows about you. I woulda thought, a town this small, there'd be people who remember you from when you were a, uh...."

"When I was a girl, you mean? More like back when I had to *be like* a girl. I, um... I didn't grow up here. We lived out in Belvedere up until a couple years ago. Then mom got a new job that let us move here, and I was just finished school by then... and it was like my perfect chance to finally be what I always wanted to. Start a new life.... People here accept you pretty quick — maybe you already noticed that. And if... if anyone from back home ever happened to come over here and run into me, I'm not so sure they'd recognize me anymore. So yeah, no one around here knows. You're the first one I ever told."

I swallowed. "I appreciate what an honour that is. Thank you."

He smiled, kinda awkward, and put a hand on the back of his neck. "I, I didn't really have a lot of choice. I mean, when I think about how, how I want you to know me. I don't think I was expecting that – after knowing you such a short time, I mean."

"I appreciate that, too," I said. I noticed my heart was pounding hard, just from listening to him.

"That first time I saw you, that day in Maggie's, I, I tried to be cool, but my god I *noticed* you. You were *dazzling!*" He looked in my eyes, and made me feel like he saw depths in them I didn't know about. "God, you *are* dazzling!"

I touched the base of my throat. "What, sittin' there with my head all gooped up with bleach?!"

"Like that would matter!" he said. "The first second I laid eyes on you, I could see *fire* in you. 'Hearth fires and holocausts!'" He put on a Jimmy Stewart voice for that last bit, and did a terrible job, but he made me smile anyway.

"Robin, I...." The walls of the room felt closer, snugly, and the rest of the world felt very far away. "I hope you realize that the same thing happened to me. I saw you that day, and, and I thought you were an angel. I never saw anyone like you. I couldn't stop watching you. And that sorta thing doesn't happen to me every day, either."

Still watching my eyes, he whispered, "Oh, wow." And then something like hurt snuck into his look, and, still quiet, he said, "Okay, so, so now what? What do we do?"

I blinked and looked away. "I dunno," I said. "I'm sorry, but I don't. Not right now. I mean, you gotta admit, this is a lot to process, right?"

He sighed. "I guess, yeah. I mean, I guess it would have to be, sure."

I let my eyes wander around the room, looking at his tools and his work, awestruck by the spirit of him, trying to avoid his face. "Well look," I said after a while, "you needed some time to sit and think about what you wanted to say." Then I looked him in the eye. "It's only fair you give me the same, I think."

His forearm rippled gentle while he rubbed the back of his neck. "You're right. That is fair. I, I'm sorry if you felt like I was pushing. This is new stuff for me."

"Oh, trust me, for me, too." I rubbed my lip for a second, then looked at the red smudge on my fingertip. "But I can already tell you this: I know I still wanna be with you, somehow. I mean, I realize how crazy it sounds, but I already can't imagine a world where I don't see you anymore. I know I want you in my life – I just gotta figure out how."

"Well, at least... at least that gives me something to hope for, for now."

I looked around again. "And when I hear you say things, that sound like *you* want *me*, too, I mean I can't believe – " Suddenly I stopped. Because I saw something sitting on the table, over near the silkscreen and the T-shirts. Something I had looked at, a few times now, without realizing what it meant. But in this moment, it suddenly clicked together with a few other things, and I just had to stop. I blinked, and said, "Oh, man." And started to laugh, soft. "This is too much."

"What?"

I faced him again, searching his eyes like they were new. "You're part of The Night Shift."

His jaw fell a little but otherwise he didn't move or make a sound for a few seconds. Then he broke out in a grin, huge and relaxed and like an angel. And relieved, like baring his heart to me had gotten too intense and this was a good excuse to change the subject.

"So you don't deny it?" I said.

Robin shrugged. "Meh, why should I?" He rubbed his eyes for a second. "Anyway, if someone was gonna figure it out, I'm glad it was you."

I shook my head. "And you actin' all coy when I told you about 'em, like you didn't know nuthin – what a weasel."

That made him laugh. "All right, so how did I slip up?"

"Oh, I'm not sayin' ya did. But you let me in close enough to see a few things." I gestured at the black baseball cap sitting on the table. "The guy I saw that night was wearin' a hat like that. And, when I think back, he was pretty much the same build as you."

He blinked and nodded.

"And he had a portfolio, like those ones over there. And now I notice that that one at the front has some really faint sprays of paint on it, some of the same colours as on those windows."

"By jove, Sherlock," Robin said.

"And actually, there's sumthin else. Took a while to click. The way you print your N. A little wonky. I see it on Night Shift, and at the end of Wuh-Robin where you print your name."

"Wow." He laughed again. "Now that was something that anyone could've picked up if they were paying attention."

"I guess a lotta folks don't."

He gave me a nod, like a little bow. "*You* did."

"When it comes to you, I do. Or I thought I did. I mean, I never noticed your *other* big secret, right?"

"Uh, yeah, thank god I do a better job on that one!" He shook his head.

"So, what is up with you guys, doin' all those? I keep feelin' like it has to mean sumthin."

He slid down off the windowsill onto his feet. "Well, since you figured all the rest out, I might as well tell you this while we're here: there are no guys. I'm it. I am The Night Shift."

"Oh." So many questions, now. Stuck where to begin. I looked at his eyes, at my hands, at his easel. There was a new painting started there, now. Again, it was abstract stained-glass shapes, colours that I would never imagine. "Robin, I, I need..." What? *I need to keep you with me a while longer? I need to kiss you but*

now I'm afraid to? I looked in his eyes again. "I need a cigarette. And it ain't safe up here, around your varsol and all that. Plus I could use a coffee. Is there anyplace we can go?"

"Yeah, there's a good coffee shop a couple doors down – they're open late on the weekend." I waited for him to tell me sumthin like he "had to get going though", but he just put a gentle hand on my elbow and steered me back toward the stairs. I didn't exactly know where we were going, but it felt good to have him close behind me on the way.

Twenty-Five

"Ever see sand sculptures?" That was the very first thing Robin said, once we sat at the little table with our coffees and I reached for my cigarettes.

I blinked – this wasn't quite where I was expecting him to go. "Um, I've seen pictures. I've heard about 'em. Like giant sandcastles only not just castles."

"Yeah, not just. I've seen bas-reliefs, freestanding statues... things you wouldn't believe are even possible with just sand, but there they are. The most amazing things."

I lit up. "Uh-huh?"

"The thing about sand sculptures is, once you get a couple of rains or a good windstorm, they start falling apart. You know that, some day soon, they won't be there any more. Some guys, who can work really fast, even build theirs on beaches where they know the tide is going to come in soon and wipe 'em out."

"Yeah, I'm not sure I see the point o' that."

Robin shrugged. "A lot of people don't. But, I dunno, one day I was thinking about them, and it suddenly hit me: what those guys are doing, is touching on one of the very deepest truths about art. About life, even."

I sipped my coffee. "Which is?"

He looked deep into my eyes. "Nothing lasts." He gave me a few seconds to chew that over, so I tried to do him the honour of chewing. "Once I finally got that, it, it changed my whole idea of what I want to do with my art. With myself. It's, like, the most powerful idea I know."

I took a drag and looked at his eyes. There was a light in them, sharper than I had seen before. Where they filled me with beauty before, now they filled me with awe. "Go on. Please."

He rubbed his forehead. "I mean, so many artists I see, or writers, musicians, anyone.... People are making things because they think they have a message for the world. They want to make something they hope will outlive them. It's like they're thinking about their legacy. Some of them want recognition for what they

do, now and after they're gone. But legacy is useless."

I just blinked, and tried to follow him, and smoked, and waited for him to go on.

"I mean, what good does it do you to be famous after you're dead? You'll never know if that happened or not – you're gone. And that sort of thing can change. Paul Klee is one of my heroes. When he started painting, they said he was great. And then some new theys took over, and *they* said his work was psychotic garbage. And then after he died, some more new theys said he was great again.

"Like, when Shakespeare was writing, they said he was cranking out junk for peasants. He was like the trashy romance writer of his time. Now they say he's the greatest writer who ever lived. But that doesn't do *him* any good – he doesn't know it. Maybe in a hundred years, they're gonna say that one of those things you're reading is the greatest novel of the twentieth century. And the novel that was supposed to be a great statement about the world will be gone and forgotten. We'll never know. It's crazy, and it's beyond anyone's control. Legacy and posterity are bullshit.

"And, and even the work itself doesn't last. Canvases rot, sculptures crumble. The, the Pyramids are still here, but they don't look the same as when they were first built. Whatever those guys wanted us to see when they built 'em, we can't see that anymore. That message is gone. Creating for the ages, for the theys and what they think, it doesn't work. That can't be why we do this."

I took a sip of my coffee and said, "So why do you?"

Robin drank some of his. "You do it for the love of doing it. You love the process. And you do it for the few people who happen to be around you, who happen to be in the right place at the right time to see what you've done. Anything you create, there will always be people who will never get the chance to see it or hear it or whatever. You're always making it for the lucky few who happen to stumble across it. And when that's how it works, then really, how big a difference does it make if something lasts for five hundred years or five hundred minutes? In the end, it's still gone."

I blinked for a few seconds, and finally said, "Huh."

"You said you felt like there was meaning in *The Night Shift*. That's it: it's anti-legacy. That's my statement. That's why I paint them on glass. So they'll clean

off easy, and they won't last. Plus, I admit, brick is way harder to clean and I didn't really wanna piss anyone off as bad as that. But, anyone who happened to go past one at the right time, they're the audience. It's just a more glaring, obvious example of how all of it really works."

I made sure to blow my smoke away from him. "You... you think very hard, don't you," I said.

He grinned and he was gorgeous. "Sometimes. And other times not at all.... Yeah, like, I still work in traditional media, I mean, you saw my paintings and all. But I do those because I love the process, the smell of paint, the way the brush feels when it pushes the canvas. I don't kid myself about what they mean, though. Someday, they'll get painted over, or fall apart. Someday, my T-shirts will be cleaning rags. I, I mean, other people can feel differently and do differently if they want, I don't mind. A couple years ago, I felt differently myself. But... but this is how it feels to me now. So this is how I do."

He looked down into his coffee and started to blink fast. "I... I don't remember my father at all," he said to his cup. "I barely remember my stepfather. My, uh, my mom tells me that, before I was born, she had a boy. David. Born with organs outside his body – he didn't even live twelve hours." He looked up at me and his mouth quivered a little. "Nothing lasts. Nothing stays the same. Things change, people change. They come and go. And it's, it's wrong for us to try and hang on. Well, maybe not wrong so much as pointless. What we need to do is be aware of things, of people, while they're around, appreciate them and be with them while we have them. That's what my weird stencils on glass are trying to say."

I shook my head slow and felt something welling up in me. "How can you be so young and see things this way?"

Robin's eyebrows went up a little. "Young has nothing to do with it. There's nothing magic about being young, Rhonda. The magic is in being alive."

I swear I saw him glow. I wanted to tell him that he was an angel, whatever his body was. I wanted to tell him that I loved him. I couldn't. I just sat, and looked at him, and then felt a tear rolling down from each eye. Suddenly Robin leaned in, reached his hand out and rested it on mine, and he said, "Hey! What's wrong?"

I lifted my other hand to rub my eyes, shook my head, and said, "Nothing." But it

came out sounding like a croak that didn't convince me, so I doubted it convinced him. "I, I must be tireder than I thought, or sumthin."

He rubbed the back of my hand, very gentle and slow. "Well, I guess I hit you with an awful lot of shit tonight – that probably didn't help, eh?"

I swallowed and tried to smile. "Nah, it's okay, honey. I'm good. I'll be good."

For a while we just sat, still and quiet, and watched each other. And I realized he was right: he *did* hit me with a lotta shit. And I needed some time on my own, to sit with it and think about it – as much as I needed to be with him.

Finally he tipped back the rest of his coffee and set the empty down on our table. "Still, it's kinda late and maybe we should get you home." He cocked his head and added, "He said as if he was the one providing transportation."

I smiled and bit my lip. "I gotta tell ya, it's been a crazy night... but I still dunno if I want it to end, anyway."

His eyes got warm. "There'll be other nights."

My throat felt a little tight. "Will there?"

"I promise," he said.

I made sure my cigarette butt was out good, then took one last swallow of my coffee, but I didn't feel like finishing it. "Will you at least let me give you a lift home tonight?"

He held one of his hands in the other and looked at his nails for a while. Which got me looking at them, too, and I noticed how many stains, how many colours had gotten into them. Like his art had seeped into him, become a part of who he was. He took a deep breath, then looked at me. "Okay. After all the other stuff that's gone down tonight, I guess I've already let you in. You know where The Two Towers are?"

"Never heard of 'em."

He stood up. "No problem, I can navigate. You okay to drive now?"

I nodded, he offered me his elbow, and we swanned out of the coffee shop like Fred and Ginger. And as we walked up the street, through the quiet, I was flooded by realizing something strange and powerful: the night that Robin panicked and ran... if somehow he had stayed, if somehow we managed to become lovers that night, he would not have touched me more deeply than he did in these moments, on this night.

Through this light, then right at the next. Left at the stop sign. Robin directed us north out of downtown, past my street, through the industrial park (I pointed out where I worked when we drove by). Then we came to a dim neighbourhood, abandoned factories, one with a tall brick chimney still standing, wire fences with openings torn in them, railroad tracks crossing the streets, tiny brick houses cramped together. Standing in a parking lot without enough lights, there were two run-down concrete blocks, with rows of dark rectangles for balconies. A worn sign at the entryway said *Gateway Terraces*. There were only a few cars scattered in the lot; none of them looked new.

Robin guided me to the right building. Looked to me like about ten floors high – back home, something like this would never be called a tower. I pulled up in front of the lit entrance. Saw a few spray-paint scribbles on the walls, grills on the windows. While we sat idling, I turned to look at him while he opened the passenger door.

"I did get the impression that you didn't want me to know where you live," I said.

His mouth twisted a little crooked. After a second, he said, "Over all, Westgate is a pretty sweet little town. But some parts of it are maybe not so sweet. The Two Towers have a bit of a reputation, let's say. So, no, this place is not the first thing I brag about when I meet someone."

I tisked. "Honey, you think sumthin like this makes any difference to me?"

I caught him smiling, almost like he didn't mean to. Suddenly he leaned in and kissed my cheek. Then he turned around fast and got out of the car. As he closed the car door I heard him say, "You're the best." It looked like he paused, and watched the bushes at either side of the entrance for a second, before he actually went inside.

Twenty-Six

It took me a long time to get to sleep that night, and so I slept in the next morning. With so much on my mind, though, no wonder. But sleeping in on Sunday is fairly normal for most people, right?

I ate breakfast and went through my coffee and a coupla smokes without hardly noticing. I was doing some serious re-evaluating. I had been fantasizing about me and Robin for weeks, and now my nose was rubbed in the fact that many of those fantasies weren't even possible. I had ached for a part of him that didn't exist. The weirdest thing, the thing I was finding hardest to deal with, was that this wasn't an immediate deal-breaker for me.

I still wanted him.

My mind spun. What did I want from him? How did I feel about him? Could this work? What would I do if I was involved with a man who was physically male and then had some kind of I dunno accident or whatever? Would that be something like what I was facing now? Was it way too soon to be even thinking the word "relationship"? Yeah, I know how superficial and crazy it all sounds, but I was in new territory here, I didn't know what to think.

I knew people who told me about how they "fell in love at first sight", and, while I wasn't rude to them about it, deep inside I never believed in such a beast. I always figured what they really had was some wild infatuation about their *idea* of someone. Someone they didn't really know, that they couldn't know. It only made sense, right? But now I was finding it a lot harder to dismiss, when I was forced to admit it was happening to me.

Part of me knew I was thinking and feeling and acting nuts. Part of me didn't care. Part of me wanted to never live any other way.

It was another hot, sunny afternoon. I figured the laundromat would be cooler and less crowded if I waited til the evening to go wash my things. So I voted that this afternoon would mean me getting bikinied and slicked up and lying in the sun with my book again. Sometimes we just hafta make do and take what life offers us.

I finally reached the end of Ravenna's saga. She used her connections in the world of high finance to find a no-questions-asked buyer for the hot diamond necklace she and Marcel had liberated, and he proposed a permanent merger to create an unstoppable team, and the waves of the Mediterranean crashed on the shore...

And I heard a rustle in the hedge. (Seemed like that was becoming almost unavoidable when I was dressed like this.) Glanced over and saw the glaring eyes and bristly hair of Dougie-Dad again.

But this time he had something to say. "You should know better."

I just gave him a who-me look.

"I got young boys over here. What're they gonna think, they look over here and see this?"

I frowned, just for a second, then stood up slow. Time for the queen of the world to put in an appearance. "Why yes," I said, "I am finding this a lovely neighbourhood. I like it here very much; thank you for asking." I started The Walk. "We should be introduced. My name's Rhonda."

He blinked. "M-my boys shouldn't – "

I came to a stop and tried to feel royal. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

He swallowed, then said, "Er, Stan."

I gave him a little bow of my head. "Well, Stan, this is my yard, and no one else has to look in it. And it's not my job to be in charge of what you or your young boys *think*, is it? I think that's someone else's responsibility, don't you?"

Stan murmured something I didn't catch.

"Now it sounds like maybe you think my attire is a bit, uhh, skimpy." I casually tugged an edge of my top and let it go; I'm sure part of me quivered, and his eyes got a bit wider. "But I promise you, Stan, that there is not a court in the land that would find this indecent." Then I gave him a bit of a glare. "I know that some of the girls that go to dance clubs wear things that are pretty much as, uh, summery as this."

His eyebrows went from down low and close together, to up higher and more open.

I pursed my lips for a second. "So, Stan, if we ain't gonna be the kind of neighbours who have each other over for coffee, maybe we can at least be the kind that live and let live. How does zat sound to you?"

Just then, a woman's voice from back at Stan's house called, something that sounded like "Stosh?" As soon as he heard it, his head whipped around, and then he disappeared behind the hedge without another word for me. Saved by the bell, honey.

I spent the next couple days about like you'd expect: losing myself in my work, or in a book. (I was starting to get impatient for my glasses to show up, so I could dig in to that new Windermere Robin got for me.) And thinking. A lot. More than I was used to.

Robin didn't call. What the hell, it was only a few days. And I specifically told him I wanted some space, some time to try to sort things out. Who knew that he'd be so much better at doing that than I was? Bless him, the little dumbass.

By the time Wednesday rolled around, I was thinking of checking out New Romantic night at The Station again. All the mulling things over, cooped up in my little place, was starting to get to me, even when I had the Supremes on. At work that evening, I asked Sheila and Candy, but neither of them were up for a night out. So once again, I went out on my own – I knew the way. (Part of me noticed how any excuse would do, to go out clubbing – I needed to watch that. I really did.)

It was kinda quiet at The Station that night. I was actually able to get my own table, and parked myself there for a while with a cooler or two. Now and then, I'd push out onto the dancefloor, but I wasn't trying as hard as usual to find a guy who appeared to be at loose ends. After an hour or so, there was one who found me. Said his name was Damon, but for some reason I had my doubts. We danced a couple, he came back to my table, we gabbed for a while, I found out that he was a junior partner at a law firm. Which I also doubted. Once I told him that no, I wasn't really interested in leaving here early and going someplace

quieter, he suddenly needed to stretch his legs and he never brought them back.

I lost track of time. I probably heard some songs I loved without even noticing them. I remember once when a waitress came by to collect a few cooler bottles off my table, and I at least had enough presence of mind to thank her. I found myself thinking things I had never thought about before, like: did I wanna have sex with a gender, or a person? I felt like this situation was forcing me to learn things about myself.

And suddenly there was a hard nudge against my upper arm – lucky I wasn't holding a drink at that moment. I turned my head quick –

Dev. Displaying his full Dev-ness: dark suit, shiny hair, wolf smirk, scotch on ice in one hand, smoke in the other. "Hello again, pinky punky!" he called out.

I shook my head. "Am I, like, not gonna be able to get rid o' you anymore?"

"Your lucky day, sweetie." He dragged a chair from someone else's table to mine. "But no, I haven't moved out here just yet. Still thinkin' it over. So: no Sheila tonight, hah?"

"Naw, she had an attack of bein' sensible. So, um, what? You like drivin' sixty miles to a club instead o' just goin' to Yonge Street?"

He stubbed out his smoke in my ashtray. "Business," he said. "I think I'm makin' some headway with these guys, gettin' 'em to book Debra in here someday. I like to talk in person when I can." The Human League came on, and Dev cocked his head up toward the speakers and smiled. Then he looked at me and said, "Speaking of Debra, you said you're teachin' dancing now, hah? At Sheila's?"

"Yeah?"

"Would you be interested in givin' private lessons?"

I scowled. "Dev, that is one o' the lamest pick-up lines I ev– "

"A-hem!" He reached in his jacket for his cigarettes. "C'man. I know you ladies have some serious moves in that classic R&B style, right? That's the sorta thing I think Debra could use. Stage presence, like."

I pulled out a smoke of my own and waited for Dev's lighter. "Never really thought about it, to be honest."

"Well, think," he said, and lit me. "I'm still lookin' ahead right now, so it won't be for a while. Just wanna know if I can keep you in mind when the time comes."

I gave him a slow nod. "For now, let's say okay."

"Good goin'." He looked over his shoulder, then leaned in like we were spies. "Look: Morley doesn't know boo about this, but I'm thinkin' of branching out into management, awright? I got ideas for what Debra could do. The guy lookin' after her now is a turtle, he's holdin' her back. He has no idea what he's got with her. No vision."

"You know anythin' about managing?" I said.

"I know bad managing when I see it." He sniffed, picked up his glass and took a sip. "I talk to guys, I know guys, I can find out what I need to." He made a little grimace. "Like, I never said anything, but some of your problem, you guys, is that Brant thought he could manage. If you guys had someone else on your side, guiding ya, seeing possibilities for ya, you might still be workin' now. I still think that was a shame."

I shook my head. "Dev, my voice would still be shot by now, manager or no manager." All of a sudden, I felt the hole in my life where my singing used to be – I felt it bad. "But yeah, maybe Brant would still be goin' now, you're right. I wish."

Dev's mouth got tight and he glanced into his drink for a second. "Yeah. Speakin' of Brant, it's a shame what happened to him, hah? I mean, geez."

My cigarette paused on the way up to my mouth. "What, you mean him movin' away? You, you know more about that?"

Dev started blinking fast. "You wha–?... Oh, Christ. You don't know." He swallowed. "Rhonda, he's in hospital. Uh, leukemia or some shit. Four days ago or so. No one told you?"

I could feel I was gaping. "Well, who *would*, eh?" My first thought was Sheila. She never said boo to me. What the actual. No, wait. She wouldn't do that to

me. She might not know, either. That had to be it. She wouldn't do that to me.

"Hmmyeah, fair enough. Geez."

"You, you know where he is?"

He shook his head. "No, but I can find out for ya. Gimme yer number, I'll call ya when I got sumthin, awright?" He got a pen out of his jacket, I dictated my phone number, and he jotted it down inside the flap of his cigarette pack. I couldn't help thinking that this was the only way I would ever willingly give Dev my number. If it turned out that this was all some weaselly plan to get it out of me, then he was gonna get my foot up him. But I couldn't see even him doing sumthin like that. And it would be such a relief if he had. But no, wishful thinking.

I wanted some air. I wanted to go home. I wanted to hold someone. I said good night to Dev, thanked him for helping out. The night air was coolish. I wasn't ready to drive yet, so I went for a walk while I smoked.

The only way I knew to walk from here was down toward Robin's studio.

That's where I went. I stopped at the narrow door, looked up. The lights were on in the upstairs window. That could be him. I thought about him. Creating art cuz he loved to, and maybe for whoever was lucky enough to see it. I bet he glowed when he worked. I missed his light. I wanted it.

But he shared that studio. Could be someone else working up there tonight, someone I didn't know. And, when I thought about it, if I did see him now, I had no idea what to say. I felt lost, like the earth might swallow me.

Instead of knocking, I turned away, back toward the club and my car. The sidewalk felt reassuring under my boots. Solid.

Twenty-Seven

When I got home, it was too late to start bothering people, so I just tried to get to sleep. After a while, I got a little. Next morning, I had a piece of toast, then figured Sheila was most likely up by then, so I called her.

She answered on the second ring and sounded alert. "Hello?"

"Sheel, did'ja hear about Brant?"

"Wha – Ronnie? Wussup, girl?"

"He's in hospital with leukemia or sumthin – heard it last night."

"Say what now?" I thought I could hear her swallow. "Who'd you hear this from, baby?"

"I bumped into Dev again at The Station last night. Said he's gonna find out what hospital."

"Oh lord." Sheila paused long enough to take a breath. "Okay, baby, you sit tight and don't worry. I'm gonna try to get hold of Lavern." (That was Brant's cousin, and his only living family as far as we knew.) "I got her number around here somewhere. Maybe we can find out something sooner, uh-huh?"

"Gotcha. Thanks, honey."

"You think there's much chance that Dev heard wrong, got mixed up?"

"Doubt it. I know he can get kinda babbly, but he usually knows what he's talkin' about."

"Hmokay. Now I'll see you at work if you don't hear from me before. You all right, Ronnie?"

My turn to take a breath. "As much as I can be. See ya this aft."

That afternoon, I tried to give my students the focus and back pats they

deserved. Still no word about Brant – Lavern wasn't answering, probably at work, Sheila said. She'd try again this evening. Which made sense but didn't help now. Once again, the classes were a good way to help ground me in the moment. It was after work, when I went home and tried to eat, looking over at the phone, that I was really wrestling with the feeling of having little pieces pulled off me. So much to think about, so much to deal with.

The evening dragged. I started a new book, reminded myself to re-donate the last one, but my heart wasn't in the story. I was afraid to be away from the phone, so I just stayed put. Went through a couple of drinks, a few more cigarettes, and tapes in the boombox sitting beside the phone. Tonight I was focused on playing songs that Brant Benson and the Glories used to do. No matter who was singing on the tape, I was hearing him, and us.

There was only once or twice that I found myself wishing that Robin was sitting there with me. Most of the time, I was years away. The phone never rang.

Friday passed in much the same sort of blur as Thursday. When I saw myself in the bathroom mirror that morning, I told myself I needed to call Magnolia and get my roots touched up, but somehow never got around to doing it. I did manage to donate that book back to the Sally, but couldn't be bothered looking to see if they had any others in that I might wanna try. Later, having the kids in my classes to take me out of myself for a while was the biggest blessing of the day. And then there was keeping watch over the phone after work, after dinner.

I started wishing that Robin would call. Even if I still didn't know what to say, that didn't matter, somehow. I just wanted to hear him. Better yet, he should come over. I didn't need to say anything: he could say anything, or nothing, I just wanted to be with him –

The phone rang and I jumped over to it. "Hello!"

"Rhonda? It's me," said Dev. "I, ehh, tried to call ya before, I guess you weren't home, hah?"

"You got sumthin?!"

"Yep – go grab a pencil an' I'll give it to ya." So I did, and he did. Name, address,

and phone number of the hospital in Toronto that Brant was in. I thanked Dev, a ton, and he acted kinda modest, oddly enough, and hung up.

First thing I did was call Sheila and tell her. Then I called the hospital to find out how Brant was. They were giving nuthin out over the phone. So I asked when visiting hours were, and they said he was in I.C.U. and no one but family was allowed to see him. So I called Sheila back to let her know.

"I know, Ronnie," she said. "I just called 'em and got the same story. You wanna see him, right?"

"Well, yeah, of course, but – "

"Me, too. So let's go after work tomorrow, you 'n' me. I'll give 'em some line and get us in, don't you worry about that, baby. We'll take my car, all right?"

It was the first time I had smiled, outside of class, in a couple days. "Honey, you are an angel."

She laughed. "I got some exes that'd tell you different. See you in the morning."

Next morning, Sheila barely made it in to work on time, so we had no chance to really talk. She just told me to get right home and change after; she'd pick me up at my place and we could talk on the way.

And we did. Sheila was running late cuz she took a minute to try calling Lavern again before she left for the studio, and finally got hold of her, just to find out whatever else she could. Lavern said things the doctors had told her, about systemic infections that flared up, and they were having trouble fighting. Technically it wasn't the leukemia getting Brant down now, it was complications caused by it. (Some doctors are good at splitting hairs, I guess.) They were managing to keep him comfortable, but they weren't convinced that they could pull him outa this. So they told Lavern to brace herself, and she told Sheila.

"You said he came to see you on the long weekend," Sheila said. "You didn't see nothing wrong then?"

I shook my head. "He looked a bit tired, is all. Maybe not quite as, uh, spunky as

I'm used to. But I had no idea, no." I sighed. "Givin' me all this story about goin' away – well, this is a helluva way to do *that*, dumbass."

She took one hand off the wheel for a second to reach over and pat my leg. "I'm sure he meant well, baby."

I sighed again. "Yeah, he always did." Guard rails went flowing fast past my window. "Always did."

I tagged along while Sheila found the nurses' station for the I.C.U. She walked up to the nurse on duty, a woman about the same age as her, who greeted her with a Jamaican accent. As smooth as anything, Sheila asks where she can find Mr. Benson, says she's his cousin and Rhonda here is his ex. (Sheila could get away with claiming to be a blood relation to Brant – I sure couldn't.) Ms. Jamaica barely even noticed me, but accepted Sheila without blinking and directed us through the swinging doors and down the hall. Told us not to stay too long.

The chemical smells that rattled me as soon as we came in the building were stronger here. Shiny floor. Gurneys gliding by, shuffling footsteps. Mumbling voices coming from the doorways we passed. Sheila stepped inside one of the rooms and I was right behind her. Close to the door was a small area, totally curtained off. I heard like a coughing snore in there. Back past that, Brant was lying on his back, in a big bed surrounded by tubes and metal stands and little blinking boxes. He looked like he was asleep but not peaceful.

We just stood at the foot of the bed and looked at him for a while. Very quiet, not wanting to wake him, I called his name. Not a twitch from him.

There was a chair near the window, and Sheila nudged me to sit down; she rested her backside on the windowsill. For a while, we just stayed still and watched him, like something could happen any second and we didn't wanna miss it. I know we talked about stuff off and on, hushed, but I almost didn't notice. I was fascinated by his chest moving gentle under the sheets, the beautiful highlights on his skin from the light on the wall.

Finally, Sheila got up straight and stood with her hand resting on the foot of the bed. I watched her watching Brant's face. There was a warm light in her eye, and she wore a soft little smile, and I couldn't help thinking that she was ages

away, like I was the other night. The years she had with him were different than what he shared with me, but she had more of them.

Then she said she was gonna give us a little time, and go downstairs for a coffee. She asked if I was okay meeting her down in the front lobby after. I nodded and she stepped away quiet.

Another snort came from behind the curtains. There was a clear plastic tube running under Brant's nostrils. A plastic bag full of white stuff hung from a pole, and a tube ran from under it, down into his arm. Another bag, of clear stuff, ran a tube into his other arm. Wires came out of his pajamas and plugged into boxes. On TV, those blinky little machines go beep-beep all the time, but these ones didn't make a sound. I felt like my breathing and my heart were the loudest things in the room.

I stood up, and held onto the railing at his side, and looked at him. I realized his skin looked kinda darker, a little inflamed. It was like he was holding a pressure in him. I didn't notice any of that when I saw him the other night. Once in a while, there was a little tic in one eyelid. Lavern said they were keeping him comfortable.

Careful not to touch any of his tubes, I reached in and curled my fingers around his. He still felt warm, like I always remembered. Then he made a little grumbling sound. I looked over and thought I saw his eyelids flutter.

He made a sound, like "urn", and then "dur".

I stopped breathing. When I remembered to again, I whispered, "Hi."

A couple of his fingers tried to move in my hand. His chest pushed a little harder to breathe. After a few seconds, I heard, "Surry, burb."

Still watching his face, I slipped my other hand under his palm, and pressed it between mine. A bit louder than a whisper, I just said, "Ah, Brant."

His eyes fell completely shut again, and he stopped trying to make a sound. His chest moved shallower.

Very gentle and careful, I lifted his hand a little, and bent myself over his railing and down so I could kiss his knuckles. Then I looked in his face again, my throat

and my chest feeling tight. Like I still didn't wanna wake him, I said, "I love you." Part of me really wanted to say "dumbass" – but I couldn't let that be the last word he ever heard from me.

For a second, I felt his fingers try to curl around my hand. But so feeble: that strength I always felt in him wasn't there now. It was like some of him was already gone. And then his hand just relaxed completely, and I set it back down onto the sheets and let go.

I stood at his bedside a while longer, just watching, in case there was any other kind of sign from him. But there was nothing. Finally I took a deep breath and walked out. There was a foggy look at the edges of everything.

I didn't feel like having a coffee. I just took the elevator down, found Sheila in the lobby, and waited for her to stand up. When she did, she came over and gave me a hug. Then we went back out to her car, fought the Toronto traffic, and hit the highway back to Westgate.

The trip back was very quiet. We didn't even stop for dinner on the way. If we talked about anything, I don't really remember now.

Twenty-Eight

I felt like running away.

Not that I would. I mean, what the hell, I only moved here like a month ago, right? And, if I even wanted to think seriously about it, then where would I go and what would I do? No, I knew that was just nuts. But when I got home that evening, I was just sitting there in the loveseat, no music, no lights. Just the fans on, watching the apartment get dim, looking at the sunset colours in the sky just over the back fence. A beer and a few veggie sticks on the coffee table. Ashtray filling up slow. Feeling the world crashing in on me. It was funny how, even when