

## **Prologue**

A man in a ragged coat pushing an overloaded shopping cart slowly moved through the bank parking lot. It was almost two in the morning, and the place was perfectly quiet. No cars were on the street nearby. No cars were in the lot.

He stopped at the ATM, and the sounds of the prompting “beeps” bounced like bullets off the closed shops that surrounded the bank. Finished with his business, he moved toward the covered overhang of the drive-through window and curled up on the curb. Pulling a dirty quilt out of his shopping cart, he made a pillow, hooked his feet through the grate on the bottom of cart, and sighed. He had been traveling for some time. He quickly fell asleep, his soft snoring echoing lightly through the night.

## **Chapter One**

### **Welcome to the Neighborhood**

Before she first saw the house, they told her it had a view. Really, it was a view of other people's rooftops, but it was still a sweet little house, and she had fallen for it right off. The neighborhood was quiet for the most part, and a few houses down, the street ended and a trail headed off into what might charitably be called a "forest," or maybe a "wooded area." It was a good trail for running with the dog, and so she did when she first moved in. The dog was a huge black Labrador with a head the size of a trashcan, and the similarities didn't end there. That dog would eat anything. After she moved in, it seemed such a large space that she found herself at the pound, looking for a friend for the big dog. She walked out with a Chihuahua that weighed roughly the same as one of the Lab's paws. Her household was complete.

Alexis Trotter was a writer. She wrote travel articles and the occasional article for a trade publication or legal journal. She made a reasonable living at writing, and it gave her the time she needed to write novels, beautiful lyrical novels of love and longing that no one would ever read because she couldn't seem to sell them. She tried everything. And then she found out how much sex paid a writer.

Really, just sex, and the number of zeros on the end of her paychecks skyrocketed. A travel article could pay a few hundred dollars, but erotic writing, that paid thousands. Then tens of thousands, and suddenly she had an agent named Jeanine from New York, and money in the

bank. That's how she bought the house, the smallest house on a lovely street in the beautiful seaside town of Santa Teadora, California.

Alexis – “Alex” to almost everyone – still couldn't sell the novels, although Jeanine kept promising to take a look. Jeanine was much more concerned with the material that made the Big Bucks, and that's why she was on the phone this morning at 6:45. Jeanine thought that everyone lived on east coast time. Alex didn't mind. She was a morning person.

“But Jeanine, I don't think I can provide advice like that. No, I don't think it's the same. Writing fantasy and writing non-fiction is very different.” Alex took a sip of her coffee, listening to Jeanine explain why a self-help book on sex was perfect for her. She sighed. “Well, I still don't know. What? How much? Really?” In a perverse reaction, Alex frowned at the numbers being floated by the publisher. “Well, OK. I suppose I can write it. Sure. But let me send you chapters as they come out, OK? I don't want to go the wrong direction.” She smiled into the phone. “Thanks, Jeanine. Ummmm... I don't know. Next week? No, give me a couple weeks.”

As she hung up the phone, the back door opened, and in flowed Lisbeth Jackson, “Liz” to all. At five-ten, she towered over the petite Alex, who was less than five-foot-five on a good day, even standing straight and thinking of stilettos. Liz was one of those rare women who was hypnotically attractive without being beautiful. Her green eyes sparkling, long black hair falling down her back, Liz was curvy in all the right places. When she smiled, the white of her teeth in her mocha-cocoa skin – her phrase – lit up the room. She moved like a dancer, and half the time Alex thought a little pirouette would make her morning entrance just that much better.

Liz came for coffee almost every day, plunking herself down at the kitchen table with the ease of someone who practically lived there. She often came with stories of the night before. That smile and that dancer's grace were not missed by the men in her life. She was busy with

this date, or that dinner, or something even more intriguing on most nights, even with her days filled with lawyering. Liz was a Public Defender, handling drug offenses and homeless offenses every day. Her daily calendar was dozens of cases long. Huge numbers of people came through the Public Defender's Office, folks trapped in the legal system but too poor to hire their own attorney.

"Who was on the phone, sunshine?"

"Jeanine," and Alex's smile was a tip-off.

"Oooh! Good news! What-what-what?" Liz tapped out her question while reaching for the coffee mug Alex had poured as soon as she heard Liz come through the back door.

"Money for a new book. . . we can go skiing now."

"My people don't ski."

"Liz, skiing is so much fun. Wait till you get there. And the after-skiing part is good too. Sitting in front of a warm fire ... hot buttered rum ... hot men. You will really like it."

Liz laughed, "Don't change the subject. Hot men – like that would distract me! What is the new book?"

Alex explained, "A how-to book on good sex. How to have a solid sexual relationship with your partner, how to make sex stay exciting instead of falling into a routine."

Liz looked startled. "I don't want to discourage you, but I will remind you that you don't even date anymore."

"That shouldn't stop me. I wrote 'Locked Room' and I didn't know a thing about that sort of nastiness."

"You are so funny. You have a hard time talking about sex, you blush every time you talk about 'Locked Room,' and now you're supposed to write a book on having good sex. This

makes no sense at all. You're a bona fide writer of hard core porn! You think you could say 'orgasm' without blushing!"

Alex scowled at her friend. "Way to be supportive."

"Alex, you know I am your biggest cheerleader, or I would be if you let me talk about what you do." Liz gave a little snort. "Whatever. The book will be great, you'll sell millions of copies, and Mrs. Hartman will still think you're the trouble-making little writer who shouldn't be living on her street."

"I saw her yesterday."

"Mrs. Hartman? What happened?"

"I was walking past her house, and she glared at me, and said that 'people like me' should be more careful."

"'People like you?' Do you have any idea what she meant?"

"Nope. And I had the dogs with me, so I thought the better part of valor was getting the hell out of there. I didn't have any leashes with me. I figured she was about to call the cops on me."

"Mrs. Hartman. There's one of those in every neighborhood." The two talked for a while, their routine a settled and happy start to the day. Finally, Liz put her cup in the sink and ran a little water into it. "That's it for me. Work calls."

"Have a good day. See you tomorrow."

Liz was wearing a longish skirt that swirled as she moved, emphasizing those perfect curves of hers. Alex's last thought as she watched Liz walk out was that she really needed to do a little spin when she left a room.

## Chapter Two

### Good Sex

A couple weeks later, Liz came walking through the door looking a little more tired than usual.

“Finally! Sit down and read.”

“C’mon . . . I was up till two, Alex. Can’t I have coffee first?”

“No. Read first. Coffee coming up.” Alexis looked at her friend, half anxious, half excited. “Liz, it’s about sex. You always tell me you like sex in the morning.”

“That’s not what I was talking about, and you know it.” Liz glanced over the pages. Oh! Is this more porn?” Liz perked up, and sat down.

Alexis put Liz’ coffee on the table, and added milk. “I don’t write porn.”

Liz raised an eyebrow. “And what paid for this house?”

“C’mon, read. Jeanine wants it today, and I don’t want to send it without at least a half-hearted endorsement from you.”

Liz sighed and began to read:

*This is a book about Good Sex. Not Great Sex. Great Sex is something that you have once in a great while. It might happen anonymously, with a person you just met, and the chemistry is fantastic, electric, and the next day you feel awkward, but you still have a crazy-silly grin on your face all day, no matter what happens, because you had Great Sex. Sometimes, Great Sex happens with someone you have known for a long time, and*

*then you suddenly realize you love them. And they figure it out too, at the same time, and the next thing you know you are coupling in slow motion, with deep luxurious kisses, and sweet things said that can never be recalled exactly. That is Great Sex too.*

*But this book is about Good Sex. How to have it, how to enjoy it, and how to make sure it happens every day, or as often as you want it.*

*Good Sex still leaves you with that silly grin the next morning. And you feel pretty good.*

*But Good Sex is no match for the things we have to do every day. Work is tough some days and add children, and elderly parents, and buying groceries, and doing taxes, and all the rest, and Good Sex can only help you feel a little better about going home. It may make you feel a little better about getting up in the morning. And what more can we ask from the people who love us?*

*The life we live in America today is a challenge, every single day. No matter which sex we are, we work. We raise children. We pay bills. There are pressures. Some of the worst pressures come from –*

“Strike out all the stuff about America and bills. No one wants to hear that. Besides, what if you want to sell in Europe? But I like the description of Great Sex. That works.”

“Keep reading.”

Liz grinned and took another gulp of her coffee. “OK, I’m reading.”

*Some of the worst pressures may come from not knowing what role we are playing.*

*Women have it worse than men.*

*A woman goes to work in the morning, knowing that she must prove that she is better than her male counter-part. She gets paid less. A woman lawyer overheard a judge*

*telling a group of men at the next table in a restaurant that all women in the courtroom are “strident.” Women, said the judge, are so hard to listen to, I just want them to shut up. This is a sad example of something women have to deal with every day.*

“Hey, I told you about that judge!”

“I can give you credit, but that might not be wise.” Alex smiled at her friend. “Keep reading.”

*But it is an excellent example of why Good Sex is so hard to get. A woman strives to be a man in the world, and then comes home to be a woman, a wife, a mother. Add parenting, and it is surprising that many women ever come home, much less come at all.*

“Wink, wink ! Love that last line!” Liz looked up at Alexis hovering. “I know. Keep reading.” She held her coffee out for a refill.

*But it is what we do. As for men, they no longer have the initiative. If a woman wants to go out, she goes. A man must be sensitive to his lady’s career, but he is no longer the one in charge. And if she makes more money than he does, it is oddly embarrassing.*

*This book contains some practical exercises to get Good Sex. To get the sweet charm of knowing who’s who in the bedroom, and enjoying that, without losing any of the strength and intelligence either sex has outside of the bedroom.*

“What if they’re not intelligent in the first place?”

Smugly, Alexis responded, “Then they’re not reading my book.”

“Good point.”

### ***EXERCISE ONE - FOR A WOMAN***

*Ladies, I know there is a tendency to drift off to some fantasy world in order to find that “sweet spot” that lets you come. I know that living with a man often takes the joy out of*



*sex, turning one of life's simple pleasures into a chore. Anyone who has been married, or in a relationship for a long time, knows this to be true. These exercises are not going to cure all of that. But we need to train your head, your heart, and your sex so that all three remember what it's like to be lustful.*

“Funny, I never had a problem with that. Sex is fun.”

“I know.” Alexis looked baffled and jealous, at the same time. “I know. But you’re —” Alex struggled for the right word. “You’re odd.”

“Hey! Well, yes, I am.” Liz grinned broadly. Even with the morning sun streaming in the kitchen, that smile made Alex feel good, just seeing Liz there. “And I’m proud of it.”

“How is it that I am writing a book about sex, when you get so much of it, and I get so little?”

“Think of it this way: if you need someone to do research, I’m right here for you.”

“Gee, thanks. I would have preferred to do that on my own.”

Liz laughed. “Like you’re going to get any.”

Alexis looked deeply offended, but only for a moment. “Hey. . . I was in a long-term relationship. Seven years. Remember?”

“Yeah. Like Seven Years in Tibet.”

“But without the enlightenment. More like the indentured servitude they talk about in the Bible.”

“Oho! But you’re not bitter!”

“Not even a little.” There was just a little sarcasm in Alexis’s voice. “I just think sex is so much better if you’re in love.”

“If you wait to be in love, you will never get any. Case in point: how long has it been since you’ve had sex?”

The crease between Alex’ eyes deepened. “A long time?”

“It has been a long time in glacial time. I can’t remember the last man you slept with.”

“Maybe I didn’t tell you about them,” Alexis said, with an exaggerated flip of her honey-brown hair.

“Honey, if you had slept with someone, you would have called me from the car on the way home.”

“Well,” and Alexis sighed deeply. “At least I can write about it. What do you think so far?”

Liz laughed loudly. “I’m getting wet.”

Alexis shook her head and breathed out an exasperated sound. “Well, I asked. Silly me. But I guess that’s a good sign. Here – “ Alex flipped some pages and pointed. “Start here.”

### ***EXERCISE ONE – FOR A MAN***

*You are a man. Therefore, sex is as natural to you as breathing and eating. During the course of your day, it should be common for you to get that familiar rise between your legs every time you see an attractive woman. It could be the way she walks, the way a piece of clothing curves along her breast, or swings sweetly along the curve of her thigh. This does not mean that you do not love or cherish the woman you have at home. It’s just the way you’re wired. But when you get home, what do you find?*

“Why are you limiting this to seeing women – it could be dogs, park benches, trains . . .”

“OK, I am taking away your reading privileges unless you take this more seriously.”

“You are asking me – of all the people in the world, me – to read a book about sex, and you don’t expect me to be the peanut gallery?”

“Alright, fine. But keep reading. There’s not much more.”

*Your wife, the woman you love and to whom you have pledged your forever, may not be home from work yet. She may be out gathering children from soccer or school. The house may be a disaster or quiet and cold. When she comes in, do you have a moment to touch her? Or are both of you scrambling to make dinner, pay bills, help with homework, and find just a few moments for yourself?*

“He’s a man. He wants to have sex all the time. Why not multi-task? Dinner and sex? Bill paying and sex?”

“Perfect comment – because that’s not ‘good sex,’ it’s just sex. I am trying to get people to make love, and I don’t see how anyone could be motivated to make love when there is chaos all around.”

“What about wars? Remember all those stories of Rome and the barbarians? Chaos all around? Every single one of those stories included rape. It was always ‘rape and pillage,’ not just pillage. Did you ever hear a single story about pillaging without rape?”

“Rape is not love making. Study after study shows it is a violent act, and has very little to do with sex. You should know that! At the Public Defender’s office, don’t you ever defend rapists?”

“First of all – “ Liz raised a cautionary finger. “Alleged rapists, please. And no, I didn’t like that kind of thing. I much prefer defending drug cases. That’s a simple, understandable vice. And not particularly violent.”

“My point exactly. Rape is not love making and is certainly not good sex.” She threw up her hands. “A man is no more capable of making love under stress than woman is. I suppose he could have sex, but that’s not what we’re after here – “

Liz’s voice raised a couple of registers. “That’s the title of a book! ‘Good Sex.’ Can’t you just teach people how to have sex and enjoy it?”

“I can’t believe that a man does not prefer making love to mere sex. I won’t believe it.”

“Then you are going to have a hard time selling this book. Making love is a distinct and different beast than sex, good or bad. I keep telling you – you need to do research. Besides, a man is not going to be very open to learning about sex from a woman.”

“Why not? If I want to learn how to fix a car, I don’t talk to an electrician. I find a mechanic.”

“That is one crazy analogy.”

“No it’s not! If I want to know how to make a man hot, why would I ask a woman?”

Smugly, Liz grinned. “You asked me how to give a good blow job.”

“So not fair! You have more experience than me!”

“So why didn’t you ask the man you were with?”

“I did! He gave me some vague rambling without specifics. I could have used the same advice to eat ice cream. There’s no good in it if there isn’t detail.”

“So why would a man listen to you on sex?”

“A woman he isn’t sleeping with is going to be candid, and give him details. That’s a lot better than asking another man for advice.”

Liz looked skeptical, but tried a different tack. “If that’s the case, then how are you going to give sex advice to a woman? Especially since you tell me that plain old sex isn’t good enough for you.”

Alexis leaned back in her chair, fiddling with her coffee cup. “I don’t know how to have sex, at least not enjoyable sex. But I like making love. I need to know that I am loved. I can’t...” she paused, a little embarrassed so she blushed. Even though it was Liz, and Liz knew everything about her, she was still shy about her own sex life. “I can’t – um – achieve orgasm without being in love.” Right on cue, Alex blushed.

“Wow. That sucks.”

“I know! Believe me, I know.”

A slightly evil look appeared on Liz’s face. “That must be why you fall for such wretched men. You’re desperate to have an orgasm.”

Alexis pursed her lips, looked at Liz and shook her head only slightly. “Yes, Liz, that must be it. I hook up with men who treat me badly because I am desperate to have an orgasm. Lord! Now that I understand my dysfunctional psyche, I will never again get into another poor relationship.”

“Thank God. My work here is done. I’m late – I’m going to work.”

Alexis walked her out to the car, and waved her off to work. As Liz was pulling out of the driveway, Alexis remembered: “Hey! You never finished the Exercise for the Man!”

Liz leaned out the window as she was pulling away. “Don’t worry! I’ll do it tonight!”

Smiling, Alexis shook her head. She knew that Liz was not talking about reading anything. She put away the dishes, turned off the coffee pot, and climbed into her running

clothes. Running always helped clear her head. Not this time though. Three miles went by, and the jumble in her head remained. Why she ever agreed to write this book was beyond her. *Pesky mortgage*, she said to herself. *Seriously – what do I know about good sex? I never have any sex at all, good or bad. I can't keep a relationship going. This is the worst idea . . .*

She needed to talk to someone to whom sex was central to his life. Someone who could help her decide whether she was right, or if Liz was right. Is sex just sex, or is there good sex, bad sex, great sex, boring sex? And she knew just the right guy. She reached for the phone.

## Chapter Three

### The Riverbottom

The homeless encampment in the river bottom was not so much a camp as a place where some very independent men decided to share the same piece of real estate. It smelled of a sewer and rotting food. There was trash everywhere. There were dogs, some well-fed and some so scrawny every rib showed. Here and there was an island of order, a place with no garbage, a fire pit, and perhaps a tent or a lean to. This was not a place for women, and few tried to find a spot here.

Most of the random sites had a shopping cart, maybe two, piled high with things of use or value: blankets, buckets, bags of recycling. There were a few men in groups, passing a bottle, sharing a smoke. Every now and then, there would be a sharp cackle, too rough for a laugh, too loud for chuckle. That sound, that cackling sound, came from the ruined lungs of men too drunk for too long to understand either health or moderation.

From the north, the small man walked into the encampment. Like many of the others, he had a shopping cart, with a dirty quilt and a bag of recycling hanging off the back. He chose a spot a bit to the west of the camp, closest to the River. The water there was slimy and brown, about right for a southern California river in the late summer. There wouldn't be any rain for months, so until the rains came the Riverbottom was safe enough.

As the afternoon dragged on, the new man set up his camp. He picked up some trash and buried it with a broken shovel, a shovel with only the metal remaining. He gathered some rocks

and some firewood, and put them both near his shopping cart. No matter the time of year, the river bottom got chilly near dawn, the wet fog from the ocean rolling in to drench everything. He knew that a fire around three in the morning was a life saver.

Dogs wandered over, sniffing cautiously. He petted all of them, scratching ears and rubbing bellies, giving the thinner ones food and water. He pulled out a book and began to read, catching the last of the afternoon light. The drunken men got louder as the night began to fall. As darkness crept in, he had to put his book away, and he opened some food and waited. Someone would come; they always did. He ate slowly and deliberately, as he did everything else.

The man's name was Francis Mellon Smith. He was 52 years old, although he had the kind of face that could have been years younger, or years older, depending on how the light hit the wrinkles around his eyes. Unlike so many of the others, he looked healthy, not sallow. He was thin, but not emaciated. He had walked to Santa Teadora from San Diego, far to the south. He knew the places that were made dangerous by young gangsters, and those made dangerous by the police. He knew where the soup kitchens could be found and where he had to have money to eat, to get through to the next town. He didn't stay in any town too long, and although he had been in Santa Teadora often, it had been many years since his last visit. Finally, about nine o'clock, after the sun had gone down and the sky had turned black, someone did walk up, as he knew they would.

"Hey, Buddy. New around here? I don't recognize you."

"I haven't been here for a long time." He smiled as he gestured to a rock he had dragged in as a chair. "But sit down. My name's Frank."

"Frank, that was my dad's name." The fellow squatted down on the rock, looking a little wistful. "I don't hear that name much anymore. Now it's Justin or Jason or some such."



“Want a little something to eat? Don’t have much, but I have enough to share.”

The man shrugged. “Sure. Never turn down a little food. Whatcha got? Oh, my name’s Sam.”

“Nice to meet you, Sam. Here, just beans and bread, but it’s good.”

Frank dropped his head to one side, and looked at Sam with narrowed eyes. “Where are you from, Sam? Let me guess – Michuacan?”

“Yeah! How’d you know that!”

Frank tipped his head to the side and smiled. “Just a lucky guess.”

Same grinned back. “I was born here. My parents were from Michuacan. I was born Hilario – but they called me Sam at school. Sam, since I was about 10 years old.”

“I lived in Michuacan when I was just out of school. A couple years there. Beautiful place. Hard to make a living though.”

Sam couldn’t figure out why someone would move to Michuacan from the U.S., especially a white guy, but he didn’t press the point. You learned not to pry too much in the Riverbottom. Nevertheless, Sam was happy to talk about his family, and where they went, and how he ended up in the Riverbottom. Sam crossed the border at Tijuana when he was nine. He was supposed to cross with his parents and his little brother, but they were separated. Sam followed the plan, and made his way to a cousin’s house in San Diego. His parents never made it across. His little brother still lived in Michuacan. They wrote each other now and then.

“He wants me to come home to live with him and his wife. I have nephews, two of them. But I don’t know. I’m not ready to go back yet.”

“What about your parents?”

“Both dead, a few years ago.” Sam looked at Frank, but his eyes were far away. “My mom died of pneumonia. My dad just died one day. We figure it was a heart attack.” He came back to the Riverbottom, and his voice picked up. “What about you? Your parents alive?”

Frank smiled, but only a little upturning of his lips. “My parents are both dead as well.” He shook his head. “A long time ago. I have a cousin. I still talk with him now and then.” Now, he grinned. “Not as often as he would like!”

“Why’s that?”

“He doesn’t approve of me living on the road.”

Sam shook his head. “Family never does.”

Frank asked about the scuttlebut in the camp: what’s the latest news here? Sam told Frank about three dead homeless men, men who were regulars in the Riverbottom, and who had been found dead in the past few weeks. Sam was sure it was a plan to kill all of the homeless in the Riverbottom, because the City was saying the camp was bad for business. The gossip in the camp was that it was the police. One man said he saw the killer, and it was a big white guy, but no one really knew anything. Plus, a “big white guy” described about half of Santa Teadora, including most of the police department.

Frank hadn’t heard anything about the killings, and wondered if the men had simply died. “This is a tough life, Sam. Could they have died of a heart attack or something like that?”

“No. One guy was young. My age probably, maybe a little older. The other one was old, but the word is he was strangled. I don’t know about the last guy.”

“But nothing in the paper?”

Sam laughed, a short bark. “Who reads the paper?”

The two men talked well into the night. About two in the morning, Frank built a fire, explaining his theory about the fog rolling in off the ocean right before dawn. Sam agreed readily, and went poking around in the weeds for a few more pieces of wood. Then, with the fire burning, small but steady, the two fell asleep.

The sun rose through thick fog, fog that wouldn't even begin to burn off until noon. And that's when Frank heard the shouting. First, it was just a disorganized sound, but it took shape quickly and Frank heard large engines idling in cars along the edge of the levee, and the sound of someone yelling unintelligibly through a bullhorn.

"Frank, we gotta go! Now! Let's go!" Sam already had his pack on his back, and was gathering Frank's things and throwing them into the shopping cart, scrambling, adrenalin pumping, the fear emanating from him in a nimbus Frank could almost see.

"But it's only the police. We haven't done anything wrong. Calm down, Sam."

"Frank – I like you, man. But you leave now, or you might die. We got three dead so far and I think it's the cops. So I have to leave. Now. You don't understand. This Police – people die when they come to the river." And Sam started backing away, pleading with Frank to leave. "Leave your stuff, man. Come back later. You gotta go now."

Sam's understanding was obviously one shared by the entire encampment. They were all running, scattering, and the police were moving into the river, beating the bushes like aristocrats trying to flush pheasants.

Frank closed his eyes, moving his lips in silence. Then he stood, quickly, grabbed a small bag from nearly the bottom of the shopping cart, and he took off after Sam. As they walked, he stuffed the bag into an inside coat pocket.

The bull horn blared. “This is the police! You are in a no-camping area. You are in violation of the law! You are required to stay where you are, and be arrested for trespassing. If you try to run, that will be charged as resisting arrest and you will do time.”

The officer next to the bullhorn-officer added, “And you might get killed by some crazy asshole that we can’t find.” The two looked at each other. They were young, just joined the department, and both were ambitious and enthusiastic. “Dude, if we find the killer we’ll be heroes.”

“I know, dude, but we got work to do right now.” He continued with his admonitions on the bullhorn. “Do not try to run. Just stay where you are while we contact you. This is the police.”

A few of the men, too tired or too drunk to move, stayed where they were. The rest melted into the rushes along the riverbank, heading upstream, downstream, wherever the bamboo-like plants were the tallest and provided the best cover.

The bulk of the force – only a dozen men – began to talk to the homeless men, asking for identification. When no ID was available, they asked for names and birth dates, writing everything down, and warning each of the campers that they were in violation of law and would have to be taken to the Central Jail. The two young officers fanned out looking for stragglers. They found only leftover belonging, smoldering campfires, and a few shopping carts. They began to rummage through one of them, but heard their names.

“Travis! Olmeda! Let’s go!”

The two jogged back to the phalanx of cars, and helped with processing. One of the homeless, drunk and shouting, struggled and fought getting into the car. Travis and Olmeda were the two biggest men there, and jumped into fray. They brought the drunk man down to the

ground, zip-tied his hands a little too tightly, and stood over him grinning like cowboys over a calf.

Olmeda talked to a few of the men, asking about strangers in the camp, but the stragglers were the ones who were the least alert, the most addled by drugs or alcohol. Travis, watching, said softly, “Olmeda, it’s like talking to jello. Give it up.”

Eventually, six homeless men were transported to the Jail, with their belongings and their shopping carts. Each was charged with trespassing and possession of stolen property: the shopping carts. The man who had resisted arrest was too drunk to know that his scalp was leaking blood down his face and onto his coat, but he kept muttering all the way to the jail: “What’d you guys do with Johnny? Johnny was my friend.”

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Price of Lunch**

Alexis sat down at her desk and dialed Michael Traynor. Alex had met Michael years ago, when doing an article on the latest real estate boom. He was a real estate developer, well-known for his large and often controversial projects, turning vast areas of southern California's open lands into subdivisions and shopping malls. She interviewed him again for the inevitable real estate bust, then again when housing starts went up. He was quotable and had an outrageous sense of humor. His strength was trying to manipulate others into giving him large sums of money for speculative ventures. He was really good at it, apparently.

From the first time they met, he made it clear that he wanted to sleep with her. She turned him down, that first time and dozens of times after that. He bought her lunch, complimented her relentlessly, and made her laugh when she was down. At first, it was clearly a seduction. But since Alexis wouldn't give in, eventually it settled down into a familiar and comforting flirtation, even if somewhat obscene at times. If Alexis ever felt overwhelmed by the world, by work, by anything at all, she called Michael, and he never failed to lift her spirits.

Michael once complained that if he added up all the lunches he had paid for over the course of their friendship, he could have purchased a boat. So he did. He invited her down right after the purchase, but it didn't go well. She realized that for the first time, they would be alone, with no witnesses, no phones, no wives, no potential chaperones of any type. She was so nervous for the entire fifteen minutes that she managed to stay on the boat, that by the time she

left both of them were jangling with the frightened energy she telegraphed. He didn't speak to her for weeks.

"Michael. It's Alexis."

"Well, hello, my dear. What can I do for you?"

"I'm hungry."

"Again? Let me check." He got off the phone to ask his secretary if or when he could get away. "I'm free today, amazingly enough. Where do you want to meet?"

They decided on a place and a time, and Alexis pondered the problem. There was no way in hell that she could ask Michael about sex in a public place. First, she blushed too easily. Second, there was no second. She couldn't do it. But, she figured, a little embarrassment never killed anyone and it was in the spirit of research. And Jeanine needed chapters. At lunch, knowing that she was about to blush and stammer, she tried to explain what was happening, but Michael's jaw dropped open and he kept repeating himself. It was awful, and exactly what she thought would happen.

"You write porn?"

"No, Michael, I write erotica."

"How long have you been writing porn? And why haven't you told me?"

"Because I knew that you would react like this."

"But Alexis... you write porn. How could you not tell me?"

"Look, Michael, I tried to explain. I just did it on a whim one day, when I was feeling down about not selling anything. A writer has to write –"

"A writer does not have to write porn without telling me." His eyes lit up with an unearthly glow, and it was a little scary. "What's the porn like?"

"I am so not telling you."

"How much have you written?"

"Well..." she paused, knowing this was going to be a problem. "Three books. One was a bestseller."

"You write porn."

Alexis sighed. "Again, it's not porn. It's erotica. There is a difference."

"Not really." Michael was a big man beginning to round in the middle, which he blamed on excellent food and good scotch. He eased his bulk back in the chair and looked at her over the rim of his wine glass. "You have written three porn books without telling me. I consider that a breach of our friendship. At a bare minimum, you should have given me copies of the books."

"Like I said, Michael... one of them was a bestseller."

"What exactly does that mean in the porn industry? A hundred thousand copies? A million copies? What are we talking here?"

"About three million copies, including the downloads. No *Fifty Shades of Grey*, but it was harder core."

Michael whistled appreciatively. "I have a new use for my Kindle. And what is the name of this book?"

"*Time In The Locked Room.*"

Alexis once again became uncomfortable, as Michael's eyes stopped looking at her, and gazed dreamily somewhere off into the distance. She actually turned around to see if there was



someone there, before her she realized that he was somewhere in the middle of her book, a book he had never seen.

“Tell me what it’s about.” Michael’s eyes returned to her. The look on his face was one of immense satisfaction and anticipation of good things to come. Alexis suspected he looked that way on Christmas morning when he was eight. Or more accurately, the way he must’ve looked when he realized for the first time that he was going to get laid.

“Oh no. I will get you a copy, I promise. But that’s not why we’re here today.”

The look of happy anticipation did not fade, although it shifted. “Okay. Then tell me – why are we here?”

“The book was such a big seller that the publisher decided that it would be a good idea if I wrote a self-help book on sex.”

“You never have sex.”

Alexis scrunched up her face and tried to stay calm. “Funny, that is exactly what Liz said.”

“Liz knows? That bitch. She should’ve told me about this.” Liz and Michael had met at several of their lunches. Watching the two play verbal volleyball was the best spectator sport that Alex had ever seen.

“I told her not to. Because I was afraid we were going to have this exact conversation.”

“It does seem strange that you, of all people, should write a book on how to have sex. Shouldn’t Liz be writing this?”

“She said she would help with research.”

Michael laughed, a delightful deep chuckle. “She will be helpful,” he said with a deadpan face.

Alexis opened her mouth to explain the reason she called, but Michael interrupted before a word came out of her mouth.

“Let’s get back to the important stuff. You write porn. And you didn’t tell me. How long has this been going on?”

Alexis explained the circumstances. Four years ago, she read an article by a well-known author who admitted his secret career of writing hilarious and very popular gay porn. He wrote under a pseudonym, giving him the freedom to do what ever he chose. The money from the porn allowed him to write serious books, books that were well-respected but sold only a few copies. Alexis could relate.

“So while I was writing these beautiful, lyrical, gentle and – apparently boring – novels, novels that would not sell, there was someone out there like me who was happily paying his mortgage getting men hard. I swore that I would not write trash, and that my porn would be highbrow erotica. However, that didn’t sell either.”

Michael grinned at her. “For an extraordinarily intelligent woman, you can be very dense.”

“I know. I know. That was okay. By the time I got into it, it definitely shifted from highbrow to...” she paused.

“To porn.”

“Yup.” She admitted it reluctantly. “And it was very well received. After the last book went into the gazillions of copies sold, my publisher called me up and asked me to write a book on how to have good sex. She said that people would see my name –“

”What is the name you are writing under?”

“Anna Maria Brown.”

“Anna Maria Brown? How did you come up with that?”

“I wanted it to sound foreign but familiar at the same time.” Alexis lifted her shoulders and spread her hands. “Frankly, I don’t think it matters much. They seem to like the way I write.”

“You write porn.” Michael shook his head and waved at the waiter to come over. “I can’t believe you write porn. And you didn’t tell me, your good friend. I am so hurt.”

Ignoring this last bit, Alexis continued. “So she says that people will see my name –“  
”– or Ms. Brown’s name –“

”Yes. And they will want to buy a book on how to have good sex. It’s that simple.”

Michael ordered coffee, Alexis ordered dessert with two spoons, and they both leaned back. It was quiet for a while. Michael broke the silence.

“You write porn.”

“Will you stop that?”

It was quiet again for a while. Michael spoke.

“If you didn’t want to have lunch with me to reveal your secret porn career, then why are we here, my dear?”

Alexis opened her mouth, and then shut it again. She looked down at the table, trying to gather her thoughts, and then opened her mouth to speak again. Then she shut it. This was going to be very difficult. She could already feel her face getting hot.

“This is going to be great. You are already blushing.”

This, of course, made Alex blush even redder. So she plunged into the deep water: I need to know how men feel about making love.”

“That is a very long conversation.” Michael raised one eyebrow in a gesture she knew well. “We can discuss it on the boat?”

She cringed, trying to keep the obviousness of her discomfort to a minimum. This was eerily predictable. “No, that’s not what I need.”

“Yes, it is. I know for a fact that would be very educational.”

“Michael. Michael.”

“Yes?”

“There is a difference between ‘educational’ and ‘research.’ I need to do research. I cannot let down my agent. She pays me too much money. She’s already given me an advance. I need to come up with something.” Now the words started spilling out.

“Liz says that men don’t make love, they have sex.” She looked over and that eyebrow was raised again, which she took as a good sign. “I think that men want to have sex all the time —“

” – well, of course —“

” – but that sex and good sex are very different. I think the difference is that in good sex, there is an element of love-making, of being in love. Liz says I’m nuts. What do you think?”

Feigning hurt, he said, “You write porn and you never told me. I don’t know what to think about you anymore.”

“Oh. My. God. Is it true or not? Do men like love making more than just sex? Do men like – no, do they prefer – having sex with a woman who is a joy to them? Or is sex for the sake of sex just as good?”

“There’s no easy answer to that, and I suppose there is a different answer for each man alive.” Dessert came, and he ate a bite of the dessert he swore he didn’t want. “Ummm. Creme

brulee. I can see why you like this stuff so much.” He hummed a little. “I can speak only for myself, but I suspect there are a lot of men out there that are like me – “

”No, there is no one like you. We already had that conversation.” Complimenting the men in her life came as second nature to Alexis. *There were no consequences of telling a man that he was wonderful, spectacular, brilliant or whatever if he didn't follow you home.*

“Thank you, darling. Let me continue.” He was entering a place of pontification. Alexis had seen it a thousand times before. It was always interesting, often amusing. She wished she could take notes, but she worried that if he saw her writing, he would lose his groove.

“A man wants to be stroked, mentally and physically. You often hear the phrase ‘Men are dogs,’ but that is all wrong. Men are cats. They want to be the only male around. They want to be petted, pampered and stroked. But they are grossly independent and want to be able to disappear at any moment. And no matter how well you treat them, they can turn around and scratch you for no reason. But they forget it in seconds, and cannot comprehend why you women hold onto hurts for so long. Makes no sense to us.” He took a sip of his wine.

“Men will prefer certain women over others, but you are right about one thing: sex is sex. Sex is always good, no matter what. Some sex is better than others, but having sex is a good thing.”

“Then why do men get married?”

Michael shook his head sadly. “Societal pressure. We have been trained for the last several millennia that we should mate for life, and remain in a monogamous relationship in order to raise children. We could blame religion, but I think it goes back further than that.”

“Wait one second. Are you about to shift the blame onto women – again?”

“Everything is the fault of women. Men would be so happy without women. Other than the termination of the species. But until that happened, we would be ecstatic.”

“Alright, assume that women are to blame for –“ Alexis threw up her hands in temporary defeat. “– everything. Take your average American male. He grows up, he gets laid, he gets laid again, then – and you know this happens – he falls in love. Is that sex better, qualitatively better, than the sex that came before and the sex that comes after?”

“He is befuddled. He is in love. He is a total idiot at this point in his life. But yes, sex is better. Sex blooms into love making, and touching her is electric and there’s nothing better.” A warm and majestic Michael beamed at her from across the table. “A man in love is a sad and beautiful thing. He wants to write poetry, because he feels that if she could just understand his heart, she would love him forever. He wants to make paintings that rival the Sistine Chapel, because he wants her to understand how beautiful she is to him. And if he can sing – and sometimes even if he can’t – he will sing to her of love and loss, and the overflowing tumult that is his heart.” Michael sighed. “This doesn’t last forever. It can’t. But it is a very dangerous place for a man to be.”

“Dangerous?”

“If the woman rejects him when he is this vulnerable, he will never recover.”

“You are far too serious right now.” Alexis’s eyes narrowed and a little smile appeared. “This must have happened to you.”

Michael shrugged. “I was only 18. But I never forgot it.”

“But what about your wife? When did you marry her?” Alexis had never liked his wife. This would be a good reason to hate her. “Was she the one who broke your heart?”

“I met my wife a couple years later. She is an exceptional woman, and has been an exceptional wife. But I never sang her songs, and I never wrote her poetry. Being in love once was enough for me.”

Her most congenial lunch partner, a man whose good mood never faltered, was serious in a way she had never seen before, not in 15 years, un-countable meals and many dozens of bottles of wine. Very quietly, she asked, “What did she do?”

“She didn’t feel the same way that I did.” He shrugged. “Happens all the time. Nothing new, not in many millennia.” He shook his head, took a deep breath and sat up straighter. “But we digress. The easy answer is that sex is better with someone you love. I just don’t think very many men expect to find love and sex together in the same place.”

At that point, the check came, and Michael handed over a credit card. The waitress, who knew Michael well if you could believe her delighted “hello-it’s-good-to-see-yous” when they arrived, came back to quietly say the card had been declined. Michael laughed it off, but it just worsened the bad mood that had settled over him.

Alexis went back home to write the second exercise. Michael’s heart was broken 25 years before, and it still hurt. She wanted to make it better, to tell him that love was possible and that he shouldn’t have given up, but she knew it wasn’t true for him. Still, she drove home wondering if there were a way to make life and love easier, when we all start off so young, so stupid, and so unaware of the consequences of love and sex.

## Chapter Five

### Plastic Flowers

Frank and Sam came out at the mouth of the river, slogging through gummy mud and muck that smelled far worse than the encampment. Seagulls were floating above them, screeching that strange sound of theirs. Gnats were in clouds all around them, and as Frank panted from exertion, he could feel them hit the back of his throat. He coughed, he swallowed, but the gnats kept flying into his mouth, no matter how hard he tried to wave them away. He said a silent prayer, apologizing for the inevitable deaths, and cleared his throat to speak.

“Well, Sam, what now?”

“I have a job I gotta do, Frank. This guy on Main Street lets me do cleaning for him a couple times a week, if I show up early. It’s not much, but it’s money. He feeds me too.” Sam stopped, and looked at Frank, confused and a little curious. “Do you want me to bring you something? It’s a good restaurant. The guy’s really nice – a good guy. He saves me food.” Chuckling, he added, “yeah, he’s from Michuacan too.” And he grinned.

Frank smiled his slow sweet smile and said, “That would be wonderful, Sam. Where can I find you later?”

The two men set up a rendezvous at the Mission downtown, and Sam ran off towards his job. It was a little late, so he had to hurry. As he jogged, he thought unusual thoughts. He was a loner, a man only out for himself – he had been on his own for too long, and knew that no one



could be trusted, no one looked out for him, not ever. What was he doing helping some old guy that he just met? But as he walked up to back of the restaurant, he was smiling, and thinking he would get something nice for Frank to eat.

Frank needed his shopping cart back, but he waited a while to make sure the police were gone. The sun was just creeping out from behind the fog when he dropped down into the river bottom, searching for his blanket and bags. He was almost completely hidden by the bushes when he heard someone swearing. Peeking from behind the weeds, he stood still, breathing through his mouth, trying to stay as silent as a cat in front of a mouse hole. He wasn't entirely sure why he was being so careful; for years, he had no fear of talking to anyone. But he had learned to honor his instincts, which he believed were little, daily gifts from God.

The man pawing through his things was tall and a little paunchy. He was definitely not homeless, and he didn't look like a police officer either. He was wearing nice pants with a dark blue windbreaker on top, and the windbreaker had some type of logo on. Strain as he might, he couldn't read that logo. The man was bending over the shopping cart, which was on its side. The contents were spread over the ground, and the tall man was looking at each item, turning it from side to side before dropping it back on the ground.

Frank watched from the bushes, waiting. He listened as the man pushed things around from Frank's cart, then moved onto to another. The sun was high in the sky when the man left. Frank could hear him start a car. Still, Frank waited a long time before leaving his hiding place and recovering his cart. He pulled his bag out from a pocket that he had sewn deep into the lining of his coat and slipped it in amongst the things near the bottom, once again. Then, he moved out of the river bottom to meet up with Sam at the Mission.

There were two priests at the Mission, one very old and one very young. It was the old one who greeted Frank as he pushed his cart up the little alley that led to the back of the church.

“Frank, my friend! I haven’t seen you in – in years? Isn’t it years? How have you been?” Where have you been? Do you have stories to tell?” The two men hugged. “It is so good to see you! I can’t tell you how many times I’ve thought of you since you were last here!”

Frank smiled, the edges of his eyes crinkling into a hundred little laugh lines. “Father, you look good! A little more gray there –“ and his hand brushed his own temple. “But you are a sight for sore eyes!” Unable to stay apart, they hugged again, and laughed some more, and the priest took over pushing the shopping cart into a little patio at the back of the church.

After talking for a little while, Frank suddenly got serious. “Remember what we talked about last time? I’ve found a good man for you, Father. A good man. He needs a little work, but he will be perfect for the job.”

“You’ve never been wrong before, Frank, but you know I don’t have a budget for a new man. What will he do for us? What skills does he have?”

Frank began to lay out his plan. “His name is Sam. He is meeting me here. Soon, I think.” Frank’s eyes looked up to find the sun, to gauge the time. “He should be here soon, but first, before he gets here – what do you know about the police or someone else harassing the homeless in the river?”

The priest shook his head. “Just what I’ve heard from the men, and they’re not always the best at telling me the truth. I know that the police are getting much more aggressive on enforcement of the no camping rules, and that they are arresting men for having a shopping cart. Apparently, those things cost a few hundred dollars each. So if you have one, you are in possession of stolen property, and the police can arrest you on sight.” The priest shook his head.

“It seems harsh, but I understand. I just wish I could find a way to let the men hold onto their things. It’s hard enough living in the river, or under the freeway. There’s got to be a way to make it a little easier.”

Frank smiled, his laugh lines wrinkling up, his smile so warm that the priest couldn’t help but smile back at him. “And that’s part of why I’m here. Our plan.” Frank turned towards the alley and grinned. “But our visitor is here.” Sam was walking up the alley, looking front and back, side to side, in a constant sweep, looking for danger, looking for trouble. And then he saw Frank and the tension drained from him.

“Hey, Frank, I brought you some food.” He paused, just for a moment, then added protectively. “Sorry, Father, I only have enough for Frank.”

The two older men exchanged glances. “That’s OK, Sam – it’s Sam, right? Frank told me you were coming.” They shook hands and all three sat at the weather-beaten picnic table that served as their conference room.

“How was work, Sam?”

Sam pushed the foil-wrapped paper plate towards Frank. “It was good. It’s good work. I like the guy who owns the place.” Sam looked around. “You got your cart back. That’s good. Police were gone when you got back, right?”

Frank nodded. “Someone else was there, though. An older man, and he didn’t look like a police officer. He was looking through everyone’s things. Why would he do that?”

Frank took a few bites of the tortillas, rice and beans on the plate while Sam answered. “I heard nothing about an old guy. Only the police. Three of us dead, ain’t that right, Father? Three guys dead in the past month or so. Police won’t do nothing about it. It’s their own that’s doing it.”

The priest answered. “We don’t know that, Sam. We only know three men are missing. We don’t know they were killed.”

Sam shook his head, hard and angrily. “We know they’re dead and we know someone did it. Mean Joe? He never left the riverbed once, not in five years. Not since I been here. Even when that big storm came through, two, three years ago? He took his stuff. He sat by the freeway and he waited. And when the rain stopped, he moved back down.

“And that ugly guy – um, Jamie, Johnny, I don’t remember. He had a bad leg, remember? He dinnit like to walk. He stayed close, always downtown, always with his cart. His cart he put flowers on it, remember? Plastic flowers. Next time I see his cart, it’s by the freeway – plastic flowers, on its side, stuff all over. And he was young, no older than me. I don’t know about the last guy, but Mean Joe and the plastic flower guy – they’re dead. And someone killed them.” Sam said this with certainty, he would listen to no argument on this.

The priest was still skeptical. “But we don’t know the police did this.”

“We know that the police are giving all of us a hard time, every day. They’re on us in Riverbottom, they’re on us on the streets. And it’s always the same guys. And they come into the river, and guys disappear. Three so far. After this morning, another one of us is gonna be missing, you watch.”

The men sat at the picnic table and talked well into the afternoon. Frank laid out his ideas to provide some help for the local homeless. Basically, the plan was to use Mission buildings to set up a job center for low income people, as well as the homeless. They could take showers and get help filling out job applications. Most of the job applications were online now, and there was certainly no internet service in the Riverbottom. Volunteers would help with the

applications, and there would be a clothing drop, plus washing machines to make sure folks could stay clean. Staying clean was the biggest issue in getting a job, and then keeping that job.

“Father, I have seen this work in other cities. You set it up, provide the building, and then volunteers will come. They just show up –“

”The Lord will provide, I know, Frank. But what buildings are there here?”

“You must have something, Father.”

Sam interrupted. “Father, can I ask a question.”

“Sure, Sam.”

“Why isn’t the shelter here? And the food kitchen?”

“Well, a couple of reasons. We don’t have a lot of space, and we didn’t want it too close to the school.”

“So if you don’t want the shelter here, why would put the job place here?”

The priest looked uncomfortable, a little embarrassed. “It’s different. I have to protect the children though. Sometimes, things at the shelter get a little out of hand. I don’t think a job center would have the same problem.”

Sam shrugged. “Just curious.”

Sam looked around behind him. He could hear the kids on the playground behind the Church. There seemed to be enough room for a job center, but he didn’t really care. This didn’t have anything to do with him. He put one foot on the bench, and relaxed. Sam had no idea that Frank had already started working on Sam’s future.

## Chapter Six

### All Men Lie

Liz showed up for coffee in the morning, and Alexis told her Michael's sad tale. The response was a little startling.

"That's bullshit."

"What?"

"Michael is an outrageously good musician. He could have gone pro. You've heard him play – you know what I'm talking about."

"Hadn't thought of that. Yes, he can play. What of it?"

"He is also a painter, isn't he? You keep telling me how much you want a Michael original. The watercolor? You talked about it for months after that party at his house."

"Yes, I did." Alexis was heading the right direction, but she clearly wasn't there yet.

"So. He plays music. He paints. I would guess that sad soul also writes bad poetry."

Alexis nodded, wondering where this was going.

"So he tells you that he has never written poetry for his wife, not sang her a song, not painted her a picture. But he plays music all the time, alone and with others. He paints, beautifully, and hangs those on the walls of the house he bought for the woman he married. She's not worked a day in her life, has she?"

"No, she hasn't." Clearly, Alex was lost in the fog.

"Do you get it yet?"

“I don’t think so. Maybe I get it, but I don’t want to.”

“He may be telling himself that he never fell in love again, but he has stayed married to the same woman, through thick and thin, three kids, financial ups and downs, deaths and births, for more than thirty years. That’s love.”

“So was he lying to me? Playing me? What?”

“No,” Liz said with a frustrated glare. “No! He’s a man. He just doesn’t get it. He whimpered because once, decades ago, some woman didn’t want him, and he has played wounded ever since. The same shit happens to a woman, and if she complains even once, she’s called a drama queen. He is a drama king.”

“So he thinks he’s not been in love since that first time?”

“Right.”

“But – oh. This is too much.” Alexis looked down and then sparkled up. “What about the comment that men aren’t dogs, they’re cats?”

“Men aren’t dogs or cats. They’re just animals. Men are animals.” Liz got up and moved toward the door. “And that’s why I like them. I’ll read the new exercises tonight. Do you have more done?”

“I will have by tonight. Promise.” Alexis held up two fingers in some kind of fake Girl Scout salute, and Liz took off.

Back at the computer, Alexis still couldn’t wrap her brain around poor Michael. But she forced herself into a different place, and started the second set of exercises.

### ***EXERCISE ONE – FOR A WOMAN***

*One of the most important exercises in this book may be the most difficult for you. You may have a hard time doing this with your partner, so do it first on your own, with no one home.*

*Lie on your back on your bed, with your clothes on. Make sure the room is quiet. Turn the lights off, if it makes you feel more comfortable. As you relax, spread your legs apart comfortably. Imagine your man standing right in front of you, between your knees, looking down at you. Imagine him looking at every part of you, from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet. You are not touching. Just remember how he looks at you when he truly wants to make love to you, in that urgent, can't-wait-to-get-my-clothes-off sort of way. Your eyes can be open or shut. But you have to visualize him next to you, looking at you with lust in his eyes.*

*It is important not to let the stresses of your day interfere with this exercise. In a perfect world, it would be best if the stresses of your day do not interfere with sex at all.*

*Unfortunately, that may be impossible, but that is the point of these exercises. With effort, using these exercises as a base, we may be able to make it easier for you to untangle the woman you want to be in the bedroom from the woman you have to be in the world. So don't be discouraged if it takes you more than one try to finish this exercise in a way that makes you happy. That's what sex is all about – making two people happy and comfortable together.*

*Ladies with children: install a lock on the bedroom door. This is not a time for mothering. This is your time, and your partner's time. You get a key, he gets a key.*

*Children can learn how to knock.*



There was a knock on the door. For a long moment, Alexis was frozen, trying to figure out if the knock was in her head, or in her house. Then there was another knock, which helped her decide.

“Hey, Miz Trotter. Another package for you.”

“Hey Jesse.” The FedEx guy was so beautiful it hurt her eyes to look at him. And he always wore shorts, and smiled with his big white surfer teeth. She scrambled for conversation to keep him at the door a little longer. Reaching for the signature box, she asked, “Jesse, do you like your job?”

“Yeah, I do. Why?” He grinned and she realized that she had actually stopped breathing. “Do you have a job for me?” Was he flirting?

Alexis blushed, which was bad enough until she realized that he could see her blush, which made her blush again. The second time, she could feel the heat in her face. So obvious.

“No, I was looking for a career change.” She handed him back the signature pad, and he handed her a package from her publisher. “Thanks, Jesse. See you soon.”

“I’m sure you will.” His butt was perfect and his shorts hugged the curve of his ass. But his butt was not the point. She shut the door and held her breath for a moment before exploding.

“I am so stupid!” Ripping the cord that opened the package from Jeanine the Agent, Alexis kept talking out loud. “Do you like your job? Seriously. That was the dumbest line ever.”

Could she actually take that beautiful man to bed? There was fantasy and then there’s reality, and in reality that man wasn’t going to fall in love with her and sweep her off her feet. She tried to read the note from Jeanine, but it wasn’t critical. More information on royalties, on

sales in various markets, and the most interesting note: a request from the publisher for a sequel to “Time In A Locked Room.” And an offer of an advance, one with lots of zeros.

“Seriously, I want to be taken seriously. Then she sends me stuff like this, and I have to think about more porn. I am going to hell.”

Hell or not, the sequel could start with her heroine sleeping with the Fed Ex guy, and that guy definitely looked like Jesse. But she had to make him a little more aggressive. Jesse was too normal. She opened a new window and starting typing.

*Cassandra was back at home, back from the hospital, trying to remember the time before she went into That Room. It was capitalized in her head: That Room. She went there looking for something. What was it? Adventure? Something new? Or was it just that she wanted sex, needed sex, without any attachments?*

*Just the thought of going there again made her wet, and she remembered the days and nights in That Room, remembered the men that came in and out, a parade of different tastes, of different sizes. It was intoxicating, addicting, that they all wanted her.*

*Thinking back on the Cassandra who lived before That Room, that pre-Room woman wanted, more than anything else, to be desired. She closed her eyes, remembering the time before and thinking that she could never be the same again. But was she really different now? And what was life like after the Room? Could she have that same feeling, that same attraction, here in the real world?*

*She was startled out of her memories by a knock on the door. She scrambled to her feet and padded barefoot to the door, naked.*

“I can’t send her to the front door naked.” Alexis held down the backspace button.

*She was startled out of her memories by a knock on the door. She scrambled to her feet and padded barefoot to the door. She quickly looked down, making sure that she was properly clothed. This wasn't her fantasy world – this was daylight in California, and she was pretty sure showing up naked at the front door wasn't allowed.*

*She opened the door to a man so beautiful that she stopped breathing for a moment. He was more than six feet tall, tanned and lean. She took him in, slowly, her eyes working their way down from his head to his feet. He smiled at her, a blindingly perfect smile, and she smiled shyly back, blushing just a little. She was surprised at her reaction. She had just spent a month in That Room, and yet she could still blush.*

*“I have a package for you, miss.” His voice matched the rest of him, deep, dark and beautiful.*

*“Of course. Do I need to sign something?”*

*She started to look up at him, but realized that the front of his shorts was bulging, a huge erection waiting for her there. Instead of reaching for the signature pad, she reached out and stroked him lightly. Then she met his eyes, took his hand and brought him inside.*

“I could never do that.” Alexis sipped from her coffee cup and leaned back. “Maybe I could.” But she could feel her face get red, and said out loud, “Ah, c'mon! I'm alone here! Blushing's for being in public!”

The next hour or so, she worked on the sequel to Locked Room, just enough to get the Jesse character in place, so that she wouldn't forget any details when she went back to work on it later. Deadlines are deadlines, though, so she went back to “Good Sex.”

*As you lie on the bed, again imagine your partner coming in and standing between your legs. Stay in this position for at least 15 minutes. Feel how vulnerable you are. Think*

*about what it is like to be pierced by a man, speared, filled by him and by his desire. You are a receptacle, a thing of warmth and beauty. You are sexual. More than that, you are sex, a pulsing, breathing, heaving, sweating, panting thing, you are woman, and you love sex.*

“This isn’t that difficult to write,” Alex said to the dogs. She frowned. “Famous last words. It’s the first chapter.” She frowned and thought about deleting that last sentence. “Maybe I shouldn’t try to write this and ‘Room’ at the same time. Too skanky.” She shook her head, and saved her work. “Let’s see what Liz says.”

Liz walked in the next morning and read the next exercise. “That’s kind of hokey, isn’t it? ‘You are sex. You are woman.’ I mean, I don’t disagree. But it seems a little passive.”

“Passive? What do you mean?”

“I mean that some women are not ‘receptacles,’ they are active partners in the act.” Liz poured more coffee and grabbed a banana off the kitchen counter. “If I want someone, I let them know. Generally, that means that the two of us end up in bed.” Liz took a large bite of the banana as punctuation. “When I’m in bed, I am not merely a ‘receptacle.’”

“But that’s the point, Liz. There is a need to restore the roles that brought us this far. I want a women to realize the joy of being wanted. That’s a great feeling.”

Liz just shook her head, and looked at Alex with her luminous brown eyes. She didn’t have to say a word. Alex knew she was disapproving, so she tried to be more convincing.

“The people who pick this up will be normal people, people who are just looking to spice things up a little.”

“Maybe so, but they don’t think they’re ‘normal.’ They think they are going to have hot, crazy, porn-star love, and all because of the tips they find in your book.”

“But this isn’t about porn star love. The *Room* wasn’t even about porn star love.” Alex paused. “And I’m not sure it was about being a receptacle either.”

“You’re trying to take all of them to the Room! That’s not where real women live. We don’t just wait for a man to come through the door at his leisure and tell us what he wants, and what he expects us to do. Sex is a partnership, not a – why are you waving your hands at me?”

Alexis was trying to swallow coffee that was too hot, and waving for Liz to stop talking. When she retrieved the ability to speak, she explained about the sequel to the “Time in a Locked Room,” and how Jesse the FedEx guy was the first chapter.

“OK, that is your research assignment. You need to get the FedEx Guy to sleep with you.”

“But that won’t help my target audience. I am writing ‘Good Sex’ for couples, not horny housewives.”

“Or horny writers.”

“Or horny writers. Horny writers have enough troubles.” Alex looked up at Liz, puzzled. “This book is for someone like me . . . someone who needs a little push in the right direction. Someone whose life has fallen into a routine, maybe a little boring.”

Liz laughed out loud, the sound chiming like bells in the little kitchen. “Your life is so boring you would put a nun to sleep. Your book is not for nuns.”

Alex started to protest. “My life isn’t boring – “

”Don’t start with me ! You have an assignment. Sleep with the Fed Ex guy.”

“I can’t today. Busy. Doctor appointment.” Alexis was pouting. “But I wrote about sleeping with the Fed Ex guy – isn’t that good enough?”

“No, it’s not. That’s how you deal with everything – you make it all up, you put it on paper, but you don’t live it.” Liz put up her hands. Clearly, this part of the conversation was through. “Are you going to see my favorite doctor?”

“Yes, actually, I am.”

“This should be fun. Put on some makeup for a change.” Liz feigned a Texas accent. “You clean up real nice, honey. Y’all need to ask the nice doctor for a date.” Liz sighed and looked like she was about to purr. “Dr. Misthos. Even his name is pretty. That man is gorgeous.”

“I think he’s married.”

“Doesn’t matter. You need the practice. Ask him out for a date. If he tells you he’s married, then he’s married, and you’ll know for sure. Just ask. Can’t hurt.”

Alexis smiled and wrinkled her nose at Liz. “Considering his advice in other areas, I would imagine that sex with him would be – interesting.”

Liz laughed. “Right. Remember the time he wanted you to hit that bump on your wrist with a book?”

Still laughing, Alexis said, “But it worked! The bump went away.”

“And the time he gave you samples of that antibiotic, and it gave you spots?”

“They didn’t last very long.”

“I would like to know if he gave out more samples after that, or if one spotty patient was enough.”

“I should ask him.” The two sat quietly for a moment.

“Why do you keep seeing this doctor? Gorgeous or not, he sounds like all your other relationships – no matter he does wrong, you have an excuse for him.”

“I like him. He’s a nice person.”

“He may be a nice person, but I’m not sure about his doctoring skills. He puts in some time at the homeless shelter, and that’s why I like him. But don’t think about the doctor part, or even whether is a saint. He is one gorgeous man, and you should think about sleeping with him. If given half a chance, I would. I’ve never had sex with a doctor. I wonder if they give advice while they’re doing it?”

“Like what?”

“Like ‘hit it with a book’ advice. ‘You are having trouble achieving orgasm, Ms. Trotter? Hit it with a book.’” They both giggled.

“Look,” Liz said, as she put her cup in the sink, “I don’t have time this morning to solve all of your problems, but have to re-think the way you look at sex. You say you have to be in love, but you are fantasizing about the Fed Ex guy and the doctor, and God knows who else. Are you really sure that you have to be in love with someone before you can come during sex?”

“It is better that way! Really better. And anonymous sex is too weird.”

“Again, it’s not anonymous. You may not be best friends yet, but you know the person, you like the person. It is not passive. You are not a ‘receptacle.’ At least I’m not. My partners are interesting, funny and if they’re good in bed, I see them again.”

Alex looked shocked, but her eyes were smiling: “You’re going to hell, Ms. Jackson!”

Liz shrugged her shoulders and stood, all in one graceful movement. “That’s OK – I like the Starbucks there.” As she reached for the door, she said, “Think about what I said – we’ll talk more later.”

## Chapter Seven

### The Homeless Fundraiser

Liz was in a meeting that seemed to go on forever, and she was almost nodding off. She kept fidgeting to keep herself awake, until something caught her attention.

“ – and this is the third guy in the past six weeks. Body dumped in the ocean, comes up covered with shrimp, so it’s hard to ID or get prints. But this one was definitely a homeless guy. We got two clear prints, one from the right hand and one from the left. He was booked into central last month on one of those new ‘possession of stolen property’ shopping cart beefs that STD has come up with – let go the next day.” “STD” was shorthand at the Public Defender’s office for the Santa Teadora Police Department. It was also well-known shorthand for a sexually transmitted disease, and was a long-standing joke among the Public Defenders.

Liz interrupted. “What about the other two? Why do you think they were homeless too?”

“There are no reports of missing persons that fit the age, weight, and all that, of the dead guys. Plus two of them had the types of medical problems that are typical in the homeless. The other one was younger, so not so much damage, but we’re pretty sure they’re homeless.”

One of the newer Public Defenders piped up. “You know, that reminds me. One of my in-custodies said that he was sure there was someone out there hunting the homeless. Said that all his buddies were talking about it.” She snorted derisively. “I didn’t think anything of it. Half of my clients are schizophrenics.”



“And the other half are drunks. Welcome to our world!” Everyone laughed.

Liz interrupted the laughter. “Did he say anything else about the hunting? Who is tracking the homeless? What the killer wants?”

The new lawyer just shook her head, right then Jay Fox walked in the room, late as usual. “Are you talking about the homeless killer?”

Everyone froze and stared at Jay. A senior lawyer with the Public Defender’s office, he had recently been promoted into the most prestigious and least coveted job in the building: defending capital murder cases, where someone without money is handed over to a lawyer he has never met, and that lawyer has to try to keep the defendant alive, away from California’s Death Row far to the north.

“Just in time, Jay.” Liz motioned him over to a chair next to her. “OK, spill it. What have you heard?”

“There are two guys in lock-up trying to use their rather limited knowledge of the situation to gain some bargaining power on their cases.” Jay sat down and reached for the box of donuts on the table, only to find it empty. “Ah, c’mon!”

“Hey!” someone piped up from across the table. “You were late!”

Jay shrugged. “Well, anyway, they don’t have a lot and I think they’re full of shit, but this is the story in the homeless encampments: there is some new guy in town. He looks like a homeless guy, but he is stinking, filthy rich. They say the story is that this guy is a member of a very famous family – like the Kennedys, or the DuPonts. This guy is a trust fund baby, but he is homeless. If he likes you, he gives you shitloads of money.”

Liz shook her head: “This has got to be an urban myth.”

The new lawyer asked a question. Liz tried to remember her name, but she was blocking it, because it was something too fluffy to say out loud, like Britney or Chelsea.

“So he carries around money with him? Why kill guys randomly?”

Jay shook his head, “I don’t know. This is just the story I’m hearing. Maybe they are robbing the shopping cart set to see if there are bags of money hidden in there with the recycling.”

“And if there are no bags of cash, then kill them? Why do they need to do that? Homeless guys are robbed every day. This doesn’t make any sense.” Liz was half angry and more than a little sad.

After that, the group discussed the latest details in the fundraiser for the homeless shelter, and a plan to coordinate with the county rehab programs, and try to get some of them addiction treatment. Liz and Jay were in charge of a fundraiser, and after everyone else left, they laughed and talked for a few minutes about the mechanics of wringing money out of lawyers, always a daunting task.

“Before you leave – “ Jay stopped at the door, and Liz turned serious. “These are my people, Jay. I need to keep them safe. They don’t have anyone else looking out for them. If you hear anything, you tell me, hear?”

Jay gave her a little smile. “Hey, I know that better than anyone. I’ll keep asking around. Anything I hear, you’ll hear it right away.”

Across town, the two young police officers, Travis and Olmeda, were thinking about the lawyers at the Public Defender’s office too. They had just gotten back from the Riverbottom raid, and were checking in to get their assignments for the day. Olmeda saw the captain of the

Department, and made a beeline for him. Travis knew it was a bad idea, but ran behind his partner anyway.

The captain of the Santa Teadora Police Department had a headache. He and his wife were growing apart, and last night was spent on the couch.

*There's got to be a better way*, he thought as he walked towards his office. *She knew she was marrying a cop. She likes cops. Liked*, he thought. *Does she even like me anymore?*

“Hey, Captain. Got a second?” It was a young officer, and between his marital troubles and the lack of sleep, it took the captain a minute to remember the man’s name.

“Sure, . . .Olmeda. What?” He stopped, coffee cup in hand.

“What can we do about the Public Defender’s office?”

The captain looked confused. “What are you talking about?”

“The STD thing. Can’t we get them to stop calling us that?”

The older officers knew about the department’s nickname, the “STD,” and it didn’t bother them. They brushed it off with a shrug and a smile. But the younger officers: it always seemed to bother the new guys.

The captain was annoyed. He had had this conversation before, and it bored him. “Don’t worry about it, guys. No big deal.”

The two young men started to grouse, but the captain cut it off with a glare. “You two. Olmeda and . . . Travis, right?” The men each nodded. “I have a report on my desk that you roughed up a guy at the Riverbottom. True?”

The two froze. Olmeda spoke first. “I don’t know, Captain. We brought the guy in, but he was struggling getting into the car. We didn’t rough him up.”

“That’s right, Captain. He hit his head when we were trying to get him in the car. There was a little blood, but you know how head wounds are. A little nick, and you bleed and bleed...”

“Wasn’t bad, Captain. And we didn’t do it. He pretty much did it to himself.”

*Youngsters.* The captain let out an exasperated sigh. “He didn’t do it to himself. Make sure that no one comes in here bloody unless there is a damned good reason. Just struggling getting into a car is not a good reason. Be more careful.” The captain turned away, and the two officers could breathe again.

“Dude. Why did you do that? Made us look bad.” Travis sounded exasperated, which was really unusual for the laid-back rookie. “Now when we try to talk to him about the murders, all he’s gonna remember is that we whined about the STD thing.”

Olmeda saw his point, and nodded. “Yeah. Sorry, dude. It’s just been bugging me.”

“Too proud, man. We’re the police. Gotta take some shit now and then. Badge of honor.”

Olmeda laughed at his friend and partner, and shook his head, smiling. “You’re right. Sorry.” They walked back toward the assignments desk.

“We need to get assigned downtown.”

Travis didn’t answer, just looked quizzical. Travis didn’t talk much, but he could say a lot with one eyebrow.

“Because most of the homeless stick close to Riverbottom or the freeway. We get assigned to the hillsides, and we’ll be chasing stolen bikes, not killers.”

Travis shrugged, and Olmeda replied. “Good. Glad you agree.”

## Chapter Eight

### Arguing With The Doctor

In the afternoon, Alexis dressed for her doctor's appointment. She chastised herself as she did it, but she did take the time to put on makeup, and she actually looked pretty good when she left the house.

Alexis primly sat in the waiting room, and was called in. She weighed in, got her temperature and her blood pressure taken, and waited for the doctor. Liz was right: Dr. Misthos was gorgeous, tall and dark, looking like a cross between Omar Shariff and Richard Gere. He breezed in, smiling and asking questions before the door shut behind him. *Focus*, Alexis thought, *focus*.

"Alexis – good to see you again. What happened with that book you were writing? The sex book?"

"Oh, it did really well – thanks for the advice on that." She was pretty sure that they had already had this conversation.

"You know I am really glad it was for a book – it sounded too kinky for you to be risking. I am supposed to give my patients advice on safe sex . . . not on the kind of stuff you were talking about." He did the polaroid picture shake with his hand. "That was a little scary."

Yes, he definitely said that the last time she was here too. Trying to be polite, she said, "Did you Google it? *Time in a Locked Room?*"

“Yes, I did. The reviews were pretty amazing. Does all porn get that kind of over-the-top commentary? I mean, really – ‘best novel of all time’? No offense, but I have to believe that some of the books of the last few centuries could give it a run for its money.”

Alexis laughed at his fake-serious glare. “Yes, I think I would concede that a few novels – not many – could beat it on the classics-of-all-time scale.”

“Oh thank God, or I would have to do a psychological referral.” He plunked himself down on that little wheeled stool you find in every doctor’s office. “So. Why are you here today? More research?”

“Nope. A spider bite.”

His smile immediately turned into a grimace. “You were not bitten by a spider. I have to tell people that all the time. They come in here swearing a Black Widow or a Brown Recluse bit them, and it’s a mosquito bite or a scratch – did you see the spider?” He was dripping sarcasm.

“No, I didn’t but –“

”That’s exactly what I’m talking about. No spider bite. Let me see it.” He held out his hand.

“But I was in the garden, trimming the roses. And then I felt a sharp bite –“ She held out her arm.

”Oh. You were actually outside?” He frowned as he looked at her wrist.

“Yes, in the roses. And it immediately turned bright red, and then turned into a little volcano crater and it is still swollen. It still hurts.”

”Hmmm. You might have been bitten by a spider. How long ago?”

“Last week. And I cut it and tried to get the venom out –“

His sarcasm came back. “Did you suck out the poison and spit it on the ground, like in the movies?”

She was really confused. “Should I have?”

He snorted. “No. It is a spider bite. And probably a staph infection. You need some antibiotics. I have some samples. I’ll be right back.”

His back was turned and he was out the door before she he saw her raise her hand in protest. “But the spots? Remember the spots.” She said it softly to a closed door and sighed. She could never ask this man out to dinner. She had trouble getting him to believe she had a spider bite. Why was it so difficult to talk to an attractive man? *Oooh*, she thought, *I might be able to use this in the new book.*

She was lost in how to use her own shortcomings in her advice book, when Dr. Misthos breezed back in and dumped a handful of little boxes in her hand. “Once a day, for seven days. Should do it.”

She thanked him and tried to gather the courage to ask for that date, but he was already saying good bye, and good to see you again, and he was gone. “I am such a little coward.” But she had antibiotics, and her arm should be better in a week. It was a successful trip, but she wondered if she should date someone who didn’t really listen to her. *Well, I’m sure he’s not like that with his girlfriend or his wife.* Out loud, she muttered, “Maybe Liz is right, I make excuses for all of them – even the ones I’m not dating.”

Home again, at the computer, she tried to concentrate on Good Sex, but Liz’ comments kept coming back to her. Am I really trying to put every woman into a locked room? A receptacle, not a partner? We could go back a hundred years, make women property of men, take away the right to vote. In Saudi, women can’t even drive. Is that a better world? More

importantly, is there better sex under that umbrella? She giggled. A lot of women here would stop driving in a heartbeat if it meant good sex every night.

She shook her head to clear it. This wasn't an exercise in social justice. It was a how-to book for sex. Concentrate, she said to herself.

### ***EXERCISE TWO – FOR A MAN***

*This will be fun.*

*In the morning, dress for work but take some extra care. You should feel very comfortable in your appearance.*

*Take the train to work, walk – but be in a place where you can see people. If you can, go out at lunch and walk around. As you do this, note each time you get a rise from seeing a woman. Feel powerful – you are a man. Remember the feeling of being wanted for your looks, your strength, your sex.*

*As you look at the women going by, every time you get that familiar feeling in your loins, that rise, that rush, make a note of it. It can be from a great pair of legs, or some perfect tits. Note the difference between just getting a rise out of a woman's looks, and actually wanting to do her. There is no reason to approach these women – in fact, don't! – this is only to gauge your reaction to them. Is it the way she walks, what she wears, her shape, her age, the color of her hair. What gets your attention?*

*Later, at a quiet time, figure out what about your partner makes you want her. What is it about the woman you are with that makes her attractive to you? Is there something that brought you to her in the beginning that no longer matters? Or something you want back? Obviously, there are things we can't change. All of us get older. But is there*



*something your woman could do for you that would give you that rise more consistently?*

*Think about it. That's part of the next exercise.*

She shut down the computer and whistled for the dogs, who came in a flash, tails wagging madly, recognizing the “time to go running” whistle. Time to run, not think. Michael was right about one thing – men were not dogs. If they were, they would go running all the time and none of them would be fat. Definitely more like cats.

## Chapter Nine

### Donuts and Bunnies

Liz came waltzing in that morning, chirping about the night before.

“I had the best time last night – we went to some sort of club, and the band was hot and my date was hot and the food was good and the drinks were good and . . . It was just perfect.”

Alexis grinned, and set down a cup of coffee in front of Liz. “And where is he this morning?”

“Who?”

Alexis twitched her head to one side, like the Victrola dog. “Who? The perfect date.”

“Oh. Him. I dunno. I left him at the club. Do you have any cream?” Liz’ head was in the refrigerator. “You’re out of milk.”

“It’s in the door. But you said he was the perfect date and that he was hot...”

“Oh, yes. He was the perfect date and he was hot. But even I go home alone sometimes.”

Liz poured milk into her cup and gently swished into her chair.

“But that doesn’t sound like you.”

Liz laughed a little. “You were more interesting before you started writing this book.”

“I’m sorry. All I can think about is the way people –” she paused, making a futile little hand gesture “– the way people come together to have sex.”

“I wish there were some way of getting you a hooker.” Liz sipped her coffee. “Maybe not a traditional sort of hooker. Maybe just someone who –”

Alexis got excited and interrupted. "Someone I could talk to about sex, without any of the personality stuff getting in the way."

"Exactly. I really don't know anyone who fits that description . . . "

"You don't know anybody in the public defender's office who works with prostitutes?"

Liz thought for a moment and shook her head. "Maybe all we need is a Playboy Bunny."

Alexis settled into a chair at the table. "That's a possibility. Where do we find a Playboy Bunny?"

They both looked down into their coffee cups and ruminated on the problem. Liz spoke first.

"We could put out carrots."

"The fact that you said that with a straight face is why I love you."

"Didn't you know someone who was married to a Playboy bunny?"

"I don't think I could go there. I can imagine that conversation: 'Hi, weren't you married to a bunny? Could I talk to her? I can't find a prostitute.' Yes. That would go well. Anyway, a bunny isn't exactly a prostitute."

"Isn't she? What's the difference?"

"You know I have always wondered that – " Liz rolled her eyes. "No, really! This is more than about the book –"

"Right."

Ignoring this, Alexis continued. "What makes a woman – a girl really, 18 or 19 years old – what makes her want to give everything in her life for the sexual pleasure of men?"

"Hey! She might be doing it for her own pleasure. I like sex. A lot. I like sex with different men and I don't have any problem with that. It's your own hang ups that are talking."

“No,” said Alexis, “it’s all about donuts. I was 17 years old and I got a job working in a donut shop. I loved donuts. All kinds of donuts. I worked there for a few months, and I would come home drenched in grease and I could not even think about donuts. Years later, I still don’t want to eat a donut. I like how donuts taste. I like the texture, I like the little sprinkles on top. I just like donuts. But after making them, selling them, taking them home on my skin, I don’t want to eat them. It’s not that I get nauseous or that it is repulsive. I just don’t want them.”

“And if you eat donuts, you become a Playboy bunny? Damn! All these years, and I thought it had something to do with having big tits!”

“No, but it’s the same thing – “

”Right! Donuts, bunnies, all the same. What are you talking about?” Liz was laughing now, giggling as she poured coffee, giggling as she sat back down.

“Let’s say you go to work every day to have sex. After you’ve done this for years, when you go home, what is the last thing you want?”

“Donuts.”

“Right. Donuts. So here you have a 19 year-old woman, beautiful, occasionally smart. She decides not to go into modeling or marketing or teaching or anything else. She decides to go into the sex trade. She spends her time trying to get that interview at Playboy, and she makes it. All so that she can strip down and spend days in front of a camera, so that men across the country can masturbate to her photo. What starts that thought? What tells her that this is a life that is good for her?”

“There are benefits. There’s money. The excitement. Celebrity. It’s quite a rush to be at the center of all that.”

“Sure there is. I can get that. But there is the performance aspect of the job. You’re at the Mansion or wherever they make bunnies, you’re expected to perform, to be the fantasy. You are having sex with men because it’s part of your celebrity status. And we’re back to donuts. At the end of the day, when you go home and you curl up with your someone, your person, how can you have sex? How can you even think about having sex? It’s like me and the donuts. It’s not that donuts are bad, it’s just that I have no urge to touch a donut. Doesn’t our bunny have the same feeling about sex?”

“Maybe. But sex isn’t donuts.”

“I don’t know. I really liked donuts...”

“And I’m really late to work. We can finish this later. And I’ll try to find you a hooker.”

The next morning, Liz walked in with a box of donuts. Alexis didn’t say a word. She just smiled and picked one out.

Triumphantly, Liz said, “See? You just proved my point. You never get tired of donuts.”

Chewing, Alexis replied, “These things really do taste good. Homer Simpson.”

“What?” Liz was truly puzzled. “Homer Simpson? You want to have sex with Homer Simpson? No, you want to eat donuts with Homer Simpson.”

Alexis laughed through the donut, raising her hand to cover her mouth, she tried to explain. “What’s more important to Homer? Donuts or sex?”

“It’s a toss up.”

“Sure. Because Homer loves being loved, he loves donuts and monster truck rallies. He’s a pretty simple guy. I’ve met a few Homers. Simple. Easy to get along with, for the most part. Wouldn’t want to live with him.”

“And this is relevant how?”

“Well, for one thing, you brought donuts, so the first thing I would think of is Homer Simpson.”

“What about sex? It was supposed to make you think about sex.”

“I think about sex all the time.”

“But you never do anything about it.”

“Not my fault. Where’s my hooker, by the way?”

“Still working on it. Where’s the bunny?”

“I am not going to call Dick! How do I ask a guy to talk to his wife because I need to talk to a sex worker?”

“He’s probably into it. You don’t marry a bunny without liking the whole package.” She paused. “You are kidding that his name is ‘Dick’?”

“No, really, his name is Dick.”

“Dick married a bunny.” Liz tilted her head and began her “examination of the witness” persona. “Ms. Trotter, when Dick married the bunny, did anyone have issues with that? Perhaps odd comments at the wedding?”

“No, Ms. Jackson, I heard nothing from any of the wedding guests on that subject at all. Actually, I don’t know about the wedding – I met him after that. And she turned into some kind of a social butterfly. Fundraisers and high tea and that kind of thing. The bunny part of her life is pretty hidden.”

“Well, does she like having sex with him?”

“If we believe him – and from what happened with Michael, we know that men lie to me –“

”– men lie to everyone –“

”If we believe him, she only puts out on a schedule, and hates oral sex.”

“So you might be right.... donuts.” Liz held her hand up to stop the conversation. “Wait right there. Do you talk sex with everyone you know?”

“Don’t change the subject. Go back to donuts.”

“OK fine. On schedule. Hates oral sex. You just described hundreds of thousands of women in this state alone.” The two women munched in silence. Liz looked at the clock, took a last sip of coffee, and stood up. “I don’t know how I would survive without these mornings. Life would be so boring.”

“Boring or not, take the donuts with you. I will get fat.”

“But you don’t want donuts. And a sex worker doesn’t want sex.”

“OK. Leave one donut. That one, with sprinkles on it. Then leave with the donuts.”

“Where are the new exercises?”

“Oh! Here. Take ‘em with you.”

“What? And read them in court?” But Liz took them anyway, and ran out the door.

Alexis poured the dregs of the coffee pot into her cup, and went to her office. Lots to do today, including finishing a travel article that she had promised to someone a week ago. She couldn’t delay any longer, or the editor would start getting antsy. But this was an intriguing thought. She had to call Dick to ask about his wife, and that meant an extraordinary meal, good wine, and the best weird conversation. Happened every time.

The first time she had dinner with Dick, he took her to some restaurant without a sign out front. He explained that only certain people knew where it was, and that was fine with the proprietors. They were served excellent food, from a menu that had no prices on it, and the waiters appeared to be psychic. At one point, she merely thought she would like a glass of water

and one appeared. When it happened a second time, she was wondering if the place was run by aliens.

Dick was terribly charming, and she was supposed to be interviewing him for some article about hot shot Los Angeles lawyers. He was clearly flattered, though he was not surprised – he knew he was the best – and he was most happy to talk about himself. Later, she figured out that he liked to talk about himself, no matter what. So their dinners became more frequent, and Alexis ate at restaurants she had never heard of, each one better than the one before. It was the restaurant topic that led to their first conversation about the bunny.

“Did you ever bring your wife here?”

“My wife does not like to eat out.”

“Ever? This place is amazing!”

“No, it is a strange quirk in her personality. She gets very uncomfortable in restaurants. I have tried several: smaller ones, larger ones. I have tried to lure her into trendy places, thinking she would be amused by the celebrity aspect of it. But she really hates eating out.”

That night, she got lots of details about the bunny. Dick was a little wound up that night, bothered by something at work, and there she was – the best listener since Carl Jung. She ate dessert, then coffee, then liqueurs, and still they talked.

After that, they met regularly, at least once a month. Each time, the best food in Los Angeles. He laughed that Alexis had turned him into a restaurant stalker. Every time someone at work or one of his clients talked about a new restaurant, he grilled the person for details. When he found one that was good enough for their monthly excursion, he gave her a call. The conversations were amazing, ranging from the silly to the serious, politics, religion, the meaning of life, the best comedy ever made, the best excuse for cancelling a date. It was always



wonderful, and yet very prim, none of the constant sexual banter she had to deal with when eating with Michael. That was great for her. It was when Alexis was at her best, when there were no worries about what might happen next.

For two years, it was all friendship, but one evening, as they were sharing some dessert with a French name and too many calories to think about, Dick asked Alexis if she would like to be his mistress. They had never even kissed, not even on the cheek. It wasn't as if she hadn't thought about it, but Alexis never wanted to be a mistress. Not for Dick, not for anyone.

She tried to take it as another of his attempts at humor, which often failed, so she asked, "Can we negotiate terms?"

"Of course." He offered her flowers, chocolates, and the occasional gem. Somewhere in the middle of it, she realized he was serious.

"But I don't want to be a mistress."

"You would make an exquisite mistress."

"I'm not arguing about quality." She smiled in what she hoped was coquettish. "I just don't want to be a mistress."

There followed multiple examples of why being a mistress was so much better than a girlfriend or a wife. After several glasses of wine, the logic seemed better than it was.

"So let me get this straight. I have sex with you – "

"Yes. Often."

"– and in exchange for this, I get showered with gifts."

"Well, maybe not showered. Liberally sprinkled."

"I want flowers. No man has ever given me flowers, except on very rare occasions."

"That was a crime. It stops now. Flowers. Not a problem. What's your favorite?"

She waived off the diversion. “That’s not important now. And candy. Expensive chocolates. Things I would never buy for myself.”

“Absolutely.” He was grinning and looking very pleased. This was a little unsettling, since Dick rarely smiled. And he was grinning. Odd.

She wanted to see how far she could take this. “And the occasional gem. Diamonds, I think. Sparkly things. Extravagant things.”

“For you, anything.” He was now serious, which made her slightly uncomfortable. “Why wouldn’t you do this? We get along great. We enjoy each other immensely. There is no downside to this.”

Getting a brief vision of the bunny, Alexis knew there was a hint of a downside, but she pushed that aside. “Then I will think about it.”

Being timid, not wanting to have a confrontation, she just avoided him for the next two months – thank God for caller ID. But she missed the food. And she supposed, she missed the conversation. So a few months after that, when he called with a new restaurant, she gladly accepted. Practically the first thing out of her mouth after “Hello” was “I don’t want to be a mistress. I hope that’s OK.”

He was all graciousness, saying that he assumed as much when he hadn’t heard from her. The conversations were still wonderful, but Alexis was a little uncomfortable now. It colored the way they spoke for a year or more, but it was time to ask for some background on the bunny. She wasn’t sure this would work, but she was certain he would love the attention. He always did. Funny thing about their conversations: she never talked about what she did for a living. He thought she was a travel writer. She didn’t want to tell him about “Good Sex,” and yet she

needed intensely personal information. She let out a big sigh. Dick loved nothing better than talking about himself. This shouldn't be too difficult.

And it wasn't. The restaurant was fabulous. She plunged into the topic between the appetizer and the main course, and he immediately pulled out his wallet. In it was a photo of a half-naked goddess. "Wow. When was this taken?"

"1975. She was one of Hef's favorites. Lived at the Mansion for quite awhile." He grinned. "She tells great stories about the place."

Alexis wondered if all ex-bunnies said they were "one of Hef's favorites." "How did you meet her?"

"She was mixed with a pretty wild crowd. I was in between relationships, and a friend of mine said he wanted to introduce me to a woman. He didn't say anything about her, other than he was pretty sure I would like her." He looked down into his water glass, swirling the liquid in it as if it would change the story or change his telling of it. "I got out of the car and she was standing in front of the house. She was 105 pounds wringing wet, five foot eight, blonde hair down her back." He leaned back in his chair, remembering. After a moment, he smiled at her and said, "One look, and I knew I was going to marry her." The smile was a sad one.

"And you were married when?"

"It took a little bit to close that deal. She was still in the middle of a nasty divorce. I was her savior. I was the quiet steady one, no drama. And she loved me. I'm sure she did. Does." This last bit sounded a little forced.

"This may seem like an odd question, but how does a person get into bunny-hood? It is not something that is on the Career Day posters in High School – "

"Painters, phlebotomists, Playboy bunnies – ?"

Not be outdone, she added alphabetically: “Mercenaries, models (catalog), models (Playboy), monster truck drivers . . . something like that?”

He smiled at her, and she knew she had made points. He loved word play. “She was approached by someone, a friend of the family. The gentleman in question assured her that he was a Friend of Hef, and got her a photo shoot. It was plausible, and her family didn’t have an issue with it. She was 17 and stunning. It is no surprise that she continued working there.”

“But I am having a bit of trouble understanding why someone would go into a profession that is – no offense – a step up from a sex worker.”

“No offense taken, and there is an aspect of sex worker involved in it. I can’t imagine that anyone living at the Mansion isn’t actively involved in a sex act at least once a day. Twenty years ago, when I was much more naive, I found her description of the day-to-day life at the Mansion pretty startling – and very enticing. She tells me that the girls are very happy to be there, and enjoy their roles in the Playboy mystique. She was no different.”

Alexis was clearly skeptical, so he kept talking. It was so easy to keep him talking.

“It is a beautiful world, with beautiful things in it. It is draped in celebrity, and celebrities are attracted to it as well. A young woman – 18 or 19 years old, beautiful, ambitious – can get into that world in only a few ways. At Playboy, all she has to do is be herself, be pretty, be charming. In exchange for that, she gets access to a world of wealth, of famous and powerful people, and she gets attention, lots of attention. I don’t know a lot of women who wouldn’t want that kind of life.”

It sounded so reasonable, so she told Dick about the donuts. He was quiet for a long time.

“Did I lose you at the sprinkles?”

“No, I understand the analogy. But I think it is fallacious.”

She interrupted, she couldn't help herself. “What does oral sex have to do with donuts?”

“Fallacious, not fellatio.” He smiled, and this time the smile went all the way up to his eyes. “And it has to do with the hole in the middle.”

He spread his hands on the table and leaned forward a little. She could imagine him doing that in a courtroom, getting ready to tell a jury about fellatio, and making it sound so very serious and important. He was convincing when he wanted to be. He was paid to be.

“Sex is a part of life. It is built into our DNA, it is part of our survival instinct. Scientists talk about the need to breed built into the animals, the birds, the fish – we aren't that far from that evolutionary stage. You could have bad sex every day for years, and have good sex just once, and know that you want more. And you'd be willing to suffer through a lot of bad sex for that one good one. Donuts are bad sex. You can avoid sex generally, but that doesn't mean it isn't hard-wired into you. Even a sex worker wants to go home and have sex with her one and only. But there are exceptions.”

“I would assume so. There must be sex workers who don't want sex outside of work.”

“It's not just sex workers. I met some bunnies who were completely frigid – “

Alexis raised her eyebrows. “And you knew they were frigid because – ?”

Dick smiled fondly at her. “No, I didn't sleep with them. My wife told me about them. They didn't enjoy sex, couldn't have an orgasm, but they did it because it was expected of them. It didn't mean much to them, but it also didn't give them any pleasure. In each case, so I am told, it was because of abuse in childhood, but who knows how accurate that might be.”

“That would make sense. And – I hate to pry –“

”But you do it all the time, Alexis.”

“OK, but I wonder if you would tell me – how do you, Richard Hendrickson, Esquire, keep sex exciting?”

“You’re writing the book. You tell me.”

“Aaahhh . . . but I need research. And you married one amazingly beautiful woman, one who basically chose sex as a profession – “

”Not really. Sexual tension, sexual desirability – that was her forte.”

“Even better. Every time you see her must be a reminder of both her sexuality and yours.”

“Alex – you surprise me. And I thought you were a travel writer.”

Alex blushed, deeply. She could feel the heat in her face, glad the restaurant was badly lit. “I am a travel writer, but this new book is fascinating. How to keep sex fresh and exciting, even after years of marriage, that’s a question that needs an answer.”

“I actually have an answer for you.”

“You do? That’s great. Most people don’t.” Thinking of Michael’s answer, she frowned.

“How many people do you talk to about sex? I think I should be shocked, or at least disappointed.”

“Disappointed?”

“I thought our conversations were special.”

“They’re very special. And if you have an answer for me, I will be eternally grateful.”

Dick sat back and his eyes twinkled over the rim of his wine glass. “I do have an answer.”

Alexis tried to be patient. Talking with Dick was sometimes fishy. You waited. The cork bobbed on the surface. There was a nibble. You waited. But Alexis had always hated fishing.

“Well? And the answer is?”

“So impatient. You won’t like the answer.”

“Please?”

“Fine. When I spend an afternoon walking with her through the mall, watching her try on clothes or picking through innumerable purses – what is it with women and purses? – the sex is good. But if I’m gone for a few days for work, or if she is peeved with me for something, then sex either doesn’t happen or is without – “ He paused, looking for the right word. “Without passion.”

“On your part or hers?”

“Both I think. We have better sex when we like each other more.”

“I knew it!” Alex said this a little too loudly, and looked around to see if she had made a scene.

“Don’t worry. No one noticed your enthusiasm. But what exactly did you know, Alex?”

“I think that sex is better when you’re in love. But when I talk to some men –“ She stopped for a moment as he frowned at her. “I have to do research, Dick! When I talk to some men, they say sex is just sex, bad sex is good, good sex is sex, anonymous sex is sex. No difference.”

“Oh, I completely disagree. Sex is better when you are in love. Sex is pleasant, otherwise. But you hit a certain age when there’s no reason for it unless it is special, with someone special. That’s why we marry, I think.”

Alexis was bursting with knowitall-ness. “That’s what I said. But let’s get back to the ‘how’ of your happiness. How do you make sex special every day?”

“I’m not sure I can do it every day. Too much going on at work, too many things to think about. But I know it’s better, and that we are happier, when we are feeling affectionate towards each other.”

The time was getting late, and Alex had a lot to think about, so she said she had to get home. They left the restaurant in a light drizzle, and when her car was delivered by the valet, he leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips.

“Always a pleasure seeing you, Alex.” He smiled and turned back to the valet for his own car. Alex couldn’t smile back. The kiss, short and almost chaste, had been electric. Pushing it to the back of her mind, she concentrated on what had been said. But driving home, the kiss surfaced again. Dr. Misthos, Michael, the Fed Ex guy, and of course Dick: married or unsuitable, one way or the other. And all she could do was write about it.



## Chapter Ten

### Goats and Goddesses

“We need someplace to keep a goat. Can I use your backyard?” It really wasn’t a question.

“My backyard isn’t that big. My roses are blooming. My neighbors might complain.” Alexis looked at Liz wondering if this was a test of some sort. “Did I give the right reason yet? Goat?”

“You know about the fundraiser for the Homeless Shelter?”

“Yeah, you’ve been working on it for weeks. But –“

”We decided to raffle off a goat.”

”No one in this town is going to buy a ticket to win a goat.”

“I know – that’s why this is such a great idea. We are sending free raffle tickets to all the members of the County Bar. It will cost them \$5.00 to get their tickets pulled from the drawing. We are calling it Goat Insurance.”

“That’s ... brilliant. It’s weirdly brilliant. So why do you need a goat in my backyard if you want everyone to buy Goat Insurance?”

“We need a credible goat threat. If there is no goat, people won’t believe us and won’t buy Goat Insurance.”

“OK. I can fence off the section at the bottom of the hill. That’s probably big enough for a goat. How long is she or he going to be here?”

“Only a couple weeks. I want to tell everyone to meet their goat here, so that they know we’re serious.”

“Oh, I don’t think I want my property crawling with lawyers. I spray for that twice a year.”

Liz raised an eyebrow. “We are stooping to lawyer jokes now, are we?”

“I don’t have any goat jokes.” Alexis flashed a big smile. “You wanna hear my favorite lawyer joke?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“No. What’s brown and black and looks good on a lawyer.”

“A goat?”

“No, a Doberman.” Alexis cackled. “I love that one.”

“I’m bringing you a goat. Have the fence ready. Your dogs won’t care, will they?”

“Not unless the goat smells like it’s stuffed with peanut butter.”

“Figured.” Liz quaffed the rest of her coffee, and headed for the door. “Busy day today. What are you doing? Anything fun?”

“Building a fence apparently. And having lunch with Freddy Krueger.”

“He is so creepy! Good luck –“ And she was gone. Alexis had no idea if she was talking about the movie guy, or the one they had nick-named Freddy due to his incredibly long fingernails, which were, in fact, really creepy.

Freddy was an artist of some sort who did the covers for her books. Jeanine the Publisher had set them up years ago and he did good work. At least Jeanine was happy, and that’s all Alexis cared about. Freddy kept his nails long for guitar playing, at least that was his excuse. Sometimes he filed them to a point, which is when he got the nickname. Alexis took Liz to some

book party in Los Angeles, and there he was. She introduced them and Liz swears her hand was bloody after he shook it.

Freddy called to say he was driving north and coming through her town, so she had to invite him for lunch. She suggested the Harbor, which was sprinkled with restaurants, art galleries and tacky tourist shops. He said he knew it. That was a few days ago. After measuring for fencing material, she was off to see Freddy.

Alexis went really early, just so she had time to walk the docks and look in the shop windows. Tacky or not, this was a nice little spot; Liz wouldn't come here with her, saying it was "too much." After wandering for awhile, Alexis parked herself at a second floor table overlooking the shop where they rented jet skis and paddle boats and the like. It was a hot day, and the place was pretty busy, especially considering it was the middle of the week. It was quarter to twelve, and her cell rang.

"Darling, it's John."

"Yes, sir ! Where are you? Are you here yet?"

"No, love, I am going to be late. Traffic is terrible in L.A. How does 12:45 sound?"

"That's fine – I'm not in a hurry. See you in a few. Do you remember how to get to the restaurant?"

A few more pleasantries were exchanged, and Alexis made herself comfortable. An hour at the Harbor. Not an awful place to wait. She had the sun at her back, and she started watching the customers coming in and out the rental shop.

The shop was dressed up to look like something from the Caribbean. The proprietor said "Hey, Mon!" to every new customer, although Alexis fantasized he was from Queens, or Vancouver, or some other anti-Caribbean locale. Everyone called him "Rastaman," and

although she had spoken with him many times, she didn't know his real name. He was a good looking guy, in his 40s Alex guessed, with wavy blonde hair and a bushy mustache that was almost entirely gray. But as age often does, he was starting to go a little plumpish and his hair was starting to thin at the top. From her vantage point, she could see that clearly. Nevertheless, he had an unflappable calm, a haze of happiness. She liked him. She even rented some windsurfing equipment from him once, although it was a mistake. Her shoulders ached for two weeks, and no matter how easy everyone else made it look, it was clearly not her sport.

A couple walked up, browned and skinny, and rented those impossible windsurfers. "I bet they don't get sore," Alexis muttered as the two wandered away toward the little beach that had been carved out of the breakwater side. Another couple came to rent something, then another, then four girls who probably should have been in a high school classroom right then.

Then the vision arrived. She did not walk up. She glided in, all curves and melting butter, brown legs that were impossibly long and perfectly shaped. Her long brown hair bounced down her back with each step, and Alexis suddenly realized the vision appeared to be walking in slow motion, like a beer commercial. While her hair bounced, her two perfect breasts did not, hugging her chest like baby lemurs. "OK," Alexis muttered to herself, "there might be a little bit of jealousy in that description."

She looked around to see who was accompanying the Vision ("Vision" was now capitalized in Alexis' head), and she saw three others: another woman and two men. They were all gorgeous. The men were both blond-ish, with exactly the right amount of beard stubble to make them more attractive than mere mortals. They too walked with a certain amount of assurance and confidence, but they did not scream "look at me!" the way the Vision did.

She walked in a way that made Alexis feel she was insolent yet vulnerable. Her friend could have been a supermodel, but Alexis had to assume that no one even looked at her when the Vision was there. The Vision kissed Rastaman on the cheek. It was obvious they knew each other and Rastaman shot off joy like sunbeams when she kissed him. She then slumped into a chair in front of the shop, one leg dangling over a chair leg, the other thrust in front of her. She said something Alexis couldn't hear and one of the men handed her a cigarette. He lit it for her first.

Enviously, Alexis said, "No one ever lit a cigarette for me." She didn't smoke. It didn't matter. When the Vision unfolded herself from the chair a few minutes later, it was watching molten gold being poured. Alexis wondered if she had been chasing the wrong sex all her life. Clearly this was better than anyone she had ever slept with, or ever would.

The four of them (really, the Vision and the other three) rented two jet skis and headed out to the breakwater. All Alexis was capable of doing was staring, open-mouthed, as they sped away from her, the Vision's perfect little butt in her perfect little bikini, calling to her like a Doppler effect.

The wave pattern ceased suddenly and she reached for her phone and saw it was 12:50. "Oh shit!" and she ran to the restaurant to meet Freddy.

Alexis was really excited when Liz came through the door the next morning.

"I figured it out!"

"What?"

"Sex!"

"That is a big deal. What did you figure out?" Liz paused. "Hold that thought. I have to get the goat out of the car."

“She – he – it – it’s here already?”

“It’s a she, she’s gentle as can be, and she is in the backseat of my car. So really – I have to get the goat out of the car.” Calling over her shoulder, Liz asked “Is the fence up?”

Liz, Alexis and the goat went out to the backyard to get Maddy settled in. Maddy was named after the presiding judge, Madeline Hayes. The name had apparently been a unanimous vote of the defense bar, and they never agreed on anything. But Alexis had been waiting for Liz since six o’clock. This was big. At least she thought it was big.

“So, I was at the Harbor yesterday. I was waiting for Freddy Krueger, but he was really late. And so I started to watch the rental shop – ? The one with the – “

”Rastaman’s shop? Sure, I know the place. Who doesn’t?”

“So, I’m sitting there, not really paying attention, when this woman walks up – amazing, gorgeous, never seen anyone like her, a Vision. The way she moved, the way she walked, she just screamed ‘Look at me – I am beautiful, I am desirable, I am perfect!’ Seriously, Liz, if I were a braver person, I would have tried to ask her for a date.”

“What did she look like?”

Alexis skimmed over the details, leaving out the butter and the melting gold, but Liz got the message nonetheless.

“And I thought love at first sight was a myth.”

Maddy was head butting the Labrador who was happy as a dog can be, right before he’s bitten by a goat. A sharp yip sent the Lab, head down and tail wagging, to sit at their feet.

“Hey! Where’s the little dog?” Liz looked around for the ever-present little mutt.

“I believe she thinks the goat is Satan. You know, she reads all that Renaissance literature, and the illuminations are really hard on goats. I told her that the monks often exaggerated, but she refused to listen.”

“But you never exaggerate, right?”

“Seriously, this woman was a goddess.”

“No exaggeration?” Liz fed the goat some hay and scratched her bony head. “You know, we should keep her. She’s sweet.”

“You mean I should keep her. And she just bit my dog.”

“He’s fine.... just look at him.”

The Labrador was still panting and wagging, looking none the worse for the goat bite. “He doesn’t understand the long-term impact of goat bite. This is worth at least a vet visit or two, and the defense bar is paying for it.”

Liz laughed. “We are criminal defense lawyers. We have no money. Talk to the D.A.”

“Seriously, I had been told that some women were like that – some women just exuded sex, and I never saw it before. I saw it yesterday. It was amazing!”

“‘Seriously?’” Liz echoed. “Then can we bottle it? Patent it? Teach a class in it? We’ll make a fortune.”

“I know! She wasn’t dressed any different. She wore a bikini, just like everyone else. Her hair wasn’t any different. I could see nothing about her that was objectively different. She wasn’t thinner, or prettier. Her clothes weren’t different. She was just different. She was so seductive – I was begging to sleep with her after watching her for a half hour. Well, no – that’s a lie. I was there after about two minutes.”

Liz started back up to the house. “What about the men? Were they screaming ‘Do me’ too?”

“No, not really. And there were some really beautiful men there yesterday. Perfect, toned – no other word for it – they were beautiful. But none of them screamed ‘sex’ like she did. One guy looked like he was close.”

“What did he look like?”

“Same basic body type as the others. Relatively thin, pretty muscular. Pulled off his shirt the same way – they all looked like Calvin Klein models! But he walked differently. He moved differently. I’ve just not seen the difference before.”

Back in the kitchen, Alexis got Liz a coffee cup, poured it full, added some milk, and took a breath.

“It was amazing. The way she moved. I don’t know if she knew what she was doing. It was unconscious. At one point, she draped herself over a chair and lit a cigarette. Completely relaxed. But in a way that said she was waiting for something to happen.”

Skeptically, Liz asked, “Had you been drinking at this point?”

“No. Just waiting. Just watching. But if there had been sub-titles, I couldn’t have been more sure. The men noticed it too. All the other women just flitted about, some prettier, some with bigger tits or longer legs.... but this woman, she was the queen.” Alexis shook her head. “I don’t know if any of them realized what was happening. The men just gravitated closer to her, really. I have never seen anything like this before.”

“You had a good time, then?”

“Well, yes, after I realized what was happening. I was on a balcony, about twenty feet away from them. And it wasn’t like I was trying to do this. It just happened.”



“You live a charmed life.”

“Maybe we should interview her. She’s not a Bunny, but I bet she knows what it’s like to be wanted all the time.”

“You think that because she’s beautiful?”

“Yes, that and how she moved. She kissed Rastaman on the cheek – maybe he can introduce us.”

Liz cleared her throat. “Did you ever think that they might be involved?”

“Who?”

“Rastaman and the Vision.”

“No. She was with someone else yesterday.”

“Are you sure?”

Alexis’ look said it all.

“I thought so. You make these assumptions about how people are because of how they look. That’s a big leap.” Liz plunked her coffee cup on the table. “In high school, I knew this girl who was really popular. Pretty, always smiling, cheerleader, good grades, the whole nine yards. Then I actually got to know her. She spent two hours every morning getting dolled up for school. She worked on homework every night until 11 or 12. She was sleep deprived and so insecure it’s hard to imagine. But she looked perfect, every day. Get my point?”

“Maybe?”

Liz’ laugh filled the little kitchen. “You want me to explain.”

Alex looked sheepish. “Yes, please.”

“The Vision may be insecure, or virginal, or completely unaware of how she looks. Think of the Room. In your fantasy, the woman in the Room is completely alluring and desirable, even without being drop-dead gorgeous, right?”

“Right – but the Room itself is the fantasy. The participants are always changing.”

“Exactly. The fantasy is in your head, not the Vision’s head. You have no idea what that woman was thinking. You have no idea how she sees herself.”

Alex had been told about this by Michael once. There were women who just asked to be at the center of every room. They asked to be the goddess, the priestess, the only one. “Liz, I’m telling you – every movement, every gesture, said ‘worship me.’”

“Maybe you’re right. You should talk to her. See if Rastaman knows her. But I would love to be there for that conversation!” Liz plunked down her coffee cup, and got up to go. “I have to go defend a man who was arrested and thrown in jail for stealing a shopping cart.” She snorted. “Like that is worth my time, the D.A.’s time, and the judge’s time.” As she walked towards the door, she mumbled, “Someone should nail the police for this kind of foolishness.”

After Liz went to work, Alexis found Crickett, the little dog, under the bed looking for a rosary, dragged her out and took both dogs for a run.

“Look, Crickett, nothing tells the devil to go away like physical fitness. Let’s go.”

## Chapter Eleven

### Leashing Our Demons

It was morning at the STPD, and the rookies were antsy.

“You heard a third homeless guy was found dead?”

“I was in the same briefing as you, asshat!”

Olmeda grinned. “Well, we didn’t do it. There’s gotta be some clues out there somewhere. And we should be the ones to figure this out.”

“And how are we gonna do that? We’re on routine patrol. Downtown and the Strand,” Travis read from the assignment sheet he was holding.

“We’re downtown, dude. Homeless guys all over downtown. We can take time to talk, right?”

“I guess so.”

“Walk and talk, man, walk and talk. We can learn a lot that way!”

Michael Traynor, Alexis’ lunch buddy, was also thinking about the homeless. It was eight o’clock in the morning, the first moment of his workday, and he was livid.

“Another break-in? Are you serious?”

The voice on the other end of the phone was pleading. “We can’t keep an eye on all the buildings all the time, Mr. Traynor. We need to get tenants in there.”

“Who was it this time?”

“Looks like another homeless guy. The window was broken, and there’s some food containers and some trash. No real damage. Except for the window.”

“I can’t keep this up!” Michael was furious. “You’re the manager – manage!”

“Mr. Traynor – you know as well as I that commercial tenants just aren’t out there right now.” He paused. “And while we’re on the subject – you are behind on your management fees. I know there are a lot of vacancies, but –“

”– you must be kidding! You want money from me while the buildings are being broken into three times a week?”

“Mr. Traynor, if we could get some tenants in there, it would be better, even at a reduced price.”

Michael’s voice was low and angry. “No more excuses. If you want to keep your job, get me tenants. And no more break ins. No more vagrants. I can’t deal with this any more!” His voice rose, the frustration and anger obvious.

“I called the police, and they’re coming over now. You want to meet me? Maybe you can light a fire under them.”

Michael thought for a moment. “Sure. That’s a good idea. When are they coming?”

“They said ‘right away.’ Can you get over here?”

Michael agreed, but still slammed the phone down. “Maybe I can burn the place down.”

He struggled to his feet, unused to the weight he had added in the past few months. He shouted at his secretary, “Gail, I’m going out.” He had to fire her; who needed a secretary when there was no work?

“Mr. Traynor, wait! The Committee for Downtown called – another meeting is set for tomorrow at three. Can I schedule that for you?”

Michael had gotten himself appointed to a committee in charge of revitalizing downtown. It was a prestigious appointment, and normally would have made him proud and happy. But so far, his participation had given him very little to work with, and had taken a lot of his time.

“I don’t know,” he growled. “I’ll talk to you about it when I get back.”

Gail talked to his retreating back. “When will that be?” He didn’t answer. Gail turned back to her work and mumbled to herself, “I think I need another job.”

As for Michael, he thought about how to fire Gail. She’d been with him for years, but there was no money to pay her. “I’ll do it when I get back,” he mumbled to himself on his way to the car.

Michael was shocked at how young the two officers were, maybe 20 or 22 years old. *Olmeda and Travis*, he thought. *You might be useful.*

In his best and most ingratiating way, Michael explained that his commercial buildings downtown had taken a terrible hit in the past few months. Break-ins, small fires – and one “small” fire that turned into a financial mess, not a complete loss but close.

“Gentlemen, I am going broke with these vagrants. Can’t you help me out here?” He smiled, pleading. These young guys would want to help.

“Mr. Traynor, we can keep an eye on things, but it is hard to watch the back entrances. Maybe you could install lighting on the fire escapes?” Olmeda shifted from foot to foot, his heavy leather belt holding his baton and gun, creaked loudly.

“I can’t afford anything right now, officer. New lighting on six old buildings –“ he snorted. “Why, permitting alone would take months and thousands of dollars.” Michael was starting to get angry.

Travis interrupted. “Mr. Traynor, maybe things will get better when the homeless killer is caught. The guys are looking for shelter in strange places lately –“ Travis flashed a look at Olmeda, who piped in.

“That’s true. They’re scared, so they’re spreading out all over the city.”

Michael scowled at them. “What about the raids in the Riverbottom? Isn’t that helping get rid of the problem?”

“We’re not sure, but we think the raids are just pushing the guys out into the community. We’re hearing more about homeless guys in the west end of town, near that big park. No one has heard of guys that far away from the downtown in years.” Travis interrupted.

“Look, Mr. Traynor, the Riverbottom raids aren’t related to the murder investigation. We are working the murders now, and we are talking to everyone we can, right here in downtown, including the homeless.” Travis looked over at Olmeda, a little smug.

Michael looked interested again: “You two are involved in the investigation?”

The two officers looked at each other. “We sure are,” said Olmeda. “Maybe we could find out more if you worked with us. Rather than chase these guys out when they break in – hold ‘em for us. Let us talk to them. I bet the scared ones know something – maybe more than they realize.” Travis nodded as his partner spoke.

“These guys are long gone by the time my manager gets to the building. But I’ll tell you what – working together makes sense to me. How many guys have been found dead now?”

Travis answered. "As of today, there are three. But it has not been confirmed that they were all killed by the same person."

"What about arrests? Have you arrested any homeless?"

"A few, but only for stolen shopping carts, things like that. There's no indication that these murders were committed by another homeless guy – only that the homeless are being targeted."

Michael took business cards from each of the officers, and promised to call if he ever found someone in his buildings. "One more question, officers – what happens to a homeless guy who is arrested? How much time do they get for a shopping cart theft?"

Olmeda answered: "Depends on his record, priors, warrants. Most of them get out pretty quick. Why?"

"Just curious. Thanks for your help."

Michael got in his car and drove slowly, aimlessly, out of the parking lot, down the street towards the freeway. He changed his mind at a red light, and turned towards the Harbor. "The boat. I'll go clean the boat."

Michael walked, head down, toward his slip at the end of the last dock. He stopped at the little rental shop for a Coke and a bag of chips.

"Hey, Rastaman, how ya doing?"

"Michael! Just fine today, mon. Beautiful day, ah?" Rastaman took Michael's money and gave him some change.

"Beautiful." His tone said otherwise and Rastaman had no interest in finding out why. Michael walked down the dock. *Clean the boat*, he thought. *How appropriate, today of all days.*

While Michael was walking toward the dock, Alexis realized she was behind schedule on *Good Sex*, so she turned off the phone at 9:00 a.m., turned on the computer and was determined to get out at least exercises three and four before the day's end. If that meant midnight, so be it. The Vision kept flickering in and out of her head, as did Liz' comment that she wanted to put women back in the *Locked Room*, a place where a woman had no say as to her partner's demands and where she was, truly, a receptacle.

For two hours, it was swimming through jello, every word a chore. She finally sat back, sighed, and went to the kitchen for a Coke. And the doorbell rang.

Fed Ex, she thought, nice. "Hey, Jesse. Whatcha got for me?"

He handed over the signature pad, Alexis signed and handed it back. Jesse was quiet and didn't hand her the Fed Ex package that looked suspiciously like empty Fed Ex envelopes she hadn't ordered. There was nothing said, Alexis did her Victrola dog impersonation and Jesse asked, "Ms. Trotter, can I come in for a minute?"

Adrenaline burst into her veins and she was buzzing like an antelope running from a lion in a micro-second. "Of course, Jesse." She opened the door wide. "Please come in."

*I get to live my fantasy!*, she thought. She had a weird realization that even her unspoken thoughts were sprouting exclamation points, so she took a deep breath and tried to think why he wanted in, other than fulfilling her sexual needs, which she had detailed in the first chapter of her new book. In great detail. With a soundtrack. She blushed.

A slow "ummm" escaped his lips and he grinned lazily. "Alexis, I know that you write all those sex books – "

Alexis went from wondering if her bedroom was clean to pure shock. "You do?" And mortified. "How? No one knows that – I write under a different name – "



Jesse waved his hand vaguely. “Everyone in the neighborhood knows. Mrs. Hartman is always asking how many men you have in here.”

“That bitch!” She pulled herself up to her stately five foot, five inch height and declared “There are no men here.” Then she sat down with a thump, stunned. “Sorry. Um. What, um, did you want to talk to me about?” Alexis tried to flash a smile but she has lost the adrenaline and was working on shame and outrage instead. It was a comedown.

“Look, I am having a terrible time with my partner. And since you write all those sex books, I thought you might have some advice for me.”

*Here I am again – Carl Jung.* She chided herself. *Shut up and listen. Wait till I get to Mrs. Hartman. I am going to knock over her trashcans tomorrow.* “Jesse, have you ever read any of my books?”

“Um, no, not really. I hope you’re not offended. I just heard that you wrote sex books, and I need advice, and you are one of my favorite customers . . .”

The fact that he never actually read *Time in a Locked Room* was a relief. *But this is very strange.* “Well, I will do what I can, Jess. What is happening with you and your lady?”

“No, my partner. We’ve been together for five years, and he is –“ Jesse sighed, most forlornly. “He is my everything,” and Jesse sprouted that smile that made her stop breathing. “And we can’t seem to connect anymore.”

For the next hour, Alexis played Carl Jung to Jesse’s heartbroken lover, and they talked and drank Diet Coke and ate cookies, and Jesse walked out thanking her and bowing and smiling that smile. Alexis felt pretty good, until she saw the time, so she went back to her computer.

The next morning, Alexis played it up as best she could.

“Liz – I have terrible terrible news. You better sit down.”

“Omigod, what happened? Is the goat ok?” She started for the back door, and Alexis stopped her with a frustrated “No! The goat is ok. Sit down.”

Reluctantly, Liz sat. “Is it your mom? What? Where’s the dog?”

“Under the table.” Liz looked, sighed and sat back in her chair. “Alright, what is it?”

“I saw Jesse the Fed Ex guy yesterday.”

“And – ?”

“He came to the front door, with some envelopes I didn’t order. He asked to come in to talk to me.”

“And – ?”

“He’s gay.”

“No way!” Liz swung back in her chair, shaking her head back and forth. “That’s tragic! All that beauty, lost forever to the other team!”

Smugly, Alexis spilled the story, including the part about Mrs. Hartman (“That bitch!” added Liz. “That’s what I said,” added Alexis. Liz suggested they knock over her trash cans.) She explained that Jesse and Paul were having trouble making the old chemistry spark, and they talked about options and exercises and –

“It was incredible. It was a great time.”

“You gonna use it in ‘Good Sex’?”

Alexis grinned. “You betcha.”

“Still sorry to hear he’s gay. But some man is very happy.” Liz looked at her phone. “I really have to go.” She got up and started walking towards the door.

Alexis said, “I knew a guy in college like that. Absolutely gorgeous. Fell for him head over heels – but he was gay too. Wait. Maybe not. Maybe he just slept with everything that moved.”

Liz turned around, hand on the door handle. “Again, that little bitter edge in your voice. We have to work on that. Whatever, I think I knew that guy too. If we hadn’t been on different coasts about that time, I would have thought it was the same guy. Take care of my goat.”

“I sprinkle holy water on her every morning.”

Alexis went back to the computer and pulled up the material from the day before, after talking to Jesse. It seemed to her that it was so much easier being a man.

### ***EXERCISE THREE – FOR A MAN***

*Do you like to be on top or on the bottom? Do you like your woman to be the aggressor or for her to follow your lead?*

*Every man’s needs and desires are different, and you need to find out what makes sex good for you. Pull it apart – think of a good sex act, one where you walked away very happy with the result – and visualize like a schematic, spread out in front of you like a huge hologram. Were you on top, was she on top, did you change places? Was it fast and passionate, or slow and luxurious? Was there oral sex involved? Did she bite you, did you bite her? Or was it all gentle kisses?*

*On your schematic, select five things that made the act as good as it was. The idea is that if you take out any of the five things, the schematic is invalid, and the act fails. Five things, small or large. Keep those in mind – write them down if it’s helpful.*

*Now think of the last time you had so-so sex, not-so-great sex. Create a schematic, visualize what happened, and then match the two up. What's missing from the second schematic?*

*If you find the missing pieces right away, that's great. Remember this exercise, because you'll need it again. But if there are no missing pieces, and everything is the same in the two schematics, then there's something else going on, and we will deal with it in the next exercise.*

Alexis turned off the computer and called the dogs. The three of them went to feed the goat, who was tangled in the fence looking miserable.

“Oh Maddy, what have you done?” She put a collar on the goat, and then added the Labrador's heavy leash before she untangled, pushed and pulled her out of the fence. It was ruined.

“I have things to do today, Miss Goat. I don't want to fix this bloody fence. Liz should fix the fence. Liz and the rest of her people. My dogs want to go running, Ms. Goat.” She looked at the goat. The goat looked at her. “Are you leash trained?”

They walked around the back yard, the goat snapping at the roses with pinpoint accuracy. Then Alexis started running, and the goat ran too. Everyone was running, except for Cricket who was sitting on the back porch whining, with her Chihuahua heritage shining through her big brown bug eyes. She was clearly praying for divine intervention.

“Stay here, Miss Goat.” And the goat stayed and cropped some grass, while Alexis went to grab her running shoes and the other leashes. “Second thought, Cricket, you stay here.”

The goat tracked pretty well, running through the neighborhood, past Mrs. Hartman's trash cans and onto the unpaved trail at the end of the street. She still swiped at plants as she

went by, but generally was a very well-behaved running partner. When they got far enough away from the street, Alexis took the leash off the Labrador who ran ahead, as was his way. Alexis and the goat ran their three miles, and the three of them went back to the house. The fence was still broken, so Alexis left the goat in the kitchen with the Lab, and took Cricket to her office to write.

Around six, the bell rang, and Liz was there with three other lawyers. “Here to fix the fence, ma’am. Where’s the goat?”

“In the kitchen.”

One of the other lawyers set up a great wailing, “You cooked her?! Noooo!” He headed for the back door with Liz, still sobbing. Liz turned around. “Is the goat really in the kitchen?”

“Yes, she seems to be OK with it. I left the dog with her.” In fact, the dog and the goat had been in and out all day, doing their best to distract Alex from writing, but the goat appeared to be housebroken, and the worst damage was a little gnawing of the butcher board. “By the way, are all lawyers as crazy as that one?”

Liz said, “Nah, just defense lawyers.” One of the other lawyers looked at Liz and laughed. She turned to Alexis. “No, just that lawyer. Just Jay.”

The fence was fixed, and Maddy returned to the wild. Alexis opened a bottle of wine and the five of them talked and drank that, and another bottle, and then called out for sushi. Jay had been making goat jokes all evening.

“You really put the goat on a leash?”

“Yeah, she was really good. I’m going to try again tomorrow.”

By the time everyone left, Alexis was exhausted and fell into bed with the little dog curled up on the pillow. She dreamed of goats, and beautiful men she could never have, and goddesses who floated when they moved.

## **Chapter Twelve**

### **The STPD and The Fourth Body**

The sun was just coming up and the fog covered everything like spider's silk. The masts on the sailboats wavered back and forth ever so slightly, giving the watcher the impression that the world was flickering, a bad channel on the TV, too much wine last night, something just a little off.

Rastaman, the proprietor of the rental shop, was wavering himself, bumping down to the Harbor earlier than usual. He had a rough night, couldn't sleep, couldn't stay awake, so here he was: grouchy, tired, irritated. He banged the screen open, jammed his foot against it to keep it open, and stuck the key in the lock. Dumping his bag of supplies on the floor, he left the door open, the keys in the lock, and looked out through the back window over the water. Something was bobbing in the water, something that didn't belong.

He squinted at it, hoping that narrowing his eyes would bring the object into focus, without success. He smiled to himself for the first time that day. Squinting wasn't going to do much good anymore. He needed glasses. He really was getting old, and the thought was almost funny. Considering his past, he was actually pretty pleased that he was old – he never thought he would make it this far.

His name was Aldous Henry, the only son of a school teacher. His father was well-educated and pretentious, but lacking ambition. He named his son after Aldous Huxley, and like the Boy Named Sue, Aldous spent much of his childhood learning how to defend his name. He tried Alex, Al, Henry, then Hank: nothing sounded right. Finally, after many years of arguing

with his name, his name won. One day, he introduced himself as Aldous and learned to live with the raised eyebrows. By then, he was in his thirties, and it seemed to fit. His father was dead by then, but Aldous would talk to him in the night, tell him what was happening, and he would often mention that he thought his name – Aldous – was just fine. Aldous much preferred talking to his dead father than he did talking to his live father: fewer arguments, more acceptance.

Aldous wasn't from the Caribbean, not even from the Gulf Coast. He was, in fact, from Ohio. He knew that a man was what he said he was, and here in southern California, in the lovely seaside city of Santa Teadora, he was Rastaman. He rented boats, he sold sunglasses, and he taught pretty ladies how to surf and scuba dive. Yeah, Mon. It was a good business and he had no intention of leaving.

He began putting the shop in order, cleaning off equipment, stocking the candy shelf, putting more Red Bull in the glass-front cooler. The early morning quiet was a tonic. His head felt better, and he started to smile. Then he looked out the window. The thing bobbing in the water was getting closer. He squinted again, and this time he could see that whatever it was wore a coat. He reached for the phone and called 911.

“911 – what is your emergency?”

“This is Aldous Henry, at the Harbor. There's a body in the water. Floating in the water.”

“Do you need paramedics?”

“I can't say for sure. But I don't think so.” He squinted again. “Think he's dead.”

The police and the coroner were there quickly. The morning quiet was brushed away and replaced with noise. Aldous didn't like the police, never had. They asked questions he couldn't answer. Who was the man in the water? How the hell should he know? When did he see him?



Who else was there? Why did he come to work early today? “Because I had a headache” apparently wasn’t a good answer. When did he close up last night? Who was there when he left?

Two Santa Teadora PD beat officers were first on the scene. The two grilled him for a long time and acted like he was the killer. The guy could have just fallen in the water, right? Fallen off a boat? Drank too much and fell off a dock, right? But no, they acted like Aldous banged the dead guy on the head with a can of Red Bull and a bag of M&Ms. What the hell. How many times can you ask the same question? And did they really think if they asked it three times, he would answer differently than the first two times? *What a waste of a nice morning.*

Aldous looked over and through the two officers and watched as the coroner and his assistant pulled the body out of the water, laying it on the dock to examine it. Aldous could hear the coroner talk to the assistant, at least he thought it was an assistant. The guy wasn’t in a uniform. The coroner said it was a man, stating the obvious was Aldous’ thought, and he said, older, maybe 55 to 65 years old. Dressed in layers, and the top layer was an overcoat. The assistant said, maybe he’s another homeless guy. The coroner said it was likely. Aldous wasn’t getting it all, because he was trying to listen over the police officers’ questions, and answer the questions at the same time. He felt like telling the officers to shut up, he was trying to eavesdrop, but thought that wasn’t the best idea. Nevertheless, it made him smile to himself, and apparently that was a bad idea too.

“What are you smiling about?”

Aldous shrugged. “Just thought of something funny, that’s all.”

“You think this is funny? There’s a dead man over there.”

“I know that. What I was thinking about had nothing to do with the dead guy. I gotta finish getting the shop ready. Are you guys done with me?”

“For now. We might want to talk to you later. Don’t leave town. Don’t go anywhere without calling.”

Aldous smiled again. That sounded just like a bad movie script. He never realized that the bad movie scripts came directly from the mouths of guys just like these two. “Sure, officers, sure.” He shook his head, trying to hide the smile this time. “I won’t go anywhere. I’ll be right here.” He turned and went back into the shop.

The two officers, both paunchy and a little gray, walked slowly towards the coroner, not bothering to lower their voices.

“I don’t think that old fart knows anything. He didn’t see anybody, he didn’t hear anything.”

*“Old fart?”* thought Aldous. *That’s a little harsh! Maybe I am an old fart. But what about them? No spring chickens them!*

“We’re no closer to an end to this. And when this gets out, the homeless are going to start causing trouble. This is the fourth guy dead in – what? – a month? Six weeks? We were starting to get push back after two dead. This is gonna cause problems . . .”

“Over on the east end, some homeless guy came at some security guard with a bat. Said the police were killing homeless and thought the security uniform was a police uniform.”

“What a doofus.”

“Maybe. But I don’t want some brain dead crazy coming at me with a bat.”

“Speaking of which – here come the suits.”

The officer pointed up towards the parking lot, where two men were coming down the walkway toward the surf shop. Detectives, thought Aldous, peaking out from his door while trying so very hard to melt into the background. They were much quieter than the coroner or the police officers. Try as he might, he heard nothing he could decipher. He kept busy in the shop, knowing that this story would be good to make people laugh and weep for weeks. Good stories were good for business.

The suits practically whispered the whole time, and the coroner's voice dropped to match theirs. Aldous couldn't hear a thing, and about then, one of his regulars showed up and he tried out parts of the story on him. It would be a good day after all.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Cookiegate

For Alex, the weekend had dragged by. She wrote a little, trimmed the bushes, mopped the floor, played with the goat and waited for the phone to ring. It didn't. Monday morning, Liz called early to say that she had too much work to come over, and that she would try to drop by after work, which was perfect. Alexis was in no mood to talk. Alexis took no one running, fed everyone more than usual to keep them happy, and was at her computer by 8:00 a.m.

Two things kept rattling around in her head. Her vision of the Vision was unsettling, and she didn't quite know why. She kept thinking she was figure it out "later," but why was it nagging her so?

The more practical problem was Jesse's: Jesse's dilemma was the soul of *Good Sex*. He loved Paul, who was apparently good looking, smart and funny. They went everywhere together, loved all the same things, and laughed at each other's jokes. Their families were supportive, their friends were great. But their sex life was, at least according to Jesse, routine.

"And, well. . . it's kinda boring."

"Did anything change from before, when it wasn't boring?"

"No, not really. He has always been sweet, and a great kisser. Great hands." Jesse grinned, with a lot of remembered joy spilling from his face. "Really. Great hands."

"He doesn't have great hands anymore?"

“No, he does! I just don’t seem to react the same way.” Jesse looked down at his own hands. “Does that mean it’s me? This is my fault?”

Alexis tried to make him feel better, and asked a lot more questions. Then she told him to try the schematic exercise, which she made up on the spot. Jesse was supposed to come back and tell her how it worked out. But the underlying problem was the reason for writing *Good Sex* – how do you keep passion in a relationship that is good, but has turned into a routine, the same sex for years, maybe even decades?

#### ***EXERCISE FOUR – FOR A MAN***

*In the last exercise, you found five magical pieces that make up Good Sex, five things that – if you took them away – would reduce the act from Good Sex to just-so sex. This exercise is for the men who looked at the two schematics and found that there was nothing different. The five key pieces were in both schematics. Despite this, one of the acts was excellent and one was not. It was routine, boring. Perhaps you didn’t react the same way, perhaps she didn’t react the same way.*

“Sorry Jesse,” Alexis said this out loud. “I have been instructed to make this a heterosexual book. But thanks.” She kept typing.

*What you have entered into is a zone where the rules don’t apply anymore. Up until now, you knew that if you touched here, or kissed there, good things would happen. Now they don’t. New rules, and no one told you about it.*

*The next time you are with your lady and sex is possible and imminent, you will need to take yourself into a different mind-set. You need to pretend that this is a different woman. Her name is the same, but this is the first time you have ever bedded her. Instead of taking your hand to her sweet spot, ask her where it is. Instead of kissing or biting her*

*where it always gets a reaction, try to find a different spot, a different way of touching her, just as if this were the first time, just as if you were trying to please a brand new woman you have never bedded before.*

*She may get confused or even a little angry. Roll with it. Your goal is to make the act new, all over again. The next time, let yourself slip into old habits. Randomly, without warning to your partner, try something new. We need to keep her a little off-balance.*

Alexis jumped at every sound, waiting for the door bell. She wanted to hear from Jesse, to get feedback on her schematic approach. But no matter what she did, the door bell did not ring, and in the afternoon, she shut everything down and headed for the trail with the goat and the Labrador.

By the time she got back, darkness was falling so she took a shower and called Liz. “You gonna make it over here?”

“I – I don’t know. No, that’s probably a good idea. Do you have any alcohol in the house?”

“I think I have margarita mixings – is that ok?”

Liz sighed deeply and it was clear there was something bad going on. “That’s perfect. See you in an hour.”

A margarita was awaiting Liz when she came in, dragging badly.

“I’m afraid to ask what happened today.”

“Cookiegate.”

“You are going to explain?”

“I had to go to jail first thing this morning to interview my guy, in custody. This is probably the third time I’ve seen him in the past year or so – nice guy. Police brought him for

possession of a stolen shopping cart. Ridiculous charge – and the third one I’ve had this month, but he’s homeless, so staying in custody is OK with him. He’s the one who remembered me from the last time, so when he sees me go by, he says ‘Hey, Miz Jackson! Good to see you!’”

Liz took a sip from her drink. “Last time I was there, I had snagged a cookie from the Sheriff’s Mess. They make these big chocolate chip cookies for the deputies and they’re fresh every morning. So someone handed me one as I walked in. My guy sees the cookie and gets really excited. ‘C’mon Miz Jackson, gimme a cookie. I haven’t had a chocolate chip cookie in years. That smells so good.’ So I handed it to the guy.” Liz shook her head, sadly.

“I don’t get it. What’s the big deal?”

“In jail, you’re not allowed to give anything to the inmates. You absolutely cannot, must not give any food to the inmates. They frisk you coming in, and if you have anything on you that resembles food, it stays out.”

“This is probably a dumb question – but why?”

“Mostly drug issues. Drugging a cake or a cookie is pretty easy.”

“But you didn’t bring it in. It was a Sheriff’s cookie. It practically had a badge on it.”

Another big sigh from Liz, but at least this one ended in a smile. “I know. That’s what I tried to tell them when they put the handcuffs on.”

“Handcuffs? But all the guy did was take a cookie from you.”

“They didn’t put the handcuffs on my guy – they put the handcuffs on me.”

Alexis’ mouth dropped open. “Did you break out of the slammer, or are you out on bail?”

“Not either. I explained that the Sheriff’s Department made such good cookies, that all of the inmates should be issued one on intake.” Taking a sip from her drink, she added, “But they didn’t think that was funny. One of the deputies has it out for me. We argue all the time. I

think this was just an excuse for him to make me miserable.” Liz motioned for more margarita, and Alexis filled up one for both of them this time.

“This was at 8 o’clock this morning? Maybe 8:30? By 10:00, they had cleared the arraignment courtroom, and had a special session to discuss what I was now calling ‘Cookiegate,’ and no, they still didn’t think it was funny.”

“Did you know the judge?”

“Yep. In front of him every day. I think I saw him crack a smile after about the fourth time we called it Cookiegate.”

“Was the Public Defender’s office your attorney? Did you represent yourself? How do you do that in your position?”

“I called Jay. He represented me.”

“Jay is the crazy one who was here last week. Wait – you chose the crazy lawyer?”

“He’s a really good lawyer. But he spends all his time in capital murder cases, and so he blows off steam when he can.”

“Then he must have loved Cookiegate.”

Liz laughed despite herself. “Yes, he did. This is the most fun he’s had since they moved him into murder cases. You should have seen him! He practically yelled at the judge, told him that we were all wasting the people’s time and money, that the government had more important things to do than spend thousands of dollars in attorney time and court time on a chocolate chip cookie. Mentioned that he should be upstairs arguing a death penalty case. Then because he had the judge’s attention, he said that this homeless man shouldn’t be in jail anyway for possession of a shopping cart. To top it off, he chastised everyone in the courtroom, saying



that they better have sent in their money for goat insurance or they would be feeding chocolate chip cookies to Maddy the Goat.”

“Nice touch! So they dropped everything?”

“The judge said this was a personnel matter, not a criminal matter, and suggested to the Public Defender – who was there, in person, watching this fiasco – that he needed to take action to ‘control’ his people. I am pretty sure he was referring to both Jay and me. Neil was his usual self – told me that we needed to talk later. This is not going away.”

“Neil was actually there? In person?”

“Amazing, huh? Left his office and everything.”

Alexis, trying to be perky, asked, “What happened to the homeless guy? Did he get to eat the cookie?”

Liz was very quiet, and her voice shook as she started to cry. “No, they took the cookie away, and threw him against the wall. And he kept calling my name and asking me for help, and I couldn’t do a thing.” She put her head on the table and started to cry.

The next day, *Good Sex* didn’t seem to be very important. Her blue weekend was turning into an even bluer week. Liz and Cookiegate were important, and it made Alexis feel worthless. Porn and self help books were nothing; her life was nothing. She tried to talk her way out of her funk, saying this was her life: not saving the homeless, but writing her travel articles, the porn books, and trying to write the next great novel. It didn’t resonate.

Lifeless, sad, unable to write, she ran. The goat and the Labrador, and this time she even brought Cricket, who was one step away from a heart attack, the way she kept growling at the goat. The whole day was a sad grey mess, even with the sun shining, even with the Lab panting at her happily. When they got back to the house, she left the back door open and let Maddy

come in and out as she pleased. The Lab trailed behind the goat, no matter how small a move she made.

“Maybe when Maddy leaves, I will go on a trip. That’ll shake me out of this.” Alexis pulled out her travel file, looking for something that needed writing, but nothing jumped out at her. She moved Maddy back into her pen, put the Lab outside and Cricket inside, and left the house.

Alexis started for the store, thinking she needed dog food and coffee and probably a dozen other things, but she found herself driving to the Harbor. “A walkabout,” she said out loud. “That will be good.”

The sun was bright and hot, so she pulled on a baseball cap that said “No Kill Conference,” from a story she did on turning around animal shelters. With her sunglasses too, she figured she was as anonymous as a gazillion-selling author of porn could be. *How did they figure out Anna Brown was me? No one knew, only Jeanine the Publisher. I told them I wrote travel articles.* Maybe Liz was right. Too many square feet of house for a travel writer. Too little for a script writer. *But that left only porn, or a brothel?* Out loud, she muttered, “I could have had a rich husband.”

Vaguely thinking about Mrs. Hartman’s trashcans and Cookiegate, Alexis wandered from shop to shop, fingering a pretty shirt or blowing at windchimes. Without windchimes and lacy shirts, it was clear that the Harbor would have nothing to sell. Still, she wandered. She went by the rental shop, said hello to Rastaman, but couldn’t pull up the courage to ask about the Vision. He was busy anyway, she thought. He appeared to be holding court, a half dozen men and women in shorts and bathing suits laughing and giggling at some story he was telling. Alexis looked, but the Vision wasn’t there. Almost at the end of the horseshoe that was the Harbor, she

saw a familiar portly shape moving towards her, and her adrenalin kicked in. Did she turn and run? Did she stop and talk? But it was too late –

“Alexis! Have you come to visit me?”

“Michael!” She pretended to be surprised and happy, neither of which was true. “No, I was just walking around, trying to clear my head. Aren’t you supposed to be at work?”

He avoided the question nicely: “And aren’t you supposed to be writing porn? Do you have writer’s block? I know something that will clear that right up.” He smiled at her, but she saw only the leer. “Come see my boat – I was just playing hooky and working on a few little things.”

Michael had been such a good friend, but today, he just felt creepy. A little angry at him for the leer, she said, “Michael. I don’t want to have sex with you.” She sounded angry, but was far too polite to leave that without some sort of softening. “I am too busy today – “ She trailed off.

Michael’s face clouded over, and she worried that she had offended him. “Alex, I am not going to rape you, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Her eyebrows shot up, and she was genuinely sorry. “Oh my gosh, no! I am so sorry, I didn’t think that. I was just – “

Michael held a hand up. “Considering what you write for a living, you should be a little more polished, doncha think?”

“Oh, Michael, I’m so sorry. I just had a really bad morning, and I -- I don’t want to . . . “ She stumbled. “Look. Just a bad mood, that’s all.”

He hurrumphed. “Well that’s in the air lately,” he said, with more than a touch of bitterness. “You make it sound like I’m dangerous. I’m not.” He chuckled that rumbling laugh

of his, but it didn't sound happy. "You are afraid of what you yourself might do, subject to my charms, without anyone else around. But anything that happens is your fault, not mine."

She pursed her lip and realized she must look like a small petulant child. That was OK, because that was how she felt. "OK, fine. But if you touch me, I'm going to smack you." She crossed her arms in front of herself, and moved towards Michael. "Seriously, bad day. Very bad day."

"Obviously. You aren't even putting up a pretense that you find me attractive. Usually, you at least make an effort to fake that. It's why I feed you lunch so often."

Michael's boat was only a short walk away, a fishing boat she assumed, with a high canopy over an engine area. It was shining red wood, teak if she guessed correctly. She was talking well before they hit the slip. She summarized Cookiegate for him, and told her how upset she was by the whole thing, how pointless her work felt. When they reached the boat, she stopped, an invisible barrier holding her back.

"Grab a chair for me, would you? I would rather sit on the dock, if that's ok."

Michael scowled. "What is it with you and this boat? Just come aboard." This was a demand, not a request.

"No, Michael, really. I just want to sit on the dock."

He looked angry and she was about to relent when he grabbed a folding chair and handed it to her. "It's ok – I need to clean the boat anyway." He grabbed some supplies from near the big wheel and asked. "You were saying?"

"So Liz is in trouble with the Public Defender's office, I can't seem to write, and I thought that all I wanted was to run away to some new locale, but even that didn't excite me."

"Not everyone can save the homeless – leave that to Liz. She's the right person for it."

“But she was so torn up over the whole thing. Never, not in five years of knowing her, never have I seen her like that. I don’t think I have ever seen her cry – “

”Unless the tequila dries up.” He was grinning at her.

“Or unless there’s no coffee in the morning.”

“Or if there’s no chocolate.”

She finally smiled back. “Or if there’s no one to sleep with.”

“Oh, that would certainly be a tragedy! She just needs a little time. She was probably worried about getting fired, or losing her visiting privileges at the jail, which would be the same thing in her position. Just sit tight, she’ll be OK.”

They moved to other topics, and she talked while Michael scrubbed things, and put oil on other things, generally making the boat shinier. It was already perfectly clean, but Michael kept fussing with it as they talked. Finally, he sat down with a big whoosh of a breath, and said: “Done.”

He was looking at her expectantly, as if there were something she was supposed to be saying or doing. Out of sheer panic, she started talking about *Good Sex*, and the conversation with Jesse. About five minutes in, she ran out of steam.

“So I gave him the schematic exercise . . . You look really confused.”

“I am. There are three things here that you seem to be saying as if they are not important, while they seem to me to be enormously important.”

“Three?”

“First, you are lusting after the Fed Ex guy, and he turns out to be gay. Second, the whole neighborhood knows you write porn and you never told me, your best friend, knowing that it was critically important that I was told this little tidbit. And, third, that random men show

up at your front door asking for sex advice. You don't find any of that to be odd, or disturbing, or maybe part of why you came to see me today?" He smiled at her, and it looked like her old friend was back. She relaxed a little, and pulled her legs to her chin, something she used to do as a child.

"I don't know, Michael." She wondered if maybe there was some truth to this. Maybe it wasn't Liz' problem that had her confused, but a number of her own problems.

"Well," she said after a little bit of silence. "Well I did think that I should knock over Mrs. Hartman's trashcans."

Michael nodded sagely, looking a little wicked. "I can help with that."

"Would you really? Because I am kinda upset that she asks Jesse how many men I have in the house."

"Maybe we shouldn't knock over her trashcans. Maybe we should go tell her that you run a house of ill repute, and ask her if she would like to come over. How old is she anyway? Old? Young? In the middle?"

"On the old end of middle, but definitely not old."

"Do you not get along?"

"Well, I don't know. I haven't talked to her since I moved in." Michael raised an eyebrow, skeptical. "I moved into the neighborhood a few years ago. The Lab got out a few days later, and was kinda wandering up and down the street. He never does anything bad, not really. He's really gentle. But she comes storming up to my door, screaming – literally screaming – that he knocked over her trashcans and she had already called the pound to come get him."

"A little high strung, perhaps?"

“Apparently. Now, the fence is dog proof and goat proof, and he never got out again. So much for a ‘welcome to the neighborhood, here’s a muffin basket.’”

“Goat proof? You have a goat now?”

Alexis then had to spend the next few minutes explaining about goat insurance.

“I leave you alone for one week, and all hell breaks loose!” Michael was laughing. “I want a raffle ticket for the goat.”

“What would you do with a goat?”

He nodded thoughtfully and said, “I have always wanted to roast a goat. A huge Grecian feast, with ouzo and dancing. It would be marvelous.” Alexis must have looked stunned, because Michael asked, “Are you OK?”

Alexis finally spit out the words: “You can’t eat my goat. She’s a pet!”

“Oh don’t be ridiculous. A goat is food, like a cow. Of course you can eat her. People eat goats all the time.”

“And the Japanese eat whales. That doesn’t mean it’s right!”

“What’s wrong with eating whales?”

Alexis was stunned. “Are you serious?”

“Of course I am. The touchy-feely politically correct crowd makes it a crime to do what we have a right to do – eat, hunt, be the top of the food chain, the ultimate predator. What does it matter whether it is a cow or a whale? We can kill it, we have a right to eat it.”

He smiled at her, and she felt a little nauseous. “Michael, I’m shocked.”

“It’s in our DNA, it’s what we do. In the Bible, it says that God gave us dominion over all the creatures of the earth, whether they crawl, walk or fly. We can kill them and eat them, we

can hunt them, we can use them for farms. We are the top of the food chain, the ultimate predators.”

Alex struggled with a way to convince Michael he was headed the wrong direction. “There are significant scientific studies that indicate whales are more evolved, more intelligent, than humans. Whale song in the Indian Ocean can travel 5,000 miles to another pod. The songs themselves can last hours, complex operas that – “

”That are just mating calls. Don’t kid yourself.”

“That are clearly not mating calls, unless Beethoven’s Ninth was just a mating call. How can it be a righteous act to kill such an evolved being?”

“You’re getting upset about this.” He was surprised.

“Damn right.” She was torn between fleeing the scene and trying to get him to understand. “What about the elephants that mourn deaths in their families for weeks. There’s more to life on Earth than what you can kill and eat.”

“Look, it’s in the Bible. Man shall have dominion over all the creatures of the earth.”

“Maybe the whales didn’t get the memo.”

“Look, in some cultures they eat primates. In others, they eat dogs. I don’t understand why you are upset about this.”

“Because primates have complex social structures, and they’re our closest cousins on the evolutionary tree. Because dogs are – well, dogs. And they should be protected, not eaten. They’ve protected humans for tens of thousands of years, back to the campfires, Michael. They deserve something for that loyalty.”



“We are the ultimate predators, Alex.” His voice was hard. “You act like we’re herbivores. We need to take what we want, when we want. Things die. People die. The strong survive.”

“But Michael, how can you decide who lives and who dies? A dolphin has a right to life. A dog, a cat, a mouse, has a right to live.”

“What do you eat, girl? You eat meat – I’ve seen you. So what’s different between a chicken, a whale, a monkey and a goat? Get off your high horse.”

Alex looked down, a little embarrassed. “Yes, I do eat meat, but I don’t go hunting lions, or slaughtering whales. I eat a chicken now and then.”

Sarcastically, Michael asked, “and now you get to decide who lives and who dies? Doesn’t that chicken have a right to live?”

Still struggling to find a way to make him understand her, Alex tried again. “Can’t you make a distinction between eating to live and killing for killings’ sake? Eating a gentle little goat, a pet, is very different than a chicken dinner.”

Michael stood and stretched, and looking as if the conversation bored him, he disappeared into the cabin. “You want a coke, or something? I have . . . “

His voice dropped off, but Alexis really wasn’t listening anymore. Her argument had been weak, so she was a bit ashamed of herself. But more so, she felt as if she didn’t know this man, a man who had been her friend. This man’s idea of a good time was to kill and eat Maddy the Goat. He was practically running a society for the roasting of endangered species, like a movie villain. Hoping she could take off before he noticed, she quietly padded off down the docks. Alexis knew this was rude and certainly cowardly, but she had had enough of Michael and his need to consume everything that couldn’t fight back. She was confused and tired. Plus,

she felt that she was simply another conquest, another new dish to eat. If that wasn't a fair characterization, fine – she would deal with that later. Not today.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

### **Samson's Spaghetti**

Even in the middle of the summer, a night near the beach in Santa Teadora is cold and wet. Frank and Sam walked down there anyway, knowing that a night in the Riverbottom right now was a bad idea; too many risks.

The dunes along the beach had grown in the past few years, some of them towering over the retaining walls that separated the beach-front homes from the water. In that space between the dunes and the walls was a little pocket, protected from the wind and weather. Sam had spent the night in this area before, and he suggested to Frank that it might be safer than the river, at least for now.

As the two men walked, they talked about the news. It was spreading fast: another homeless man dead. The locals think they knew who it was, and Sam was sure of it.

“I told you so.”

“But Sam, we don't know it was someone from the riverbottom. Do you know who was there last night? There must've been 20, 30 guys. You can't know them all.”

“I know it was one of us. Three guys dead. Now one more, right after the police come down into the riverbottom. It has to be the police.”

The two men walked slowly, through the State Park and into the little neighborhood that might have a pocket or two of peace for them. They were trying to find a space that was out of sight of the street. It was tough. The streets along the beach were short and narrow. Sam

wanted to find a spot to stash Frank's shopping cart, and there weren't many bushes or low trees and no alleys. Staying out of sight was a challenge, and if someone saw the cart, it would be stolen, impounded, or the contents scattered. Bringing the cart onto the beach was impossible.

"It doesn't make any sense, Sam. These men, your friends – and I'm not saying they were the homeless guys you know – these guys don't have anything. Plastic flowers. Bags of recycling. Noone would kill for that."

"It's the rich guy they're looking for." Sam was smug.

Frank looked so downcast that Sam stopped walking. "What? What's wrong?"

A big breath in, a slow breath out and Frank answered: "I hope it's not that. That's just a story, Sam, there's no rich guys around here."

"I don't know about that. There's a lot of talk. And why else would the police be hunting down homeless guys if there wasn't money in it? Follow the money, that's what they always say. Follow the money."

The two men walked slowly down the street that fronted the ocean. Off the street were two dozen narrow little lanes, wide enough for just one car at a time. The houses were very close together, and the men knew that the rattle of a shopping cart would bring too much attention. They tried to strategize, but the cart was a problem no matter what. At that point, they passed the half-way point along the street, where a larger street came down towards the beach from the freeway. At that intersection was gas station, a Starbucks, a cleaners, and a big grocery store.

"Maybe we can leave it behind the grocery store."

Sam shook his head, but Frank tried to talk him into it. “We’ll put all the recycling on top. Make it look like it was dropped off by someone. Leave it by the dumpster. I bet it will still be there in the morning.”

“S’worth a try, Frank. Got anything in there you want to take out first?”

“Just something small. Where do you keep your clothes, Sam? You can’t keep everything in that backpack. Unless it’s a lot bigger than it looks.”

“The guy at my job – he lets me keep some stuff there. Then I can wash it and hang it up in the back, so when I work there, I got clean stuff on. He wants me to look OK, in case a customer sees me.”

“He sounds like a good man, Sam. A good man.”

The two wrangled the cart into position near a big dumpster, and tried to make it blend in better. Before leaving, Frank reached into the cart and pulled out the small bag, and slipped it into his inside pocket. “That’s it, Sam. Let’s go.”

The two walked back towards the beach. “Aren’t you worried about getting arrested with that cart, Frank? That’s why the guys at the riverbottom got into trouble.”

“Not really. I suppose I assume God will take care of me.” Frank grinned. “But in case He’s busy with someone else that day, a friend of mine actually bought that cart for me.”

“No shit?”

Frank shook his head, smiling. “He kept telling me that he wouldn’t bail me out if I was arrested for stealing a shopping cart. So he bought it for me and gave me the papers. The police could ignore the papers, I guess. But when we get back there, look at it . . . It has a little plate on the bottom that says it belongs to me.”

The two laughed at the silliness of it. Frank owned a shopping cart so he could be homeless without committing a crime. It was a strange moment, and they both knew it.

With the shopping cart safely stowed, they watched the sun set into the ocean and made their way quietly along the beach towards a set of towering dunes that acted as a wind and weather block. The house closest to the dunes was a three story affair, yellow and white, perfectly maintained, with flowers in all the planters. Sam whispered to Frank that he thought only one person lived there, so if they were quiet they should have a pleasant night – “but no fire, Frank. She’ll see the fire, f’sure.”

Frank nodded and leaned down to pet an enormous cat, more than 20 pounds, with a beautiful black and white coat, looking more than a little like a dairy cow. As Frank sat in the sand to pet his visitor, the rumbling purr could be heard above the waves. The two of them, man and cat, looked blissful, one scratching and petting, the other rubbing and drooling just a little in pleasure. Sam shook his head and smiled at the two of them as he unpacked his backpack, pulling out the little food he had to share with Frank.

“Samson! Samson! C’mon kitty! Samson – dinner time!”

A plump little woman came out the back door, and Sam ducked and tried to stay still to avoid being seen.

“Samson! You rotten cat,” she muttered darkly as she looked up and down her patio, walking over to the wall to see if her companion had gone for a sunset walk. Three sets of eyes stared at her. The cat spoke first.

“Merowww.”

The woman was pure ice. “What are you two doing here?”

“Just petting the cat, ma’am. Is he yours? He’s a beautiful creature.” Frank smiled at her, still happily scratching Samson behind his big black ears. The cat sat very still, his white tail lazily flowing back and forth.

“Samson hates people. He’ll bite you.”

“He’s purring. Can’t you hear him?” On cue, Samson meowed again, and the deep rumbling purr got even louder.

“What are you doing here?”

“Just resting. Staying out of the wind. That’s all. We won’t bother you. It’s just that we can’t stay in the riverbottom. The police are down there every night and every morning.”

The woman was clearly angry. “Well you can’t stay here.”

Sam sighed, and started to put the food back into his backpack. “Wait a second, Sam.” Frank turned to the woman. “Please, ma’am. We would rather stay than farther away from the beach – it gets cold and wet here at night. But there aren’t many other places.” She said nothing. “Just tonight. We’ll find somewhere else tomorrow.”

Petulantly, she said, “There are shelters.”

“The only one in this town is full of women and children. We don’t want to crowd them out. They need it more than we do.”

The woman pursed her lips and stared at the cat, who was still purring and rubbing his face against Frank’s hand. “What did you do to my cat?”

Frank chuckled. “He’s a wonderful cat.” He picked up the huge tom, and snuggled him into his lap. “He’s a great cat.” Frank smiled at her. “What a gift he is.”

“He’s a monster. He scratches people. He hisses at everyone. He hisses at me sometimes. Only my husband liked him.”

“Not today. Today, he is one of God’s happiest children.” Samson leaned out of Frank’s map and oozed out onto sand, the back half of him still in Frank’s map, the other half spread on the sand, feet in the air, a smile on the big black and white head. Frank looked from Samson to the woman, and smiled at her again. “Thank you. And God bless you.”

The woman shook her head in disbelief. “I have never seen him act like that. Ever.” She stood in her patio, hands on her hips and looked at Frank for a long moment. “Have you eaten?”

“No, we haven’t. We were just about to. Would you like some beans and bread? We would be happy to share with you.”

“No, no. Absolutely not. Beans and bread. No.” She turned and walked in the house. Frank shrugged. Sam began to unpack his backpack again, when the woman came back out to the wall with two plates of spaghetti and two big glasses of water.

“Here. I always cook too much. My husband died last year, and I can’t stop cooking for him.” Her lower lip was trembling, and so yelled at them: “Make sure you take care of those plates.” She left the tray of food on the wall. “And send that stupid cat back in. His dinner is ready too.”

Frank looked at the cat in his lap. “Time to go in, Samson. You are one handsome cat.” Frank chuckled. “But you know that.”

The big cat slid the rest of the way out of Frank’s lap, shook the sand out of his fur, and jumped to the top of the wall. He carefully sniffed the spaghetti and turned. Walking with tail flicking, he jumped to the top of a tall planter, then climbed a wooden pole to the second floor. There, he meowed to be let in. Frank and Sam saw the sliding glass door open just a little and the cat disappeared.



The spaghetti was wonderful, and the two men curled up on the sand, talking softly. With the priest, the three had laid out the basics of the job center, and Sam and Frank worked on different options until lights began to flick off in the houses along the sand. Sam was beginning to add his own ideas.

“You sound excited about this, Sam.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t at first. But this might be good. You think they might let me help?”

Frank smiled, and sighed. “Yes, I’m sure they would.” He didn’t say anything else, didn’t tell Sam that he was counting on Sam from the start.



## Chapter Fifteen

### Saving Maddy

“Michael wants to eat Maddy?” Maddy looked up at Liz, chewing studiously. The Lab knocked his tail against the floor. “Alex, I think your dog thinks his name is ‘Maddy.’”

“No, he is just in love with that goat. Follows her everywhere.” Alexis smiled at her big stupid dog. In this world, there were few things you could count on, but the love of a Labrador was a given. Alex went right back to being outraged.

“I was shocked. Michael wants to eat everything. Whales and primates and dogs –“ Liz jumped to put her hands over the dog’s ears. “Don’t listen, big guy! It was just a joke!”

“It wasn’t a joke, really. He was dead serious. Claimed it was our God-given right, literally. It is in the Bible, he said: we get to eat everything.”

“No it’s not. We have dominion over all the beasts that walk and crawl, fly and swim. But we can’t eat them all. Whales don’t have scales, so we can’t eat them. And I can’t remember all the rules, but I’m pretty sure that chimpanzees aren’t on the menu.”

Alexis sat a little straighter. “You know about this sort of thing?”

“Fifteen years of Bible School. Every Sunday morning, before church.”

Alex tossed her head. “Well, that was 15 years wasted.”

“What are you talking about? I still believe in the Bible, every word.”

‘You don’t really believe that the world was made in seven days? Or that the planet is only 6,000 years old? Really?’

‘Yes I do. And that God made all of it. Including the dinosaurs. And no I can’t explain why dinosaur bones test as being 250 million years old. Doesn’t make any sense to me. But I’m sure God has a reason for it all.’

“That’s just amazing. And – oh, never mind.’

‘No, you started a sentence. You have to finish it. That’s the rule.’

‘Since when do we have rules?’

‘If you’re gonna be my friend, you have to finish sentences. You can’t stop in the middle like that. Doesn’t matter if we disagree. Doesn’t matter if you’re flat-ass wrong. You’re still my friend, and I still love you. Finish the damn sentence.’

‘You believe in creationism. You believe the planet is God’s creation and it was made in seven days. Right?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

“But you fuck like a bunny – “

”– with a capital “B” yes – “

” – and you swear like a sailor. How is that consistent?’

“It’s not consistent. That’s not a problem for me. What I believe is that God loves me and made my world. If I run amuck in it, that’s because God made me a playground. But God is there, He loves me, and I know that’s true. To the bottom of my misbehaving soul.”

Alexis chuckled. “Man oh man, I can’t even believe these words are falling out of your mouth. That very mouth that has been so active in recent years.”

“I know!” Liz spread her fingers out, hands by her head. “I said it wasn’t consistent. I know it isn’t. But it doesn’t change the core of everything I know.”

“We need to stop talking about this right now.”

“Why?” Liz was confused. “What’s the matter?”

All business, Alexis said, “This is a conversation for a long evening and a good bottle of wine. Today, right now, we have to save Maddy.”

“True.”

Alexis poured more coffee, Liz went to the refrigerator and pulled out the milk, talking as she did. “We can’t not have a goat to raffle off. That was the point. If there’s no goat, it ruins the raffle.”

“We can rig the raffle. Give the goat to someone that we know will be a good home.”

“Or we can arrange it so that I win it.”

“Liz, you live in a condo.”

“I know that. I think the HOA would have a fit, which is a really good reason to bring Maddy to my place. They already think I am a bad influence. God knows – “ and Liz’ voice dropped to a stage whisper. “I might try to dry a bedspread on my balcony. They kill people for less than that.” She grinned. “But not in the Common Area, and not without permission.”

“I wonder if it’s just Michael, or if anyone else is thinking about cooking our Maddy.”

“I’ll talk to Jay today. He’s been out bugging people who haven’t sent in their insurance money. Maybe he has a feeling for it.”

Liz took off, promising to call when she had any news on hungry lawyers wanting goat stew, and Alexis took the dogs and Maddy for a run. She needed to see Jesse again. It had been a week, and no feedback on the schematic exercise. She thought about sending herself a Fed Ex, but figured it was only a matter of time before Jeanine the Publisher decided to contact her about what Alexis had yet to produce: either the next few chapters of *Good Sex* or the first part of the sequel to *Locked Room*.

She had been at her desk a few hours, and actually making progress, when the doorbell rang.

“Damn!” Alexis hit the “save” button, shoved back her chair and went to answer the door. There, in all his Adonis-like beauty was Jesse the Fed Ex guy.

“Jesse ! I was hoping to see you!” All her annoyance melted away. “Can you talk? Do you have time?”

Jesse looked behind him as if someone were watching, and leaned forward conspiratorially. “I have a couple of minutes, but not much. I just wanted to tell you what happened.”

*Which is exactly what I wanted*, thought Alex, and she brought him into the kitchen. “Can I get you something cold?”

“A glass of water would be great.” Jesse settled into a chair next to Maddy and the Labrador. He looked down with a odd look on his face. “A goat?”

“It’s long story. So what happened?”

“So I went home that night and started to map it out – just like you said. I was making notes, and trying to figure it out when Paul came in. He asked what I was doing, and I told him.” Maddy was up and leaning on Jesse, who started to scratch the goat’s head.

“If that goat could purr, it would.”

“She’s great. When did you get a goat?”

“Last week, but not on purpose. Finish the story!”

“So we started talking, and we talked all night. It was great. By the morning, we were back on track,” and Jesse’s wide grin put an exclamation point on his words.

“Details, Jesse, I need a little more.” But Maddy had now put her front feet into Jesse’s lap and was rubbing her head against his chin.

“I think the goat likes me.”

“She certainly does. Was it the conversation that did it, or was it mapping it out, like we talked about?”

“A little of both. We started to map things out together, and then we started talking about everything. Things we liked, things we didn’t like . . .” Maddy gave Jesse a hard push and he bounced off the chair onto the floor, where Maddy curled up next to him and licked his shirt. Jesse was laughing.

“I wish I could take her home!”

“So do I.” Alexis’ eyes suddenly widened. “Where do you live?”

“It’s a little house, but it has a big yard. The people on one side have chickens, and on the other side there’s a horse, so she would have lots of company.” He was petting the goat like a dog. “Why? Don’t you want her?”

“No, I don’t really need a goat, but she’s in danger, I think.” So Alexis explained about the raffle, and Goat Insurance, and goat stew.

“Noone could eat her! Look at her! She’s –“ Maddy head-butted him again. “She’s a pet.”

“And housebroken.”

“No kidding!”

“Never had a slip in here. She’s better than the dog.”

“I would love her. Let me talk to Paul.” He scrambled up from the floor and headed for the door. “Uh oh.”

“What?” Alex looked at the goat, at the dog, at the door, and repeated, “What?”

“It’s Mrs. Hartman. She’s outside.”

“So? Can I moan really loud and yell, ‘Jesse! Jesse! Oh! Do it again!’” Alexis was feeling a little evil, especially since she hadn’t knocked over anyone’s trashcans.

“No.” Jesse looked stricken. “No, it is not proper, and my boss would be – “ He paused. “Really upset. Would fire me.”

“Fed Ex doesn’t like its people sleeping with the customers?”

“God no! We aren’t really even supposed to go inside someone’s house. I kinda blew it the other day.”

“And today, apparently.” Alexis craned her head around, looking through the front window. “Is she gone yet?”

“I think so.” Jesse turned back to her. “Thanks again, for everything. And are you serious about the goat?”

“Really, Maddy needs a good home. Talk to Paul.”

As the door closed behind Jesse, Alexis muttered, “So much for Fed Ex fantasies.” She walked back to her computer, and finished the next two exercises, thinking that Jeanine would be pleased with her progress:

### ***EXERCISE ONE – FOR MEN AND WOMEN TOGETHER***

*You and your partner need to sit across the room from each other, perhaps with the bed between you. There should be no chance of touching each other.*

*One of you must start. Tell your partner the single thing you like best about them physically. It can be something G-rated, like the color of their eyes, or something more*



*intimate, like the curve of his penis just before the tip, or the sensitivity of her nipples. One for you, one for your partner, and keep it going for ten rounds.*

*Then come together in the middle. Your partner must now tell you the ten things he or she likes best about sex, and you must do so as well. Take turns, like before, alternating between you. This is a show-and-tell exercise, so don't be shy.*

*If you run out of things before you decide to end the exercise, then do this exercise again on a different day. In between, think of other things you like about your partner, and what you like best about sex. Then you can come together and do this again.*

Alex leaned back in her chair, pleased with her progress and so she decided to have some lunch. As she searched for food that wasn't past its expiration date, she flicked on the radio in the kitchen:

*At the Harbor today, police found the body of a man, floating near the docks. This is the fourth body found in or near the ocean in the past six weeks. Police are not providing any details, and have yet to release the names of any of the victims. When asked if the deaths were the result of foul play, a police spokesman declined to answer, saying only that the investigation was continuing.*

*In other news, police are continuing to roust the homeless living in the river bottom. We asked Lt. Crister of the Santa Teadora PD why now? Why empty out the camps after such a long time?:*

*"The camps are dirty and dangerous places. There is raw sewage, drugs, violence: we need to get them out of there. Plus, winter rains are coming, and not a year goes by without at least one death because there are people trying to live in the riverbottom.*

*We've tried – pretty consistently – to discourage people from camping in the river. We are just ramping it up now, because of our concern over the coming rainy season.”*

Alexis was only half-listening to the broadcast, but something made her stop. A body at the Harbor, today? She was just down there.

“I wonder if Michael saw anything,” she said to the goat. And she laughed out loud. “Like I would ever talk to him again!” She rubbed the goat’s head, and Maddy leaned against her with pleasure. “Don’t worry, Maddy, I got your back. I hope.”

## **Chapter Sixteen**

### **Walking Downtown**

The sun was warm and their uniforms were heating up as Olmeda and Travis slowly walked down the main street of Santa Teadora, past shops and restaurants. A few homeless were perched in their usual spots, sitting with their bags and blankets, a dog, a cardboard sign asking for help: "Homeless. Hungry. Anything Helps."

Now and then, Olmeda would stop to ask questions, but the homeless men on the street were clearly uncomfortable talking to someone in uniform. Only one man talked to them, and he was clearly not all there.

"It's the police that's doing it. You should know. It's one of you." The man was haggard and grey, yet amazingly calm as he told the two officers that it was a police officer who was killing the homeless.

"Well, it's not us, dude." Travis looked so sincere that it made sense the man kept talking. "Why do you think it's the police? What have you heard?"

The old man rambled on, sometimes clearly, sometimes inaudibly. The gist of it was that someone had been seen in the Riverbottom, in a uniform, asking questions of the men there. He wasn't hassling anyone, just asking questions about a someone. Asking questions, and saying that he was looking for someone, someone with money, who might be in the area. A few days later, the first guy died.

"Are you sure he was a police officer? And he had a uniform, right?"

“I dunno man. That’s just what I heard. I don’t like Riverbottom. Too many dogs. I don’t like dogs.”

Olmeda looked at Travis, then pointed at the two happy looking canines seated on either side of the old man.

“But you have dogs. You don’t like dogs?”

“Oh, these guys? They’re not dogs.”

Travis’ eyebrow shot up. “Oh, sure. Not dogs. OK.”

Olmeda cut in. “Was that the only time a police officer was in Riverbottom by himself?”

“I dunno. I wasn’t there. You just asked what I heard. I told you.”

Travis and Olmeda kept walking. They broke up an argument between a man and his very irate girlfriend in front of one restaurant. Apparently, he gave her an STD – something curable, but she was in the process of letting him know her very strong feelings on the issue when the manager called and asked for help. Their appearance at the back of one parking lot caused two teen boys to run like hell towards the front. They poked around for a few minutes, but it seems they arrived in time, and whatever car was in danger had escaped the planned break-in. A bicyclist fell over and had a scraped knee. A woman locked her keys in her car as well as her cel phone. They called a tow truck for her. All in all, not the kind of day they had hoped for when they signed up for the job.

It was the almost the end of their shift when their radios cackled at them. Go to the freeway. Someone in distress, probably homeless. Called in by a passerby.

Olmeda was almost giddy. “This could be it!”

Travis grinned and the two high-tailed it to the freeway, a half-mile away. They spotted a man in ragged clothing, half-lying, half-sitting on the ground. As they got closer, they heard him sobbing.

The man was under a portion of the freeway that crossed to the west of downtown. Around him were pieces of a smashed and broken shopping cart, and some blankets had been ground into the dirt, along with some bags of unidentifiable things. The crying man had a dirty bandage on his head, and he was holding some plastic flowers to his chest. He was rocking back and forth and talking to the flowers.

“Johnny, Johnny. You didn’t do nothing wrong. You never nothing to anyone. You were a good man, and I miss you. I miss you every day. Johnny. Johnny.”

Olmeda and Travis looked at each other. Olmeda was the glib one, they both knew that. But without saying a word to each other, Travis was the one who walked over to the man, knelt down and tried to talk to fellow.

“Hey, man. Someone called us. They were worried about you.”

Still rocking, crooning to the plastic flowers, the old man looked up straight into Travis’ eyes. His face was blotched and swollen, but his eyes were clear. They were the saddest thing Travis had ever seen.

“They killed Johnny. He was my friend. This is his stuff. They killed him here.” He looked down again, took in a ragged breath and started keening again, his grief larger than words.

Travis tried to get more. “When did your friend disappear? Are you sure he didn’t just move on?”

“No, no, no!” The raggedy man shouted the last “no!” and raised his sad eyes once again to Travis’ face. “He had a bad leg. He couldn’t go very far. He was my friend. They killed him here.” Suddenly, fear flickered across the man’s face, like a someone had changed the channel on a television. “I know you. You hurt me!”

Travis searched his memory, then realized this might have been the guy they hog-tied at the Riverbottom raid. He lied, instinctively. “No, man, that wasn’t us. Someone us maybe. Let’s talk about your friend. Let’s find out what happened to him.”

Olmeda walked as far away as he could without leaving his partner in danger. Whispering into his radio, he explained that a homeless man was mourning his friend, a cripple, whose shopping cart was here, under the freeway. It took only minutes before sirens were heard, and Travis had his hands full trying to keep the man calm so that more questions could be asked.

Hours later, Olmeda and Travis headed to a sports bar to watch the game. “What game is that,” Travis asked, as the two walked, exhausted, into the front door.

“Does it matter? I need a game. Some sport. Basketball. Soccer. I don’t care. Something that’s not – something without blood on it.”

“Maybe they have rugby.”

Olmeda punched his friend in the arm, and the two found a table away from the bar. A willowy waitress with menus showed up immediately, and asked for their drink order. It was likely a sign of their exhaustion that neither one even noticed what she looked like.

“There were lots of footprints.”

“It’s been days since Plastic Flower guy was killed. Who knows what they’ll get from that.” Olmeda looked so discouraged that Travis felt he had to cheer him up.

“But we’re the ones who found the guy’s shopping cart. We found the plastic flowers.”

“Well, not really. The guy we bashed in the head found the plastic flowers.” Olmeda looked up, pleading. “What are the chances of that? That the guy we cuffed and put in the car is the same guy we find crying over Flower Guy? That’s not fair.”

“He talked to us. He was a little squirrely, but he was OK. And now he’s in a warm bed, and he’s got food in him. They’ll get more information out of him in the morning.”

The two men drank and ordered food. The waitress couldn’t even get a smile out of them, and assumed they were gay lovers, in the midst of a quarrel. *No tip tonight*, she thought, walking over to a better table with more potential.

After a beer and a burger, Olmeda’s mood improved. “Alright, what do we really have?”

“Four homicides. All homeless. A police officer was seen in Riverbottom right before it happened.”

“The fourth is still not solid. Might not be part of this.”

“But it probably is. They’ll tell us in the morning. But four deaths in five weeks. All found near the water. No apparent motive. No suspects.”

“Plastic flower guy was the youngest. Maybe 30 years old.”

“The one today might be the oldest. They said he was probably sixty or older.”

“Two strangled. One bludgeoned. No news on the guy today.”

“No prints, no DNA, no motive, no commonality.” Travis frowned and looked at his partner. “You asked what we really have – we have shit.”

## Chapter Seventeen

### A Silk Purse From A Goat's Eyelashes

Alexis was in the kitchen making coffee, when the back door opened. Expecting Liz, Alex turned around to find Jay Fox standing there, a large box of donuts in his hand.

“Liz told me you liked donuts, so I brought some.” Jay pulled a chair out from the kitchen table and sat down. “Can I have some coffee?” He looked around. “Where’s my goat?”

“Out back. Yes. Milk?” Alex paused. “Why are you here?”

The front door banged and Britney came in with a bakery bag. “Liz said you liked donuts, but they didn’t have any, so I brought muffins. Hope that’s OK. Where’s the goat?”

Alex pointed out back, not wanting to speak for the half-donut sticking out of her mouth. “Wawfee?”

“What? Oh, yes, thank you. With sugar.” Britney walked out back and Jay followed, both with coffee cups in hand. Alex rinsed out the carafe, and started to make more.

The back door banged shut, and Alexis looked up, curious to see who it might be this time. “Liz?” Alexis peaked around the corner.

“Good morning, beautiful! I don’t know if you remember me – I’m Neil.” He stuck a big hand out to Alexis who scrambled to put down the empty coffee carafe, and hastily swallow the rest of the donut. Neil was the Public Defender.

“Good morning. . . I don’t suppose you know why my backyard is full of lawyers?”



“We’re here to take pictures for the auction. It’s a week from today. Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>.”

Neil started towards the back door.

“Actually, Friday is the 12<sup>th</sup>.” Alex said this to Neil’s back, finished making the coffee and clicked the switch to start it brewing.

She heard Liz’ voice from behind her. “He’s such a dick. The auction is Saturday – which is the 13<sup>th</sup>, so he’s half right. As usual.” Alexis turned around looking so confused that Liz had to laugh. “You’re just starting to make coffee? Late start this morning?”

“Liz! You could have warned me!”

“And take all the fun out of it? Why would I do that? Oh! Donuts... and muffins. Nice.” She selected one from the box. “Where are they?”

“Out back with the goat.” Loud barking erupted. “And the dog, apparently.”

Liz held up a camera. “Time to make our girl a star.”

Alexis and Liz both joined the group outside, where Jay was throwing a ball for the Labrador, who was alternately running and barking, thrilled with the attention. Britney was brushing the goat. Neil was standing there, looking regal, and turned to Alex as she came out.

“May I have some coffee?”

“Sure, it’s on the counter. Cups right above it. Milk in the fridge.”

Neil smiled and went back into the house as Alex watched Britney spruce up the goat.

Liz was aiming the camera at goat, trying to figure out the best way to take the shot, when Alex said, musing, “You know she has beautiful eyelashes. We should put on mascara.”

Liz stopped looking through the camera, and looked at Alexis. “Sometimes, you are so brilliant.” She took Alex’s arm and walked her back towards the house. “You are the best and most brilliant friend a person could have!”

“What? What did I say?”

“Where’s your make-up? And clothes.... I need some clothes.”

“For Maddy?”

No! For Jay. Omigod. Yes, for Jay too.”

Liz was already in Alexis’ bedroom, rifling the closet and asking where Alex kept her lingerie. Alexis went into the bathroom to grab mascara and lipstick and eye shadow. The two poured back out into the backyard, with Liz asking Jay if he had any fancier clothes in his car. Jay went out to check, and Britney starting applying make-up to Maddy, who stood there quietly, occasionally munching a bit of hay or donut.

The shots were amazing. Maddy in close-up, with the longest eyelashes ever seen, and just a hint of lipstick (because she kept trying to eat the applicator). Maddy as a vamp, wearing Alexis’ trashy red lingerie. Maddy in a dress, with black pumps peaking out, with Jay next to her as her escort. Maddy and Britney in business suits, with Maddy “holding” Britney’s briefcase. All the while, Maddy kept munching her hay, and watching her crazy humans run back and forth to the house. Finally, after about an hour of this, Maddy had enough. She shook, the clothes went flying and she walked back towards her pen trailing a scarf.

“I think that means she’s done.” Liz put down the camera.

Jay disagreed: “No, it’s a union thing. She just needs a break. It’s in her contract.”

“And I need more coffee – it’s in my contract.” Neil walked back in the house.

Britney and Alexis picked up all the clothes and make-up, shoes and scarves, and brought them back to the bedroom. When they came out, everyone was huddled over the little digital screen on the back of the camera, seeing the results of their work.

“Oh, I think we can work with this,” Liz was quietly saying.

“Um-hmm,” added Jay. Even Neil was nodding his head, still holding his coffee cup.

Alex went over to the coffee pot to find it empty again, and starting rinsing it out. “What next? Are you making a calendar for her?”

Liz grinned. “That’s a good idea, but no – we only need to put together an internet flyer. Although with these pictures, we might want to do more.”

Britney picked up a muffin. “I could use some of these for the program.” She picked up the cameras and scanned through a few of the shots. “We could photoshop Jay out and put in other people’s faces. We could do it at the auction. A few dollars a shot. Make a few extra dollars.”

Alexis interrupted. “I heard something on the radio yesterday. Another homeless guy dead?”

Everyone became very serious. Jay spoke first. “It looks that way.”

Liz shook her head. “I am going to hear a lot about this today. The homeless guys are already really nervous. This latest body . . . my people are going to be really angry. They already think the police are behind it.”

Neil plunked his coffee cup on the table. “There’s no evidence of that. Let’s not spread a rumor that’s already causing problems.” With this, Neil said he loved the pictures but had work to do. The others figured out that was a clue, and all left within a few minutes.

Liz was the last to leave, and Alex walked her out to the car. “Liz – do you really think it’s the police?”

Liz shrugged. “I don’t know. It could be. Right now, we have nothing . . . Not a clue. All we know is that all four bodies were found in the ocean. But whether they were dumped there, or washed out to sea . . . We just don’t know.”

While Miss Goat was making her fashion debut, Sam and Frank were recovering Frank's shopping cart at the grocery store near the beach. It was covered with a thick layer of dew, as were the two men. As they started to walk out of the parking lot, someone started to yell at them.

"Hey! Stop! You two – you bums!" A security guard was jogging towards them.

"Sam – why don't you get to work. I'll take care of this."

"No. Guys are dying all over the city, Frank. This guy might be the killer."

"I don't think so. I think he just wants the cart." Frank smiled at Sam. "And as I told you – it's mine. Go ahead. Let me handle this." He patted his pocket. "I have papers."

Wanting to avoid any contact with someone in uniform, Sam began to move away, torn between his new loyalty for Frank and his need for self-preservation. He turned and ran past a row of trees and then turned and watched.

Frank stood quietly waiting for the guard, who was panting by the time he reached the edge of the parking lot.

"You can't take that! It belongs here. Get yer shit out of it, or I'll throw it away!"

Frank tried to explain. "I actually own this. If you look – " and he gestured at the cart. "It doesn't have any marking from the store on it. It has a plate on it – on the bottom – that says it belongs to me."

The guard would have none of it. "That's bullshit. Get out of here, I'll take it now. If you want your shit, take it." And with that, the guard turned the cart over and spilled everything out onto the pavement.

Frank was protesting that if the guard simply read the plate on the cart, it would show that it belonged to him, and he leaned down to show the guard. At the same time, the guard reached down to pull the cart up from the ground, and the two men's heads collided, hard.

“Attacking me? You old bastard! Did you really think you could beat me?” The guard rubbed his head and flipped the leather strap off his gun at the same time. “Get on the ground, now!”

Frank was rubbing his head too, but started to reach into his coat for the papers inside the pocket he had in the lining. The guard saw the move, and started screaming: “Get down on the ground!” His gun was out and it was pointed right at Frank's chest, but his hand was shaking. “Get down! Down! Get down now!”

Frank didn't say a word, and didn't try to explain. He just got down on his knees and as he started to rock forward to put his hands on the ground, the guard kicked him hard in the stomach and he fell on the pavement. Frank felt a small crunch as his face hit the asphalt, and then he couldn't think very well. Sam watched everything and when Frank went down, he ran towards the river, panicked and blind with anger and frustration.

The security guard made a frantic call and two police officers came quickly. Olmeda and Travis listened to the security guard, and automatically assumed that Frank had attacked the officer.

“This exact same thing happened on the east end last week. Homeless think that the police are behind some deaths in the homeless community. It's a good thing you weren't hurt.”

The guard rubbed his forehead again. “I don't know about that. My head – got a pretty good bump.”

Olmeda asked: “You wanna go to the hospital?”

“You should go get it checked out – head injuries are nasty,” Travis added.

“What about him?” The guard gestured towards Frank, on the ground in handcuffs, next to the police car.

“We’ll get him processed for assault. You’ll need to testify, unless the PD pleads him out.”

The guard still had his hand on head. “What about the cart?”

They all looked at the shopping cart, which was still on its side, Frank’s quilt and recycling scattered around it.

Olmeda looked it over, and then leaned over and read the plate on the bottom rung of the cart: “‘Property of Francis Mellon Smith.’ And there’s a phone number.” He looked up. “The old guy might have been right – it doesn’t look like it belongs to your store. And he didn’t have a weapon on him.”

Then Travis leaned over and reached into Frank’s coat, roughly feeling around until he felt paper. He pulled out a dirty bag and reached into it. Inside were two photographs, and a folded set of papers. He read for a minute or so. “Yup. One of these is a receipt for a shopping cart.” Travis shook his head and looked at the guard. “He was right. Who’d a guessed?”

“But he attacked me – why would he do that?” The guard was very defensive, and rubbed his head again.

“Like I said – the homeless are . . . well, they’re all pretty worked up about the deaths of those four guys. Whether he owned the cart or not doesn’t make the assault OK. We’re taking him in no matter what.”

Mollified, the guard and the officers exchanged numbers and other information, and Frank, his face bloody and starting to swell, was put in the back of the police cruiser. Travis was

careful not to bang Frank's head and make the bleeding worse. He didn't need the captain to think he was out of control.

As he got Frank in the back of the car, Travis tried to get him to talk, but Frank was dazed and bloody. "Hey, buddy. Why'd you hit that guy? He's just a rent-a-cop. Harmless."

Talking through lips that were bruised and swollen, Frank answered with a lisp. "I didn't hit him. All a mistake."

Travis turned to look at Olmeda. "All a mistake..." Travis looked confused for a moment, then became animated. "Dude. He made a mistake. A mistake about a uniform."

Olmeda started the car, and grinned at his partner. "So ? What's your point?"

"What about the guy in Riverbottom? He coulda made a mistake. Couldn't it have been a security uniform? Maybe we shouldn't be looking for a cop – we should be looking for a uniform."

Olmeda was quiet for a minute. "That opens up the suspect list to hundreds of people, thousands even. And this is Riverbottom. It could have been a guy in a plumbers' uniform, and they still might have said 'cop.'"

In the back of the car, Frank was flickering in and out of consciousness. Everything hurt. He tried to pray, but couldn't find the words. So he struggled to stay awake, knowing that a concussion was likely and knowing that if he could last the few miles to the jail, someone might be able to help him. He heard the two officers talk about uniforms, and wanted to tell them about the man in the slacks and windbreaker rifling through the carts in Riverbottom, but he couldn't find the energy to talk.





## Chapter Eighteen

### Liz In Jail

Liz walked into the jail at almost ten in the morning, two hours after her usual time. She was still smiling over the pictures of Maddy the goat, and scheming on how best to make money for the Homeless Shelter off the photos. It was because she was so focused on the goat and fundraiser that she was shocked when someone started yelling.

“What the hell is she doing here? She was banned after that thing last week, wasn’t she?” The voice came from a huge, barrel-chested deputy with a buzz-cut and bulging biceps that spoke volumes about steroid use. Liz had once joked that steroids made a man’s penis shrink to nothing, and that would explain why this deputy – named John Tanner – was such a dickless asshole. The comment got back to John, and he had been brutal with Liz ever since. He was at the heart of Cookiegate, and he made her life in the jail as difficult as he could without risking discipline.

“Yer late, Ms. Jackson.” An older deputy was in charge of the metal detector and screening folks who came into the jail. He took her bag, a stack of files and her phone, and put them in a plastic box so that he could run them through the metal detector.

“No, seriously – what is she doing here? She’s been banned from the jail!” The big guy wasn’t giving up.

Liz ignored him, and smiled at the deputy running the metal detector, walked through the gate, and turned to collect her files. John Tanner was in her way.

“Don’t move. You’re not allowed in here.”

Liz looked up from her five foot ten inch height into the face curling down at her from about six foot three inches. “Watch what you say to me, Depyootee.” She dragged out the word as scornfully as she could. “I was cleared to come back, and if you had any brains, you would know that.”

“I haven’t heard that.” He barked the words. “You are not coming in here without someone telling me personally that you can.”

Liz looked back at the two men working the metal detector. They shrugged. She pulled out her phone and started to call her office. John Tanner stopped her again.

“Get out. If you have to make a call, you can do it from outside.”

Liz paused for a moment. *Should I fight with the guy? Should I argue? Should I stay? Should I go? Tough call.* She looked at her watch. She didn’t have to be in court until the 1:30 calendar. It’s just that she had interviews to do with her in-custody clients before then. She shrugged.

“OK.” She turned and walked out, smiling at the deputies, Tanner glaring at her retreating back. She knew that he was much more upset with her for not arguing with him. That alone was worth walking out without a fight.

Again, she started to call her office as she walked down the subterranean tunnel that led from the jail to a basement elevator in the courthouse. The Courthouse was built in two wings. On one side were four floors of courtrooms; on the other were only three floors, all related to the courts. The jury rooms and traffic windows were on the first floor. The Public Defender’s office was on the second floor along with the Clerk’s office. On the third floor were the District Attorney’s offices. Liz couldn’t get a signal in the tunnel today, so she paused at the junction of two corridors to fiddle with her phone. One of the corridors went back to the Courthouse, and

the other went to the medical wing of the jail. When she turned, she saw a man, dressed in a ragged coat, spattered in blood, being half-walked and half-dragged out of a door in the corridor and towards the medical wing.

He looked up at her for only a moment, and in that moment, he smiled. His face was bloody, but he smiled a sweet, slow smile at her before he was turned towards the medical wing. She stood there, stunned, not knowing how to react while a part of her was wondering why the smile of a bloody prisoner had rooted her to the ground.

It took a few moments to come back to earth, and she completed her call and walked into the courthouse while she waited for her office to connect with the jail and get everything cleared up. For reasons that she couldn't explain, she couldn't bear to go upstairs so she wandered to the coffee kiosk and bought a huge cinnamon shortbread cookie, a snickerdoodle. But she didn't eat it. She simply sat next to the kiosk and waited for the phone to ring. Soon, it did, and she went back downstairs, into the tunnel, and back to the jail.

Liz walked up to the metal detector in a daze, and went through the motions again of placing her bag and her files and her phone into the plastic bin, and walking again through the gate. There, again, was Tanner. She reached out to him with the snickerdoodle and said, "Truce?"

"What the hell? You trying to poison me?"

"Look, I'm not the bad guy. I do my job and I do it well." Liz started to feel some anger bubbling up and a bit of resentment, but she pushed it down hard, wondering again why she was acting this way. "You're not a bad guy either, and I know you do a job here too, and it's not easy here in the basement."

Tanner wasn't arguing, so Liz took a deep breath and continued. "We have no reason to be enemies. I have a big mouth, and I say rude things, but I do it to everybody, not just you. So if I said anything to make you hate me, I'm sorry." She thrust the cookie out again. "Here. I bought you a cookie. I'm sorry."

Tanner took the cookie looking as confused as Liz was feeling, and he said nothing. Liz spun around and collected her things. As she walked away from the station, she said again, "Really, I'm sorry. She felt that her face was hot and realized she was blushing. She walked quickly down to the next checkpoint to find her clients.

The next morning, Liz tried to explain the whole thing to Alexis, but couldn't quite find the words.

"I don't know why I did it. There was no reason. It had to be related to the guy in the corridor." Liz lowered her voice, sounding embarrassed and a little scared. "He looked like Jesus."

Alexis' eyebrows shot up but she knew better than to say anything. This was serious and she didn't want any silly wordplay to get in the way of figuring out what happened.

"Did you see him again?"

"Who?"

"Jesus."

"No! He was being taken off to medical. I might see him today."

"Well not to change the subject, but what did you find out in the jail yesterday – what's going on with the murders of the homeless guys?"

"Oh! Yeah, I did get a lot on that. Can I have more coffee?"

“What? You do that on purpose, don’t you? You like keeping me on edge when you have news, don’t you?”

Alex got the first real smile of the morning. Liz said, “Yes, I guess so,” then stopped.

“Argghh! What did you find out?” Pouring more coffee seemed to loosen things up, and Liz spilled the latest.

“According to the guys in lock-up, the last guy who was killed was named Joe. No last name, just “Joe.” He lived in the riverbottom, and was there the day the police raided the riverbottom on another of their ‘stolen property’ tours. They all say the same thing: this is connected to some rich guy who is homeless, with a shopping cart full of cash. And he passes the money out to the people he likes.”

“So on the one hand we have Jesus in jail, and on the other hand we have a homeless guy with a cart full of money. But it was Jesus whose face was smashed in, right?”

“Right. He looked pretty bloody ... even with that smile on his face.” Liz started to gather herself to leave. “Speaking of unfinished business, what’s the latest on ‘Good Sex’? Any more exercises for me to look over? Anything new with the Fed Ex guy?”

“Jesse was supposed to tell me whether his man was OK with adopting Maddy. He’ll probably be by today or tomorrow. Sounds like he’s a good fit for her. He lives next to horses and chickens, so she won’t get kicked out. And he likes her.”

“And she likes him – I remember, you told me. You better figure things out soon – the drawing is Saturday.”

“I know, I know. Saturday. I have time.”

“Right. Two whole days. You realize that it’s Thursday already.”

Alexis stood up, looking bewildered. “No, it’s not Thursday. It’s Sunday. It’s Monday. No, it’s last week sometime.” She pushed back her shoulders and shook her hair. “I am not bound to earth like thee ... I am a free spirit, unfettered by days of the week. I care not for the clock – I am – “

Liz interrupted. “ – porn queen. You are porn queen and you haven’t written anything for days. Get to work, you’re getting lazy!”

“Hey, I’ve been a little distracted! I have a goat in my backyard. And my fantasy is gay. And there are lawyers tromping through her using my lingerie to dress up the goat in the backyard. C’mon! Lazy or lawyerus interruptus?”

“I admit we’ve been around a lot in the past week, but don’t tell this isn’t more fun than you’ve had in a month! See you tomorrow – and get me news on Jesse –“ She reached for the back door. “I forgot to ask – how are you doing on the sequel to ‘Locked Room’?”

“I am going to drag the Vision into the sequel, but I don’t know quite how yet. I think I’m going to have Cassandra fall in love with her.”

“Alex, Alex –“ Liz sounded disapproving.

Alexis looked at her, obviously confused. “What? What’d I do?”

“You spend all your time writing, and so little time living. Did you talk to Rastaman about her?”

“No, I chickened out. Besides, I think she might be better for me if I never talk to her. Leaves more to the imagination.”

Liz just shook her head and left. With a sigh, Alexis cleaned the cups, shut off the coffee, and walked straight to the computer. Liz was right about one thing – she was behind on everything. Time to work.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

### **Rigging the Game**

Sam Alvarez was a loner, had been a loner all his life. He had a house once, and a girlfriend and a job that wanted him to be there five days a week, sometimes six. But the girlfriend left and the house was too much for one person, and finally he saw no point in working when there was no one to go home to, no one to bring home a paycheck to. No one who really cared.

So he quit and he lived in his car. After a while, even the car was too much responsibility. He found he could live very simply, working when he needed to, cooperating with some businesses, like the restaurant owner who let him keep some clean clothes in the back. He ate OK. Between the restaurant and the shelter, he had enough to eat. He didn't drink very often, which made him a lot different than most. He liked to have some money in his pocket and beer ate that up faster than anything. Now and then, he would go into a shop and buy some beer, but the guys behind the counter always looked at him funny and he knew they were thinking, "That guy is a homeless drunk, and we better be careful, he could be crazy too."

He didn't blame them too much. He was careful of the homeless drunks too. You'd be a fool not to be careful, not to be cautious around men who had nothing left to lose and a nasty nagging need for alcohol. Sam was a careful man, a cautious man, a man who looked out for himself and no one else.

So it was a surprise to Sam that he was walking into the church looking for Father Peter, wanting to help a man he had only met a few days ago.

“Sam! Good to see you –“ The smiling priest stopped with his hand outstretched. His hand dropped and he scowled, looking at Sam from head to foot. “What’s wrong? You look terrible.”

“They bashed in his face, father. This security guard kicked him in the back, and his face was all bloody. They took him to jail.” Sam started to shake. “They’re gonna kill him, father. They’re gonna kill him like they killed the others.”

“Is he in jail? Did they take him to jail?”

“I think so. They put him in the back of a police car. But he was all bloody and his face was smashed in.”

The priest motioned to Sam to follow him, and the two men walked quickly back into the rooms behind the Mission. A door led into an office that was new sometime before the birth of rock ‘n’ roll. The carpet was bare in spots, and bubbled up in others. The desk was made of a laminate peaking through chips and gouges on every surface. Father Peter picked up a rumpled black book and thumbed through it for a minute or so before dialing long-distance.

“Don’t worry, Sam. There is someone who can help.” The priest started talking. “I need to speak with someone concerning Francis Smith. Yes. Santa Teadora, California. Yes.” The priest put his hand over the ancient telephone, a desk model that still had a rotary dial. “This is someone who knows Frank and can help him.”

After a few minutes, Sam was starting to pace the small space and clench his fists, and the priest kept telling him to stay calm, which only made it worse. Finally, the priest started talking again. “Apparently, he was injured this morning by a security guard, and arrested by the



police. I don't know much more than that. Wait – I'll ask." He looked up. "Sam, where was he arrested?"

"At the grocery store on the Strand, near the beach. Two cops were there, and the security guard." Sam started to chew on a piece of skin on the side of his thumb.

"OK. Yes. OK. Can you have them call me when they get him out? Thanks – do you want the number? Caller ID? Really. Well, then, we'll wait to hear. Thank you. God bless you."

He turned to Sam, who was still pacing and nibbling on this fingers. "They're sending someone. They should have word back to us by the end of the day." The priest let out a big sigh. "Do you want some breakfast?"

"No, I gotta go to work. But I'll come back after work, ok?" Sam spoke tentatively, but the priest jumped in.

"You should come back as soon as you're done with work, Sam. I have some time this afternoon. We can work on Frank's idea for the work program – you know, what we talked about. I always think it's easier to wait when I'm busy doing something – don't you?" The priest smiled at Sam, but the crease between his eyes was deep.

"What are you talking about, Father? That's nothing to do with me."

"How long have you known Frank, Sam?"

"Only a few days."

"He's – uh, quite resourceful. And he said you would be the perfect person to set all this up. Organize things. Put the project together."

"Me?"

The priest smiled again, this time happily. "Yes, you. Frank didn't talk to you about it?"

“No, he didn’t.”

“He will. As soon as we can get him back here.” Sam turned to leave, but the priest added, to comfort him: “And that man I just called – he’ll make sure everything’s OK. I promise.”

Sam nodded, but couldn’t speak. He was exhausted. He waved at the priest as he walked out to the street and turned uptown towards his restaurant job. As he walked, he started thinking about the proposal for the work program. He had been on the streets for three years now, almost four. He had no responsibility, no issues with money. He didn’t need a job.

It was a bright morning, and the sun glinted off the shop windows as he walked by. There were people inside most of the places now, setting up for the day ahead. He had been saying for years now that he didn’t want that kind of life, but he was intrigued at the idea of setting up the work program at the Mission. There was plenty to do and he thought he would be good at it, just like Frank said. The way Frank explained it, it was just a matter of organization. Getting clothing donations for men who needed clean work clothes, clothes for interviews. A place to wash things too, thought Sam – maybe even get someone to donate an older washer and dryer. Clean was important. A place to get clean and get a shave. Donations of shavers, soap, shampoo. Coordinating time in the showers. Giving them a place to check for messages from potential employers. Maybe get someone to donate time answering the phone. Maybe that person could make resumes for the men. Help them fill out job applications. They would need a separate phone line from the Mission, but with all the calls local, that should be cheap. Maybe the guys could donate some of their recycling proceeds to keep the phone on.

The more Sam walked, the more he was sure he could do this, working out of the big house behind the Mission that used to be a convent. Sam shook his head. When he was growing

up, he knew lots of nuns, but he never saw any nuns now. Maybe it was the life, tucked away in the big house, no sex, no freedom. But they taught the kids in that school, or they used to. It was a mystery. Maybe it was the sex. Sam laughed out loud, startling a woman walking by. He hadn't had sex since his lady left four or five years ago. He was as good as a nun now.

With that thought, he walked up to the back door of the restaurant. Maybe he could keep working here too, he thought. He liked the owner, the owner liked him. And the food was terrific.

Across town, Alexis was also thinking about sex. She was as good as gold for the first four hours of the day. She wrote two solid chapters on role playing, safe words, and fantasy in sex, a place she was very comfortable. She figured her readers would want at least some help in that area, after *Time In A Locked Room*. She pushed down Liz' criticism of her when it bobbed to the surface of her memory. She wasn't trying to make all women "receptacles." She was just trying to make good sex easier. Maybe re-establishing old roles would help. But a little role playing – that was easy and fun, and the writing went quickly.

Feeling pretty good about her morning, she grabbed a Coke and sat in the sun, watching the Labrador follow Maddy around the backyard. Cricket was in her lap, curled up and dreaming little dog dreams when the doorbell rang. Yapping loudly, Cricket shot up and ran to the front door. Alexis followed much more slowly, scooping up Cricket and opening the door.

"Jesse ! I am so glad you're here! I was hoping to talk to you today."

"Hey, Miz Trotter! I actually have something for you." Jesse handed over a package and the electronic signature pad. They both backed into the entryway, and headed for the kitchen.

"It's time for lunch . . . Can I fix you something?"

"Yeah, that'd be nice. A goat sandwich?"

“Oh no, not you too! I am having a heckuva time protecting that damned goat!”

“Where is she anyway?”

“Outside. With the dog. I have some turkey – wanna turkey sandwich?”

As he was heading for the back door, Jesse said over his shoulder, “That’ll be great!”

Alexis wrangled up what she hoped was a good turkey sandwich, considering that her lettuce was wilted. She found some bread, toasted it, and added a tomato and some mustard. She really needed to get to the store more often. Grabbing another Coke, she threw everything onto a tray and went to join Jesse in the backyard.

He was sitting on the grass, the Lab on one side, and the goat on the other. They both had their heads in his lap. He looked up smiling the prettiest smile she had ever seen. *If I ever had a kid*, she thought, *I would want him to be just like Jesse*. She smiled back, saying “Lunch is served. No goat on the menu, though.”

Jesse scrambled to his feet, and brushed the grass off his shorts. “Looks good.”

“Well? What’s the word from Paul? Is it time for me to start rigging the raffle?”

Jess spoke through a mouthful of sandwich. “Yes, he’s excited. We checked the fence last night, and it needs a little work, but it should be fine. Paul told me I’m crazy for wanting a goat, but he says that if I think it’s a good idea, it probably is.”

“That’s a nice thing to say. Goat aside, how are you two getting along?”

“Oh, great. We just hadn’t been talking. We figured out that sometime – we don’t know when – we just stopped talking to each other. We would kinda ramble on about what was on TV, or what we wanted for dinner, but we stopped talking about anything that mattered.” Jesse gave a crust of bread to Maddy. “He was talking to his friends at work about things, but I never heard it. We spend every night talking now.”

“What about?”

“We made a rule – we have to have dinner together. And at dinner, we talk about us.”

Jesse grinned. “Why the heck that makes a difference in bed, I don’t know. But it does.”

Alexis’ mind was racing, trying to find a way to wrap that into Good Sex. Her face must have shown that she was drifting, because the next thing she heard was, “Miz Trotter – Alex – are you OK? You look . . . weird.”

“Oh! No! Uh, I’m fine. Just thinking about something else. Sorry.”

Alexis fed the last of her sandwich to the dogs. “So we need to rig the raffle.”

“Will that be hard?”

“I don’t think so. I certainly couldn’t do it, but Liz and Jay will know what to do.”

“Liz and Jay?”

“Oh, that’s right. You haven’t met them. Liz is my best friend, and she’s the one who brought over the goat for safekeeping. Jay is someone she works with at the Public Defender’s Office. It was their idea to do a goat raffle, with goat insurance, to raise money.”

“For what?”

“For the homeless shelter.”

“Oh. That’s a good project. Do they need help?”

“I don’t know. I’ll ask. But first things first – we get Maddy a home.”

Jesse scratched the goat’s head. “She has a home with me. Just figure out how to make that happen, and we’ll take real good care of her.”

A few miles away, Michael Traynor was just leaving one of his buildings downtown. He adjusted the “Commercial Lease” sign on the building and rubbed his arm across the front of it,

just to get the dust off. He heard the creak of leather and turned to see Olmeda and Travis walking towards him.

“Hey, Mr. Traynor! Any more break-ins?”

Michael didn't want to deal with these two right now. “No, thanks for asking.”

Olmeda held up his hand, asking Michael to stay for a moment. “Hey, we arrested a homeless guy this morning, just attacked a security guard. If you have security, warn them for us, would you?”

“We couldn't get much out of him – the security guard hit him pretty hard. But we think this is going to happen more and more, with each body we find.”

Michael frowned. “More and more? What do you mean?”

“Homeless are starting to get violent, claiming the police are the killers.”

“Really?” Michael drew the word out, long and low. “What makes them think that?”

Olmeda shook his head. “Don't know, but that's the gossip in the homeless camps. And we think they might be right, but we're wondering if it might just be a guy in a uniform, y'know – like a security guard, or something like that.”

Michael nodded his head, agreeably. “That might be true. To a homeless guy, wouldn't a police uniform look a lot like a security guard? I would think so –“

Olmeda smiled, “That's what we thought.”

Travis piped in. “The guy we arrested today – you won't believe this – he had his own personal shopping cart!”

“What? How do you know that?”

“His name was on a metal plate on the bottom of the cart, and he had a receipt for it.”

Travis was grinning. “Ain't that a hoot?”

Michael smiled at Travis. “Yeah, that’s something new. Where was that?”

Olmeda gave him the details, and Michael seemed interested. “Well, thanks you two. You’ve been real helpful. Keep an eye on my place, will you? See you later.” He turned and walked away.

“Nice guy,” said Travis. Olmeda pointed towards a badly-parked car and the two officers continued their patrol.





## Chapter Twenty

### Liz In Jail - Part Two

Liz was feeling a little odd as she traveled down the corridor from her courthouse office toward the jail. She was very curious about the man she saw in the corridor the day before, but a big part of her was laughing at the absurdity of thinking that the bloodied man was Jesus, or even holy. Another part of her, the smaller younger her, the one who believed so strongly in God, was hoping to find the holy man today and thank him for smiling at her.

There was no other explanation for buying a cookie for Tanner. Tanner was an asshole. He had always been an asshole, even before she made cracks about his steroid use. He had roughed up inmates, made things difficult when they didn't have to be. And she was thinking of other times, other run-ins with Tanner, when she rounded the corner and saw him guarding the entrance to the jail.

“Good morning, Deputy.” The words came out cocky and Liz realized that she was playing a role, the role of that person who had never bought a cookie for Tanner and never seen the holy man in the corridor. So she tried to smile, and mean it.

“Good morning, Liz.”

Liz piled her stuff onto the metal detector's conveyor belt and stepped through the arch. Once through, she said “How was the cookie?”

Tanner growled. “I didn't eat it.”

*So much for trying to be nice, Liz thought.*

“I saved it for my kid. She loves cookies. And I put on weight too easy.”

Liz blinked a couple times before words came to her. “And did she like it?”

“Oh yeah, it was gone in a flash.”

“How old is she?”

“Only six. But she’s a beauty. Tall and dreamy like her mother.”

Liz was trying to wrap her brain around Tanner having a “dreamy” wife, and an adorable child who loved cookies. She searched for words that didn’t come. So she just smiled at him, said “see ya later,” and started down the corridor towards the cells. He called her back.

“Liz, wait.”

She turned.

“There’s a guy down there who – uh. There’s a guy down there, just got out of medical. He’ll need you. He’s – um. Different. Anyway, keep an eye out for him.”

“Do I need to worry about him?” Liz said this even while she knew he was talking about the man she saw yesterday.

“Not that way. He’s not violent. Well, you’ll see. Name is Smith. Frank Smith.”

A few of the inmates called out to her as she passed. “G’morning, Miz Jackson!”

“Gonna get me out of here today, Miz Jackson?” “Hey, beautiful! How’s my lawyer today?”

Liz said hello as she passed, or stopped to check on things and ask a couple questions. Two of the men, sharing a cell, were set for court today, and she talked to them for a few minutes about procedure and what to expect. She finally reached the end of the corridor to sign in and request a conference room. That’s when she saw him.

He was in the last cell, and his face was pretty swollen, at least the parts she could see. Bandages covered his nose and one eye. A part of his scalp had been shaved over one ear, and

bandages were over that too, she assumed over stitches. She smiled hesitantly, a little angry but not wanting to show it.

“What happened to you?”

“A security guard at the grocery store. Lost his temper.”

She clenched her teeth, trying to keep her voice down. “We could bring charges.”

He smiled, but the bandages prevented the smile from reaching his eyes as it did yesterday. “They already brought charges. Against me.” He paused. “I bet you’re my lawyer.”

“Liz Jackson, Public Defender’s Office. I don’t have a file on you. But I bet you’re Frank Smith.”

“Yes, I am. Did Deputy Tanner tell you to take care of me? He’s a nice man.”

Liz giggled. “No, he’s not. But apparently things are changing.” She shook her head and smiled at him, for real this time. “What did you do to him?”

“Nothing, really. Just talked with him. He’s got a good heart.”

“And you’re the only one who’s ever found it. Well, you and his dreamy wife.” Frank looked at her, a little confusion on his face. “Don’t worry about it. I don’t understand it myself. What’d they charge you with?”

The two discussed the charges, assault, trespass, and possession of stolen property. Frank explained about the cart with his name on it, and Liz promised to find it for him.

“How did you get a shopping cart with your name on it?”

“A friend bought it for me. Said it might keep me out of trouble.”

“But it didn’t, did it.” Liz felt the voice before she looked up, an elegant rumbling that demanded attention. Then she and Frank looked up at the speaker, a tall lanky man dressed in a

beautiful suit. Liz didn't know that much about men's suits, but she guessed this one cost more than she made in a week. The speaker rumbled again. "I warned you about this, Francis."

"James Joseph McDonnell. It's been a long time. The last time I saw you was in Philadelphia. What are you doing here?" Frank tried to smile, and then winced, raising his hand to the bandage over his eye.

"Francis. I swear you are going to kill me. My office got a call from the priest at the Santa Teadora Mission. My office then called me. It is your lucky day. I was already scheduled to be in Los Angeles for a meeting. I came here as soon as I could."

Liz could hear in his voice something that was foreign to her. It was almost British, prim, perfect, elegant. This was a man who never used contractions or slang. She suspected that he would never use a swear word.

"I am flattered, James. And it so good to see you again."

"And I you, Francis." McDonnell beamed the bright smile that Frank couldn't, because of his injuries. He turned to Liz: "Ms. Jackson, you can consider yourself off this case. I will be handling it for Mr. Mellon-Smith. Do we need to sign any paperwork, any substitutions?"

Liz was a little stunned. The Mission called this man's office? Why? How? She tried to answer, and the words came out mixed up and stuttered. "No, I don't, the—" she paused. "The case hasn't officially been assigned to me. It would be, if I wanted it . . ." She trailed off.

Frank interrupted. "Ms. Jackson, I appreciate your help. But Mr. McDonnell is an old friend, and he's gotten me out of scrapes in the past. I hope to see you again." Frank gave a little laugh. "Just not here."

Liz spent the rest of the day wondering about James Joseph McDonnell. After court, she looked him up online. He was a named partner in the firm of January, McDonnell and Frye, with

offices in every major city in the world. Los Angeles was a “small” office, with only 400 lawyers. The Philadelphia office, which was apparently his home office, had been opened in 1867. This McDonnell was apparently the last in a line of many McDonnells, the scion of very old money in Philadelphia. That alone said a lot about the man. Why he was in her jail today – well that was another story. She couldn’t wait to tell Alexis.

## Chapter Twenty-One

### Dinner With Dick

Later that afternoon, the phone rang at Alexis' house.

"Alexis, it is Dick. Time for dinner tonight?"

"Hello . . . This is unexpected. I don't think I can get to L.A. at this hour – rush hour has already begun. I wouldn't get there 'til – I don't know – 'til forever."

"Well, actually, I'm in Santa Teadora. There was a big meeting planned today in Los Angeles, and in an odd twist, it has been moved to Santa Teadora. We're supposed to meet at eight in the morning, so I'm spending the night. Is there any food in this town worth eating?"

"Hmmm." Alexis pondered the question. "There is nothing similar to what you're used to. Nothing five star, Michelin guide –"

"Alexis. Michelin only gives three stars. Three is its highest rating."

"Well, then, think of it as a Goodyear five star rating."

"Do I really want to eat at a Goodyear-rated restaurant?"

"Where are you?"

"Oh, change the subject. I see. There really is nothing to eat in this town."

"No, I want to pick you up. And wear jeans. Do you own jeans?"

"I do, but I don't have them with me. Do I need to buy some?"

"No, just look more casual than usual. We're going to a dive. Mexican food. But really good Mexican food."

“Goodyear-rated Mexican food – is that what I’m hearing?”

“Yes. Goodyear-rated Mexican food, the best in Santa Teadora.”

“I am worried. I will look casual as I can. And you can pick me up at 6:00 at the Marriot.”

“OK. It’s a date.”

“Alexis. Aren’t you going to ask which Marriott?”

Alexis laughed out loud, a ringing sound that made Dick smile. “No, silly, there is only one Marriott in Santa Teadora. Only one. I think I can find it.”

The two could not have asked for a more beautiful evening. At 6:00 it was still light, about 72 degrees, with a light breeze coming off the ocean.

“Is it always like this here?” Dick did not look casual, but perhaps he had managed to look a little less like a high-powered lawyer.

“Well, kind of. It is beautiful here most of the time. The problem is the June Gloom. It lasts until September.”

As Dick climbed in the car, he asked “June Gloom?”

Alexis explained that June Gloom was a local phenomenon. The fog rolled in off the ocean in the morning, starting in May or June. It didn’t burn off until late in the day, which was great when it was hot and smoggy in Los Angeles. “But if you love the sun, you sleep in.”

Alexis frowned. “So it’s great if you’re homeless.”

“You planning on making that as a career move?”

“No, but a friend of mine has me thinking about it a lot. There’s a group of local lawyers trying to raise money for the local shelter.”

“Oh, yes. I don’t do much of that kind of law.”

“I would imagine they would have trouble with your hourly rate.”

“We just raised it actually.”

“I’m afraid to ask. Wasn’t it \$575 an hour?”

Dick chortled. “That was last year. It was \$625. Now it’s \$700.”

“An hour? I am so in the wrong business.”

“I don’t know. You do awfully well for a travel writer.”

Alexis stopped at a red light, and looked at him. “You don’t know, do you?”

“Know what? Have you been keeping secrets from me?”

The light turned green and the two drove the last two blocks to the restaurant in silence.

Alexis knew he was dying to ask, but they both stayed quiet. She realized that she enjoyed having the power in the relationship – even for two blocks.

They parked behind the restaurant, and Dick began making derogatory comments about the neighborhood, the parking lot, the cars in the parking lot, and he was starting in on the building itself when Alexis cut in.

“Oh shush. This is a great place. It’s a Goodyear-rated restaurant, remember?”

The owner saw them come in, and he recognized Alexis right away. They were seated in a big red booth, the fake leather patched in places with tape. As soon as the owner walked away, promising to bring chips and salsa, Dick looked at her in a way that stopped her cold.

“What?” She tried to sound innocent.

“After all the places I have brought you to eat – you bring me here? I’m hurt.”

Alex giggled like a kid. “You’re lying. Besides, wait until you taste the food. Then you can be hurt.”

“Then I can have food poisoning.” He was wiping down his fork when he said this.



“You are so snooty. Just because the decor is a little worn – “

”There are holes in it.”

“No there aren’t.”

“OK. The holes are patched.”

“Exactly. This is a class establishment – that is very expensive duct tape you are sitting on.”

The chips and salsa arrived. Drink orders were taken and the little pause was all Dick needed to get back on track.

“So? What don’t I know?”

“Oh. I thought you’d forgotten that. Salsa?” Alexis held out the bowl.

Dick took it, seamlessly asking, “How long have you known me? Do I forget things? And I hate secrets. What aren’t you telling me?”

Alexis shrugged. She was enjoying this. She had never been enigmatic before. And since it was only going to last about another five minutes, she was trying to stretch it out.

“Oh, I like this. I like you not knowing something about me. You always know everything.”

“Let’s see. This started because I said you do well for a travel writer. That means you aren’t just a travel writer. I think you must write something you don’t want people to know – and I suspect it isn’t industrial manuals.” The look on her face must have said too much. “Or perhaps you have a secret profession.” He looked at her through half-closed eyes. “What do you do besides write?”

“I write. I just write other things.”

“You write porn, don’t you?”

It was Alex' time to be upset. "That's not fair." She heard the petulance in her voice. She sounded about nine years old, but it was too late to take it back.

"What is 'not fair' is that you brought me to a dive for dinner, after all I have done for you. How is the carne asada?" He was very smug.

"I don't know, I don't eat pork. How did you figure that out so quickly?"

"Carne asada isn't pork, it's beef. I am paid to figure things out."

"Yes, \$700 an hour. But that's a big leap."

"I think I'll have the chicken." He looked up at Alex. "Or is that made of pork too?"

*So much for having the advantage*, she thought. "Actually, the chicken is made out of pigeons. But, yes, it's good."

"You are pouting." It was a statement, not a question. He looked down at the menu again. "Are the potatoes made Mexican style? Or are they glorified French fries?"

"No, they're cooked in the traditional style. Maybe you are worth \$700 an hour."

He looked up from the menu again and looked in her eyes, a smile hiding behind those dark blue eyes. "Baby, you have no idea."

Alexis liked being called "baby" by him, and she even liked his arrogance. For just a moment, she realized she found this side of him very attractive. Then she remembered the half-naked bunny photo in his wallet, and shoved the thought down for review later. Much later. Like in a few years.

The owner came back to the table to take their order, and Dick was his usual charming self, asking lots of questions about the menu, and finding out more about the owner in five minutes than she had found out in the five or six years she had been coming to the restaurant.

The mood had shifted back to a happy place, and Alexis couldn't remember why she had been so peeved.

“So why did your meeting get moved to Santa Teadora? Isn't that unusual?”

“Very. But the most important person called today and said it had to be moved to Santa Teadora. And when that man says ‘Go to Santa Teadora,’ I go to Santa Teadora.”

“Wow. Who is he?”

“His name is James Joseph McDonnell, the latest McDonnell in a long line of Philadelphia lawyers. A very powerful man. Connections around the world, but we like him for his connections in Washington.”

“One of those lawyers. I have read about those.” Alexis was half-joking, and he picked up on it.

“Yes, Miss Porn Writer. He is an important man. Probably one of the best-connected men in the United States. Pulls strings behind the scenes. You will never read about him.”

“So why are you meeting with him?”

“That's confidential. But I will tell you if you tell me what porn you've written.”

Alex shrugged. “Only one. One big one at least. *Time in A Locked Room.*”

“I have heard of that. It had a good buzz for awhile. Until *Shades of Grey* came along.”

“I know. I would like to take credit for laying the groundwork for that book's success.”

“It would be nice if you had a piece of that. Maybe the movie rights.”

“I half-expect merchandising from that one.”

“Hmmm. That would be tacky.” He paused, chewing his tortilla chip. “You're probably right. Next hot item for Christmas.”

“Oh, ick.”

“‘Oh, ick’ she says. You wrote *Time in A Locked Room*. You have no right to say ‘ick.’”

“Sorry. It was the merchandising idea. Next in your Happy Meal – handcuffs.”

“No, they’re making Happy Meals much more healthful. I think handcuffs would be out.”

The food came, and Dick was suitably impressed. Alexis teased him about his lack of casual clothing, and he promised to come dressed poorly the next time they met.

“Just borrow clothing from the first homeless guy you meet on your way to meet me. That should do it.”

“Homeless again . . . what a strange thing to be thinking about while you’re at dinner with me.”

“Well, there’s a reason for that. Here’s a mystery for you, oh ‘I know everything’ person. There have been four homeless murdered in Santa Teadora in the past six weeks.”

“No suspects?”

“No. But all four bodies were found in the ocean. The police told my lawyer friend that the men could have been dumped anywhere, and washed out to the ocean. But that’s silly.”

“Of course it is. No rain.”

“Exactly. No rain. Can’t wash a body down a dry gulch. Rumor is that the police are doing it.” Alex took a sip of her margarita. “And there’s a rumor flying around that a rich man is here in town, masquerading as a homeless guy, and that the killer is trying to figure out who it is, so that he can rob the rich guy.”

“That is possible – not the police angle, the rich man angle.”

“It is?” Alex was genuinely surprised. “I thought that was a ridiculous angle. An urban myth, at best.”

“I don’t think urban myths get started without a bit of truth to start it off. Alligators in the New York sewer system started because years ago, decades actually, people could buy baby alligators and they gave them to their kids as pets. Stupid idea, but it happened. There are dozens of stories like that, and each one starts because of a fact, a simple fact, that gets blown out of proportion.”

“So you think there might be a rich man who is masquerading as a homeless guy?”

“That could be it. It would make more sense if there were a man who wanted to help the homeless, and he started giving away money. It wouldn’t matter where it happened, because a rumor like that would spread quickly, city to city, within months. And the men who hear it would want to believe it was a true story. So they would pass it on to the next man, to the next city.”

“I’m being told the homeless are saying the police are in on it, doing the killing themselves. What do you think – are the police part of this?”

“That’s doubtful. The police wouldn’t believe a rumor like that. They would assume it was false. But there are a lot of people who would hope the story is true. Those people – the ones who hope to find a treasure – those are the ones who are dangerous. The person who murdered these men is a treasure hunter. Someone who is willing to put in the time to find a needle in a haystack – a rich man in a homeless camp.”

“Well, I think it’s someone with a boat. Because the bodies were all found in the ocean. I think they should be looking at the fishing boats. There are dozens of them in the area, and they come and go at all hours – middle of the night, early morning. Times when no one else is up.”

“Possible.” The waiter came up and asked about dessert, which was easy: flan or vanilla ice cream. They chose the creamier of the two. “So this local lawyer who’s a friend of yours, should I be jealous of him?”

“First of all, he’s a she. Liz. And she is working on a goat raffle.”

“This should be good. You’re full of surprises tonight. Tell me about the goat raffle.”

And it started spilling out. The goat raffle. She even told Dick about Jesus in the jail, and how Liz reacted. By the time she was finished, the food was gone, and all that was left was the caramel sauce from the flan.

“I don’t think I have ever talked that much during one of our dinners. I’m sorry, it’s just been a really crazy couple of weeks.”

“There’s more?”

“Well, there’s Jesse the Fed Ex guy. He was one of my fantasies, and he’s gay. And he’s going to adopt the goat. And how do I put Jesse into my new book? Somehow, I helped him figure out how to his sex life back on track, but all we did was talk. I can’t turn that into a self-help book.”

Looking satisfied, Dick shook his head and smiled. “You are quite the surprise tonight. Jesse the Fed Ex guy is your fantasy and there’s a new book, a self-help book and it appears to be about sex. This, you haven’t even mentioned. This is going to require breakfast. Come back to the hotel with me, and we’ll keep talking.”

A familiar feeling came over Alexis. It started in her chest and rose up into her throat. It took a moment, but she recognized it quickly enough – panic. *I can’t do that. He’s married. This is a terrible idea.* And then the guy on the other shoulder started talking: *But I really want to.* Alexis shook her head, and sighed a deep, long sigh.

“I can’t. I want to, but I can’t.”

“Why not? We’ve had such a good time tonight, despite the restaurant.” She started to protest, but saw he was just teasing her. “And we have so much more to talk about. The new book, for one.”

“Why not – because you have a half-naked bunny in your wallet.” Alexis could feel her face starting to burn. That had come out all wrong.

Dick literally waved it off. “That doesn’t matter. Let’s go.” And he started to get up from the table. Alexis was so well-trained that she simply followed him out of the restaurant, nervous enough that she just kept talking about the last subject she was comfortable with.

“So how do we find a rich homeless guy?”

“Simple enough. Arrest everyone. The only one to post bail is the rich guy.” Dick smiled. “Simple.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Of course it is. I know everything, remember?”

Alex smiled, and pointed the car back towards Dick’s hotel. “OK, Mr. I Know Everything, how do we justify arresting every homeless guy in the city?”

“Well, if I were involved, I would start raids on the local homeless camps. Those camps are all illegal. Just arrest everyone in them.”

Alex frowned. “They’re doing that now. There have been two or three raids in the past few weeks.” She slowed, to turn onto another street. “So it must be the police.”

“Not necessarily. It could be someone manipulating the situation. Maybe someone high up in the local Chamber of Commerce, saying that the camps are bad for business. But it could be the police.”

“OK, that’s not fair. You’re supposed to be narrowing my choices of suspects, not expanding them!”

The two drove in silence for a few minutes. Alex was absorbed in Dick’s offer to come up to his room, the homeless killings and the police forgotten. They pulled into the parking lot at the Marriot. As she parked the car, Dick asked, “How does Jesus fit into all this?”

Alexis was stunned for just a moment, then earnestly told Dick: “Jesus would not think it is a good idea for the two of us to go into your hotel room. And I don’t think it’s a good idea, either.”

Dick chuckled. “I am was actually talking about the man in the jail, but we can put him aside for the moment.”

“Oh.” She was blushing again.

Dick opened the door to her car and put one foot on the ground. Leaning back in, he said softly, “I knew you wouldn’t come up. But you will. Soon, I think.” And he kissed her again, this time on the lips. It was slow and sweet and she lost track of time and space until his lips were gone and he was saying good night, and closing the door and walking away. But she couldn’t move. This kiss was better than the last one. After she could think again, she thought about going inside to find him, but her better self started the car and she drove home.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

### Breakfast With Liz Instead of Dick

Alexis tossed and turned all night, waking up groggy and grumpy. She wasn't up when the doorbell rang and the pounding began. That sent dogs frantically running and barking to the door, and there is nothing quite so annoying on no sleep than the frantic yapping of a hysterical Chihuahua.

"I'm coming!" Alexis dragged her robe on, and thought it was likely Liz, and then saw the time. "Oh my."

"Good morning!" Alexis thought Liz was far too happy today. "It is a beautiful day and you look . . . awful. Are you sick?"

"No, I just didn't sleep."

"I would ask if there was some fun involved in that, but I already know the answer." Liz started making coffee. "You really have to start dating."

Slumped at the kitchen table, Alexis grumped at Liz. "How do you know what I was doing? I might have been in a sleazy hotel room, having hot sex with a married man."

"Yeah, right." Liz flashed her smile at Alex, shaking her head so that the black curls down her back bounced prettily. "That would never happen."

Alexis didn't say a word, but it definitely added to her already horrible mood. Liz started talking as soon as she turned on the coffee pot. Grabbing cups and milk, she told Alexis about the man in jail – Francis Mellon Smith – and his lawyer, James Joseph McDonnell.

“He’s apparently a really important lawyer. I read a little about him, but he is a named partner in a huge firm back east.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You know? How do you know?”

Alexis shrugged, “Oh never mind. Tell me more.”

“I don’t know if he’s out today, but I have to assume he is. Assault on a security guard should be a significant bail amount. But if I understood what I saw, Mr. James Joseph McDonnell would have had Jesus out of jail by noon.”

Groggy or not, something started to gel and Alex told Liz to stop talking for a minute. She got up from the table, poured a cup of coffee, sat back down, all with a furrowed brow and a frown. Liz waited while Alex looked at her, opened her mouth to speak. Shut her mouth again, then said: “It’s a guy with a boat. And he’s trying to find Jesus.”

Liz’s eyes opened wide and she froze. The two of them looked at each other, and then started throwing facts on the table.

“All the bodies were found in the ocean.”

“Jesus has got to be rich – otherwise why the Philadelphia lawyer?”

“How long has Jesus been in town?”

“A few weeks, I think. I’ll check.”

“We should go talk to him – can you get me into the jail?”

Liz shook her head. “That’s a tough one. But maybe. We should go over right away, though. I bet his hot-shot lawyer got him out of there toot-sweet!”

Without revealing her conversation with Dick, Alex explained that it would be a perfect way to find out which homeless guy was the rich one – arrest them all, and find out who posted bail. Liz was excited.

“We have to find him. I’ll see if Tanner knows where he went!”

In fact, McDonnell had Frank out of jail in the 30 minutes after he and Liz parted the previous day. McDonnell had his staff arrange for everything as soon as he received the call from Father Peter. Showing up was a mere formality.

That previous evening, while Alexis was feeding Dick Mexican food, McDonnell and his charge were in a \$1,200 a night hotel in San Ysidro, a few miles from Santa Teadora. After Frank had cleaned up and the two had a luscious dinner, McDonnell started asking questions. These were old questions, and well worn. The two went through the dance with which they were so familiar.

“Francis, I know you are committed to this insanity – “

”Such an apt choice of words, James. ‘Committed to insanity.’ Did you think of that before you came?” From another man, that might have sounded sarcastic, but coming from Frank’s mouth, it was a quiet joke between two old friends. McDonnell smiled.

“Have you looked in the mirror, Francis? You are getting too old to do this. Come home. You have done quite enough.”

“There’s always another city, another camp. There’s always someone who needs my help.”

“This time, it has gone too far. This is the worst beating you have ever received. Next time, I will be identifying the body.” McDonnell paused, then he whispered, “I do not want to be the one they call for that.”

“You are my cousin. You are my friend. If anyone is going to be my next of kin, that would be you. I would have it no other way.” Frank was almost crying, and McDonnell could hear it in his voice. Frank had always been so sensitive. McDonnell coughed and changed the subject.

“You are the most brilliant man I know, Francis. Why didn’t you come to work at the firm?” McDonnell could not count the number of times he had asked this question. “You could handle all the *pro bono* work, you would have whatever resources you wanted.”

“I felt called to do the Lord’s work, James. And the Lord is noticeably absent from most law firms.”

“And He is present in a homeless camp? Francis Smith, you are hopeless. I could have you committed, you know.”

“Not in California, James. Here, a crazy person must agree to being hospitalized.”

“There are a number of other states in the union, Francis. I know of at least two others where involuntary commitment is allowed. And I have lawyers in those states.”

“You checked? Of course you checked.” Frank smiled while shaking his head. “Of course you checked.”

“There’s another reason for you to stop doing this, Francis. It’s dishonest.”

“Dishonest? That is a new argument, cousin. How is it dishonest?” Frank leaned back in the soft high-backed chair and looked at his friend.

“Do the people you speak with in the homeless encampments know that you have enough money to buy each and every one of them a house? Or that you could purchase a factory and put them all to work? Have you ever thought about that?”

“Yes, of course I have. But Jesus said the poor will always be with us. I am trying to create a system, structure, that makes it easier for those men, and one that will help the strong ones to start a new life.”

“And you do this by posing as one of them?”

Francis frowned, something he was clearly not used to doing. “I am trying to understand what they are going through. That’s all.” He looked at McDonnell. “That’s not ‘posing,’ is it, James?”

“I think that it is, Francis. You have been doing this for more than ten years. Certainly, you already understand what they are going through. You could be more effective by taking what you have learned over the past decade and starting a foundation with the millions of dollars in your trust. You need to think about that, Francis. Ask yourself: am I doing more good by walking from town to town with a shopping cart, or can I create a greater good by following a more conservative path?”

Francis looked at the glass in his hands, and his eyes searched the well-appointed room. “Have you known where I was these past few months?”

“I was keeping tabs on you until San Diego. Then I lost you.”

“How did you know I was in San Diego?”

“There was a newspaper article about a homeless program connected to the San Diego Mission. Food. Clothing. Showers. A phone bank. It had your stamp on it.”

“Totally self-funding too. I didn’t have to spend much at all to get that in place. People will be generous if you let them, James. People are good. They just need to know how.”

“And they could achieve the same thing through a foundation, with you at its head.”

McDonnell was a very good lawyer. And very good lawyers know when to stop talking. He

would let his words sink in for awhile. “Why are you in Santa Teadora? Are you planning to do what you did in San Diego?”

Frank immediately brightened. “Yes. I already found someone to run the program. The local Mission is fully involved.” Frank almost whispered, conspiratorially. “We’ll be using the old convent. It’s empty.”

McDonnell snorted. “Good riddance. I hated those nuns.”

“You’re a liar, James. Tell me that you didn’t love Sister Anita Marie.”

“Oh, she was a sweet woman.” The two were drifting into a world fifty years gone. “She was a sweetheart.”

“And what about that old woman, the Wall?”

“Sister Frances Marie. Sister Frances the Wall. She scared me. I can’t imagine how many children she terrified in her career!”

The two settled in with good brandy and decades of memories to relive, and some news of the now as well. James Joseph McDonnell watched Francis carefully. A few more well-placed words, and his cousin might be persuaded to come home.

Both this conversation and the brandy were far out of the reach of Liz and Alexis, although neither woman would have been surprised at anything that concerned Francis Mellon Smith.

It was now Friday morning, and there was only one more day until the auction. Maddy had a home, if the auction could be rigged. Alexis had a mister, if she wanted to be a mistress. But at this point, nothing was certain. Alex and Liz had millions of questions to ask about the murders, but they needed some time. They had to find Jesus, the rich homeless man, and ask

some questions. But first, the auction – after that, Monday morning, they promised each other to work on solving the homeless murders.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### Friday Night At The Harbor

After their breakthrough on the homeless murders, Liz left for work but Alexis went back to bed. She woke up at noon, feeling better. Liz had made it very clear that she, Jay and the others would be at the hotel down at the Harbor at 6:00, for a pre-auction meeting and that Alex better be there. Maddy's participation was optional. They thought it might be good to get Maddy used to being at the hotel, but no one was sure if the hotel thought it would be a good idea. Besides, Liz said they could tell the others about their theories on the murders.

Alexis tried to get motivated, but it was like swimming in jello. If she was really moving, she couldn't tell. Last night's kiss was still burning in her brain, and the goat was definitely second on that list. The murders, so exciting at 6:30 in the morning, had fallen to the bottom of the list. *Maybe I'm coming down with something*, she thought.

Jeanine called to see how things were going. Jesse came by with a package, and assurances that the fence was in good shape and that everything was ready for Maddy. The dogs went running, and Alexis tagged along out of habit. At some point, she figured it was getting late, so she took a shower, got in the car and drove to the hotel. As an after-thought, she put Maddy in the backseat, thinking that a bit of familiarity with the hotel was a good idea. She had to concentrate on driving; what once was automatic was – like everything else today – an interference with her preoccupations.



It wasn't as if she was thinking about Dick, or the kiss. She wasn't thinking about Michael and how disappointed she was in him. She wasn't thinking about Jesse either, but now and then his smile would flash for a moment, lighting up her dark mood. She wasn't really thinking about anything, but the men in her life bobbed to the surface of the still water of her thoughts. She would see them, remember her emotions, then both the memories and her emotions would sink below the surface again. She didn't want to deal with this today, so she didn't. But she was useless for any other work, and she knew it. Thankfully, all she had to do tonight was bring Maddy and act supportive. Piece of cake. Afterwards, sleep, lots of sleep, 12 hours of sleep, then tomorrow would be fine. "It will be," said Alex out loud. "I will be too."

Around six, she got into the car with Maddy in the back seat, and headed down to the Harbor. She and the goat were on time, and they pulled up to the hotel, a grand old lady near the waterfront. Time after time, threats had been made to tear her down, but Santa Teadora's dedicated historians, often derided as "the little old ladies," would make a huge fuss and call every City Councilmember, every judge, every police administrator, every one who ever had any clout in the city of Santa Teadora. And each time, the Hotel Leonardo survived. Money was put into renovations, always keeping the old hotel's bones clean and visible. Finally, the hotel was granted historic status, and it was safe for now.

Carefully, tentatively, as if they were sneaking into movie theater without paying, Alexis and Maddy slipped in a side door and headed towards the ballroom. She tried to stay off the polished tiles and kept to area rugs and carpeting; the carpeting muffled the click-clack of Maddy's hooves. Alexis could hear laughter and shouting ahead of her, and followed it to find Liz and the others setting up a check-in table, and preparing the cables, cords and camera that

would enable the guests to have their picture with Maddy: on cards, calendars and even coffee cups.

“This is great . . . Liz, I want a coffee cup.”

“Only \$9.95. We can even make you a calendar for the next 12 months, you and a different picture of Maddy every month.” Liz started to show her but was called away to the other side of the ballroom. Britney explained the rest.

“This should make money. It’s adorable.”

“Yes-But,” said Britney with a sigh. “Most of the people coming aren’t into ‘adorable.’ We are hoping the silliness factor will entice them. They’re more into silly than adorable.”

“Are you getting the whole Public Defender’s office?”

“A lot of them. Some DA’s. A couple of judges, I think.” Britney turned and shouted over Alexis’ head. “Hey! Liz! Is the real Maddy coming?”

Liz yelled back, “She said she would. Better yet, she bought a ticket.”

“What do you want me to do?” Alexis was directed here and there for the next couple of hours, with Maddy being coo’ed over by everyone. By nine p.m., they tracked out of the hotel and down to Harbor for a drink and some food, with Maddy of course. With all the excitement over the auction, neither Liz nor Alexis told their friends about their new theory, that the killer owned a boat, and that Frank Smith might be the basis for the urban myth.

As they were leaving, Alex saw Rastaman, and excused herself to go talk with him.

Liz whispered: “Be brave, Alex! Ask the question!”

Alex whispered back: “I know, I know – name and phone for the Vision. I got it.”

The lawyers headed off to the parking lot, which Alex walked over to the shop, Maddy trailing behind her on a leash.

“This must be a good story, pretty lady. What is the name of your friend?”

Alex laughed and explained. They talked for a few minutes, mostly about nothing. He was just coming back from dinner, and wanted to make sure everything was locked up. She was coming from dinner too, and they discussed their meals and which place made the best margaritas. But Alex couldn't ask about the Vision. It had been too long a day, too tiring, too much.

Finally, she started to walk away, but turned and asked: “What is your real name, anyway? I keep calling you ‘Rastaman,’ and that can't be the one your parents gave you !”

Laughing, Aldous told her. Alex said good bye, and walked the rest of the way to her car, alone. On the way, she started looking at the boats. *I wonder if one of those boats carried the men out to the ocean, if one of those boats is covered in blood ?* It was a sobering thought and the gaiety of the evening drained away. Closest to the parking lot were the fishing boats. She craned her neck, trying to see if any lights were on those boats, any movement. But she didn't stop to check; she was no hero, she thought. Besides, this was a Monday project, and it was Friday night.

“Well, Maddy, time for sleep. And we deserve it.” Alexis pushed the “unlock” button on her key and nothing happened: no telltale beep, no sound at all. She unlocked the car with the key and looked at the dash. No lights. Nothing. “Aww, shit.” She had left her lights on and the car was dead. *This isn't the first time*, she thought, more than a little angry at herself for being so distracted when she arrived. Fishing around in her purse, she found no cell phone. It was undoubtedly on the kitchen table. *Can't call a taxi without a phone*. She turned to go back to Aldous' shop, but remembered: *Maddy can't go in a taxi anyway*. Alexis blew out a long, sad breath.

“Well, Maddy girl. It’s about three miles home. We run that almost every day.” She got out of the car, locked it up, and looked down at the goat whose ears were twitching back and forth. “We’ll be fine. And tomorrow will be better. Besides,” Alexis added as she arranged her purse over her shoulder and made sure Maddy’s leash was on tightly, “this might clear my head.”

It was a beautiful clear southern California night. Alexis thought she would walk along the waterfront, take a sharp left turn at the big grocery store, and then head up to the foothills where she lived. She did a quick calculation in her head, and it really was about three miles. There was no traffic to speak of at this hour, and she could hear the waves quietly splash against the chunks of rock and concrete that made up the sides of the Santa Teadora harbor. Clouds were few and wispy, the stars shining through. For the first time that day, she took a slow deep breath and felt calm. *Tomorrow will be better*, she thought. *Tomorrow I will think about that kiss.*

She heard the click-clack of Maddy’s hooves and the sound of her own feet as they made their way towards the little park that separated the harbor from the neighborhood that sat right on the beach. She could see the lights of the grocery store in the distance, where someone was pulling out onto the boulevard, probably making a late-night beer run. With no cel phone and no watch, she had no idea of the time, but guessed it was probably close to midnight now. Santa Teadora was a quiet little city; at midnight on a Friday, the houses near the beach were mostly dark. She listened for any sounds of parties or laughter or even crying babies. Nothing. Even the babies knew to be quiet in this town.

They walked a little farther, and Maddy squatted to pee on a bush. “Did you learn that from the Labrador?” Alexis thought her voice far too loud in the silence, so she only whispered

the next comment: “C’mon, girl. Time to go home.” Vaguely, she remembered some old saying about whistling past a graveyard, and for the first time, understood it completely.

The sound of the water lapping against the rocks in the harbor shifted now. She now could hear the sounds of waves on the beach behind the houses. She could hear the sound of a car, far off though, and could not see its lights. Then she heard the sound of moaning. It was mingled with another sound, words low and urgent, and a scuffling sound.

“Oh, this isn’t good. C’mon, Maddy.” Alex ran towards the sound, not knowing what she would see but hoping for a drunken brawl that was harmless, stupid but easily stopped. She ran down an embankment towards the first house of the subdivision, stopping to listen, holding her breath so she could hear better. The scuffling was right in front of her, so she ran straight forward in the dark, tripped over something and landed flat. The breath knocked out of her, she tried to stand and found her ankle hurt like crazy. Her breath came out a little raspy and too loud, so she held it and listened again.

“What are you doing? What do you want?” The voice was pleading, confused.

She could hear low mumbling in response, and didn’t know what to do. She could confront the men, but she was hurt and holding a goat. On the other hand, she could pretend she was just someone out for a walk. Maybe if they saw her walk up, the fight would end. She decided on the second course of action: act stupid. That worked more often than not.

She limped out of the shadows onto a path that ran between the houses. She saw the two men and a shopping cart, full of blankets and things. One of the men, larger and stouter, was tying or hand-cuffing the smaller man on the ground.

“Are you OK?” Alexis said, hoping it sounded innocent. As the larger man looked up, the light hit his face and she gasped. “Michael? Oh my God, Michael, what are you doing?”

He turned and looked at her, shaking his head. The only lights were from the harbor a half-mile away, and a few dim porch lights. But there was no doubt who it was, and he recognized her too.

“Alexis. What a coincidence. I was just thinking about you today. In the shower. My little porn queen.” The look on his face shocked her, leering and ugly. Suddenly, breaking up a drunken brawl seemed ridiculous and foolish. She turned to run, but her ankle wouldn’t take the turn and threw her on the ground again. She hit her head too. *Wow*, she thought, *you really do see stars*. Maddy skittered away and Alexis could hear the little clickity-clack of hooves as the goat trotted off towards the houses.

Michael stayed calm. He finished hand-cuffing the man and then lifted him into the shopping cart. From one pocket, he pulled out duct tape, and covered the man’s mouth. From his other pocket, he pulled out zip ties and tied the man’s feet, only then turning to Alexis.

“Are you hurt, my little flower? You took quite a tumble.” He pulled her to her feet and she shook her head to clear it. Her ankle was throbbing and wouldn’t take any weight. Running away was out. Her head was fuzzy with falling and pain, and the shock of seeing Michael.

“You’re obviously not yourself. Why don’t you come with me to the boat, and we’ll have some fun. You would never come to the boat. Today is the day, then. Not the way I was thinking it would happen, but this will be fine.” While Michael was talking, he half-carried her to the shopping cart, where he threw her on top of the hand-cuffed man. She could feel the bound man squirming under her, and she said “sorry” to him, then realized how silly that must sound.

*I am apologizing to a man in a shopping cart, while both of us are being cart-napped.* Weirdly, she smiled, seeing the humor in this. *I am one sick puppy.* She shook her head,

thinking that she should be crying or screaming, not so deep in her own head that she couldn't protect herself. Then she realized what she was thinking, and opened her mouth to scream. The duct tape came down at that exact second. Zip ties secured her hands, then her feet. A dirty blanket was thrown over the cart and it started to move.

She struggled for a few minutes, but between the zip ties and the pain in her ankle, which was getting worse by the minute, she decided to wait it out. That, and she kept remembering she was on top of someone else, someone stuck in an even worse position in a shopping cart that was certainly never meant to carry people. She wished she were lighter, that she had not eaten all those donuts these past couple weeks, and vowed to apologize to the poor guy beneath her as soon as the duct tape was gone.

The cart rattled on for a few minutes, and Alexis took a deep breath, trying to clear her head. Where were they going? The sound of the water gave her a hint. They were definitely back in the harbor, and even though it was late, there would be people here on a Friday night. Some folks slept on their boats, others would be leaving the restaurant area. If she could get someone's attention, maybe she could get some help. She remembered that Michael's boat was on the tip of the docks, farthest from the restaurants and shops, so they would have to pass all of that before they reached his boat.

She strained to hear over the rattle of the cart. If she could hear anyone, anyone at all, then she could throw her weight, tip over the cart and someone would see. But nothing, not a sound: no footsteps, no talking, no sounds but the cart rattling over the uneven pavement.

As if he could read her thoughts, Michael started singing, a happy little tune that matched the bumping and rattling of the cart. Between the cart and his singing, she could hear nothing.

The man beneath her groaned a little and she tried to put more of her weight on her legs, which were hanging over the side.

Suddenly, Michael shouted: “Hey, Aldous! You working late, Rastaman!” This was her chance, so Alexis started rocking the cart, but Michael punched her hard through the blanket, landing the punch square in her stomach. She couldn’t move – she couldn’t breathe! – and the chance was over.

Alex heard Michael exchanging a few comments with Aldous, explaining as he was pushing the cart that he was bringing some supplies to his boat, and leaving soon for the islands. Aldous said the early-morning fishing had been excellent these past few days, and Michael exclaimed, “I know!” The two men laughed and it sounded so normal. This was the Michael she had known all these years, happy and charming. The absurdity of him throwing her into a shopping cart forced her into a confusion so profound that she didn’t move for the next few minutes as the cart rattled onto the docks and down to Michael’s boat.

The blanket was pulled off and she was pushed over the side of the boat, landing on a seat cushion. Her shopping cart companion wasn’t so lucky, landing first on her, then bouncing hard onto the deck and into a metal cleat or that’s what she thought it was. She heard the crack first, then the man started screaming through the duct tape, a horrible strangling sound.

Michael kept singing the happy tune. He wrangled the shopping cart onto the deck of the boat, and started the engine. Alexis could see him fiddling with levers and things of which she had no knowledge. While the engine was idling, Michael walked down into the cabin, and flicked on a light. She twisted around on the seat, so that she could look down into the living area. It was surprisingly spacious. In the center was a large table covered in papers. Michael was there, collecting the papers and putting them in a box. To either side of the table were what



looked like couches, and in the back, a huge bed, the blankets and covers messed up, as if someone had just climbed out of bed. Michael was making the table go away, though Alexis couldn't see what he was doing. Michael came back up on deck, and grabbed her cart-mate, pulling him down into the cabin and onto the floor, where the table had been. The man's eyes were wide and frightened. For only a moment, his eyes met Alexis' eyes, and she could feel his fear.

For her part, Alexis wasn't frightened, and the pain in her ankle and now in her arms seemed far away. *Disassociation*, she thought to herself. *I read about this*. She knew the pain was there, but couldn't feel it. She knew she should be frightened, but couldn't feel that either. She was calm, and knew that her reaction was not normal. *Why is this all so clear? A concussion?* Alexis mentally shrugged. For now, calm was fine. There was plenty of time to get hysterical.

The boat started to move out of the harbor, Michael at the helm, still humming that little song. He pulled out of the dock and into the channel before he looked down at her.

"So we're finally together, Alex. It's about time. I invited you here dozens of times, and you would never come."

Alexis mumbled at him, hoping he would figure out that her mouth was duct-taped.

"Ah yes. Do I let you talk? Good question." He maneuvered out of the last channel and headed toward the open ocean. "I don't know, Alex. In that book of yours, you didn't do any talking. That was part of it, wasn't it? Being quiet and pliant . . . submissive." The expression came across his face that Alexis once loved, that look that said he was thinking of good things to come, Christmas morning, getting laid. Tonight it was disturbing and sad, and flickering through the calm that blanketed her, she felt a little fear.

“What will we do tonight, little flower? I am – ummmm – really looking forward to it. But first, we have to get out into the ocean. I need to pay attention to that – getting us far out into the ocean. We can drop anchor somewhere quiet.” He turned the big wheel and she could feel the boat shift. “I suspect you will scream a little. I have such plans for you.” He turned and smiled at her. With that, he kept humming his song, and ignored her struggles and mumbled pleading behind the duct tape.

“First, we’ll need to deal with my guest downstairs. I only have a few questions for him. He may be the one, you know. I just need to ask him a few questions.” He started the boat’s engine, fiddled with some dials, and the boat started to back out of the slip.

“It’s usually best to talk to them about halfway to the islands. That should be fine.” He looked at her and smiled strangely. “I need to be uninterrupted.”

In the cabin below, Sam heard Michael talking and he was terrified. He knew he was going to die. He knew it was only a matter of time. He knew that this was the guy who had been killing all the homeless men. That jacket of his had a shield on it, and while his head was pounding and his vision blurry, he could see it was a badge of some kind. This guy was the one. Not a police officer, but a badge on his jacket.

Sam tried to take a breath, tried to figure out a way to get out of the boat. He had been badly beaten before that woman had shown up, and now his arm was broken for sure. The handcuffs were digging into the broken part and the pain was making his eyes water. When he moved, the pain was so bad he screamed, gurgling out his sobs behind the duct tape stuck to his face.

All he had done was go back to the grocery store, to see if Frank’s cart was still there. He had skulked through the parking lot, looking at the bottom of every cart for the little plate with

Frank's name, trying to avoid the security guards. Finally, with only a few carts left in the lot, he found it. With cart in hand, he went over to the dumpsters to see if he could find any of Frank's other stuff. He found an old blanket that looked familiar, but he found little else in the dumpster. Sam was grabbed from behind as he climbed out of the dumpster and had landed hard on the pavement, the breath knocked out of him and unable to move. He tried to get to his feet, but was kicked in the ribs and the stomach four or five times. He couldn't see who had kicked him, but he thought it was that crazy security guard. He protested that he hadn't done anything wrong, but his attacker was silent, taking the time to go through all of his pockets as he was gasping for breath. At some point, he was kicked in the face, and things got really fuzzy after that. At least until he broke his arm. That woke him up all the way.

He looked up at the woman on the bench. Who was she? And why did she know this guy? Was she in on this? His head hurt, his arm hurt, and when he shifted his weight, he knew he had broken ribs too. He wasn't going to be able to move enough to get out of the boat, and there was no chance of him fighting off this guy, who had maybe four inches and at least 70 pounds on him. The room started to spin, and Sam couldn't tell if it was because he had a concussion or if the boat was making him sick.

Looking around the cabin, Sam saw a piece of metal sticking out of where a cabinet was hanging slightly off its moorings. The end of the metal was wrapped in tape and Sam thought that maybe, if he was lucky, the tape covered a sharp end. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he swung his feet over and tried to snag the zip tie on the metal.

Up on deck, Michael leaned over and ripped the duct tape off Alexis' mouth. She gasped and then stretched her mouth and jaw to ease the pain. "Thanks, Michael." *I just thanked him*

*for ripping off the tape. I need a therapist.* She looked at him, through eyes watering from the sting of the tape. “Where are we?”

“On the water in a few minutes. We’ll be traveling for a half-hour or so, out past the breakwater. Then I will speak with our guest. It won’t take long.” He kept humming. “I’m going to save you for the islands.” He smiled lazily, at no one. “We’ll be out there before dawn.”

“Save me? For what?”

“Oh, you’re a smart girl, aren’t you? You know damn well what I want you for.” His voice ramped up a notch, and she knew he was getting angry. “You have been pushing me away for years now. You think that I bought you lunch because I liked you?” His face was getting red. “Where was the room, Alex? Why didn’t you tell me about it?”

*The Room. He thinks the Room is real.* “Michael – there is no Room. it was a book. I made it up.” She looked up at him, stung. “You don’t like me?” *I can’t believe I just said that.*

Ignoring the last part, Michael snorted derisively. “You made it up? Then you are really sick, because that shit was nasty. Anyway, I figure it’s in L.A. somewhere. I want the address. And I expect you’ll give it to me tonight.” He chuckled, a low evil sound. “We will have all the time in the world.”

“Michael.” He refused to look at her, so she said his name again, louder. “Michael. This isn’t you. This isn’t the man I know. What happened? Why are you acting like this?”

With one hand on the wheel, Michael leaned over and unbuttoned her shirt. In a leisurely way, he pulled her bra to one side and fondled her breast. “I like it that you can’t stop me doing this. I like it that you can’t say no to me. I have always wanted you, Alexis. Why did you say ‘no’ to me before? Such a mistake.” He straightened up, realized he was past the breakwater,

and increased his speed. “You should have taken me up on my offer. I would have made you happy. Bought you things. Made you cry in pleasure. Now –“ he looked away from the horizon, looking first at her and then at her open shirt – “now, I just want to make you cry.” He hummed again.

Alexis was shocked, but tried again to get through to the man she thought she knew. “Michael, ‘Locked Room’ was just fantasy. You don’t want to go there. Hell, I certainly don’t want to go there.”

The humming paused only long enough for him to say, “liar.” He was scanning the horizon and aiming the big boat toward the islands.

“And why would you want to be with a woman who said ‘no’ to you? You have a wife, you have a family. I knew that. That’s why I said no.” *Why am I being polite? Can’t I ever get angry at a man?* The wind was picking up. She wasn’t sure if it was the wind or the sudden lack of clothing, but she started to shiver. It was dangerous to get angry now, she realized. Maybe later. Maybe tomorrow – tomorrow would be better. She had to make it to tomorrow.

Michael pulled up a cord clipped to a ring in the floor, and latched it to the wheel, holding the wheel in place. He sat down on the bench next to her, and put his cold hands inside her shirt, wrapping his arms around her and pulled her closer to him.

“We could have been so good together, Alex.” His lips roamed over her neck and whispered into her ear. “We are going to be so good together tonight. I can’t wait to get you in my bed.” He sounded himself now, arrogant, pleased with himself. “I bought some toys for you too, Alex. We will have so – much – fun.” On each of those last three words, he slapped her lightly on the cheek.

Still calm, and still lacking any understanding of why she was so calm, Alexis tried to reason with him again. “Michael, my friend. That would be rape. You’re not that man.”

“I am that man, Alex.” He held her shoulders, at arms length, and happily told her, “I want you on your knees. I want you on your back. I want you every way that you took it in the Room. I want to beat you, and hear you cry. I have a riding crop, the exact one you described in your book. I have other things too – but I will keep those a secret. I want to see the tears run down your face while I spank you, I want to hear you beg me to stop.” He stood up and moved to the big wheel of the boat. “But I won’t.” He started the infernal humming again. “I am so looking forward to this.

“Alex, Alex, I am so disappointed in you. You went to the Room without me. You never said a word. How long were you there, Alex? How long?”

She swallowed hard and tried to find words that might get through to him. “Michael, you’ve known me for years. You know that I can’t lie worth beans. I’m telling you, truthfully, I made it all up! I wouldn’t lie to you about this now, not with me tied up in a boat headed out to sea. I made it all up! It was all in my head. It’s all fantasy. Look at me!” He turned his head. “I made it up. You can’t kidnap and rape somebody because they made something up. It was – “ she searched for the right word – “it was harmless.”

“It wasn’t harmless to me!” He stood up and returned to the wheel, adjusting the direction of the boat as the lights from the harbor faded away. “It was a fitting end to a lousy year, the worst year of my life. You betrayed me, Alex, you lied to me.” And as the boat motored quietly in the moonlight, Michael started talking, a stream of consciousness ramble. He was clearly unhinged, and Alex kept making encouraging sounds to keep him talking.

“My business is pretty much gone. And you lied to me. The bank called my loans last week. The bank told me two weeks ago they wouldn’t do that, not with all the equity I had. But they lied to me too.” He pulled in a big breath and his voice dropped. “Everyone lied to me this year, everyone screwed me. I had break-ins. I had arson. I had a dozen people pull out of deals after making commitments. They left me high and dry. I had banks go south on me, after I’d committed to the property. They all said the same thing – we can’t do anything right now. The economy. Stretched too thin. What about me?” He sounded amazed and looked at her as if she had the answer. “What about me? Doesn’t make sense.”

Alexis realized that this was not the Michael she knew, and she had to get back to her friend, at least to the man she used to call a friend. “Have you told your wife? Your family?” Alexis realized that she was having the strangest conversation of her life. Hands and feet tied, clothing half-off, residue of duct tape on her face, she was right back in the role she knew all too well: supportive friend. Her only excuse, she thought to herself, was that she buying time. But time for what? They were in the open ocean, heading to the islands in the dead of night. Time was not on her side.

“My family doesn’t know a thing. They keep spending my money like they always have – but not for long! The credit cards are maxed out. There’s nothing in the bank. They don’t know what I’ve been through in the past year.”

“You could talk to them. That’s what family’s all about.”

Michael exploded: “Fuck that! I need money not touchy-feely crap! And I almost have it.... I just need to find one homeless guy. I set up the raids on Riverbottom. I figured I could flush him out that way.”

Alex was stunned that she and Liz had figured it out so perfectly. The chill of knowing she was right and being on this boat with the killer frightened her out of her weird calm, and she started shivering violently. Just then, a loud bang came from the cabin. Michael swung around and looked down, seeing a cabinet on the floor. He hastily stuck the cord back on the boat's wheel and started down the stairs.

As Michael disappeared into the cabin, Alexis heard a "psst!" in her ear. She swivelled her head around to see a man's face appear at the side of the boat.

"Damn! I'm hallucinating. This can't be good."

"You're not hallucinating!" The voice whispered urgently. "Lean forward so I can cut your hands free."

"Aldous?"

"Shush! Lean forward!" Alexis did as she was told and Aldous told her to move her feet over to the side as well. The zip ties were cut and Alexis winced as the blood started moving back into her hands and feet, tingling and stinging her as she tried to move. She tried to close her shirt, but she was still shivering.

"Can you get over the side of the boat? Are you injured?" A loud crash from below made them both jump.

"I don't know. I think I broke my ankle."

"Well, we'll have to try." Another crash and a shout and the two looked at each other, eyes wide open, questioning wordlessly.

"I'll be back. Be ready to move." The head disappeared, then popped back up. "Try pretending you're still tied up." The head disappeared and reappeared. "It works in the movies." Then he was gone.



Alexis rearranged herself to look tied up, torn between trying to intervene downstairs and trying to save herself for the right moment, the right move. There was nothing loose to use on the deck, nothing heavy that might be a weapon. The cord that held the wheel in place was the only thing that was mobile, so she leaned over and un-hooked it from the wheel and then unclipped the other end from a metal loop near the floor. It was something.

The wind had picked up and the boat was rocking from side to side. She looked down the stairs and saw Michael struggling with Sam. His feet were free and he was kicking at Michael, and scrabbling for traction. Michael loomed over him, one hand holding his shirt and the other about to hit him in the face. Alexis tried to stand up, grabbing instinctively with her left hand for the closest thing: the wheel. Without the cord to hold it in place, the wheel spun downwards, lurching the boat to the left and Michael fell forward, tried to catch his balance, and then flew backwards, losing his grip on Sam.

Sam had freed his feet but his hands were still in cuffs, so he lurched forward and back, unable to steady himself, landing on his side on one of the couches. Michael was on his feet in a flash, and ran halfway up the stairs to see Alexis spin the wheel again, this time to the right. He fell a second time, hitting his head hard on the door leading down into the cabin.

Without thinking, Alexis spun the wheel a third time, trying to keep Michael off balance but it didn't work. Blood dripping down the side of his face, Michael came at her with his arms outstretched so she swung at him with the only thing she had: the cord that held the wheel in place. Adrenalin pumping, she whipped the cord with the metal clip on one end through the air and heard it land with a sharp smack in Michael's face. He howled and put his hands to his eyes, and she leaned backwards, away from him, again leaning accidentally on the wheel which spun

quickly to the left. Michael fell to the deck and landed on the same piece of metal that had broken Sam's arm. He didn't try to get back up.

Backing away from Michael, Alexis screamed out, all calm gone, now frantic and thrumming with adrenalin and fear and pain. "Help me!"

On cue, Aldous Henry swarmed over the side like a pirate, club in hand. He stopped suddenly, looked around the deck, and turned to Alexis. He flashed a little smile at her. "Looks like you did it." He went over to Michael and shook him a little, then harder, and his smile disappeared, leaving a deep crease between his eyes. He looked at Alexis and said "good work" but Alexis heard only sadness. Aldous looked down the stairs. "Is your friend OK?"

While the last few minutes had gone by faster than thought, after Michael fell, things happened in slow motion. Aldous found the keys to the handcuffs in Michael's pocket, and let Sam loose. Sam told him what had happened in the parking lot of the grocery store. They tried to splint his arm, but settled on a sling made out of part of a bed sheet. After what seemed like a long time, Aldous figured out how to make the radio work and called for help. "Mayday, mayday," he said, and Alexis wondered if she was indeed hallucinating. *No one really said "mayday," did they?*

After Aldous finished talking to the Coast Guard, Alexis had to ask why he followed them.

"First of all, I never liked that guy."

"And second?"

"He punched his supplies. No one punches supplies. Plus, supplies don't have feet."

"That was me."

"I figured." He looked at Sam. "At least it wasn't you, bro."

“Well, she was on top of me.” Sam shook his head, still in a lot of pain. “I felt that punch through her.”

Alexis remembered her promise. “Sorry I was so heavy.”

Sam cracked a sad smile. “Lady, that was the least of my problems.” He turned to Aldous. “How did you follow us? Why didn’t that guy see you?”

Aldous Henry was very pleased with himself. “I used a little skiff with a quiet engine. When that guy –“ gesturing to Michael “– started his engine, I started mine. I had no lights, so I just kept following him. My big worry was that I would run out of gas before he stopped.”

Aldous smiled first at Alexis, then at Sam. “I like telling stories, but no one is gonna believe this one. If you back me up, we’ll all drink free at the bar for years.” He made a sound that was almost a chuckle. “I am definitely going to need some back up from you guys. No one’s gonna believe this.”

The three of them sat on the boat, slowly rocking back and forth, for a long time. Sometimes they spoke, sometimes they just looked at Michael’s body. The Coast Guard appeared and took charge. Alexis was told her ankle was probably sprained, but she wouldn’t stop shivering even after being swathed in blankets. She watched them turn Michael over and saw the gash in his head. Blood pooled around him, in puddles so deep that she kept questioning whether she was seeing it or imagining it. Finally, they took her off Michael’s boat, the boat she had been trying to avoid for so many years, and put her on the Coast Guard boat. She was fine until she saw them zip up the black plastic body bag. Then she fainted.

## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

### **Coming Clean**

Sam woke up in a bed for the first time in many years, and instead of it being pleasant, he was in a lot of pain. His arm was throbbing, his chest hurt when he breathed, and he found crusted blood still on his hands. He touched his head with his good arm and found bandages. He tried to sit up, but gave it up before he was an inch off the mattress.

He looked for a button to call someone, but the only button he could see was on the side with his broken arm and he couldn't reach it. He thought about shouting, but he was not one to bring attention to himself unnecessarily. So he wriggled again, trying to sit up. It was going to be difficult.

“Step at a time, Sam,” he said out loud.

“Step at a time is all we can do, Sam.”

Francis Smith looked a bit different all cleaned up. His clothes were new and pressed. His hair slicked back from his face, Sam could see the bruising and swelling from the beating Frank got at the hands of the grocery store security guard. But all that mattered to Sam was that smile, that slow sweet smile that made the world a better place.

“Frank! You're out of jail!” Sam struggled to sit up and winced, falling back on the bed. “Are you OK, man? Are you OK?”

“Of course I'm OK, I'm fine, Sam. It's you I'm worried about. The doctors said you could have been killed.”

“It was the guy, Frank.” Sam spoke in a harsh whisper. “It was the guy who killed people. He got me!”

Frank’s smile faded. “Yes, I know. He’s dead now, Sam. He won’t hurt anyone else.”

The two men settled into a long conversation about the past few days. Soon, Frank was crying quietly, tortured over how Sam had been beaten for trying to recover Frank’s shopping cart and almost getting killed in the process.

“Frank, it’s OK, man. I got it. The police have it now, but you can have it back.”

“I don’t really need it, Sam. I – I have money.”

“You still need a cart, Frank. Unless you’re gonna move into a home. Did you find a shelter?”

“No, Sam, I have something I have to tell you.”

Frank explained that he was the rich man that pretended to be homeless. He could barely get out the words, apologizing for putting Sam in danger, apologizing for lying, for leading Sam on, apologizing for everything.

“So you’re not broke?”

Tears coming down his face, Frank answered, “No. I’ve got money. Lots of money. I just thought this was the best way to understand the homeless, and to find out how to help.”

Sam was quiet. “That’s OK, Frank.” He scowled. “You didn’t have to be in the riverbottom? You didn’t have to be on the street?”

“No. I’m sorry, Sam.”

“Man, nobody wants to be out there. It’s crazy. It’s dangerous.”

“But you were out there – you said you wanted to be.”

“Frank! I would rather be in the Riverbottom than in some dump with a crazy crack head next door, screaming at his dealer in the middle of the night! But broke is broke. I would rather have a nice house and food to eat, and a refrigerator full of cold beer.” Sam was tired from his outburst, and his voice slowed and went from angry to very sad. “A barbeque in the back. And someone to come home to.” Sullenly, he said “We still gonna work on our project?”

Frank’s face lightened a little. “Yes. Absolutely. That’s why I did this. I’m trying to set up a program like that in every city I can. But I wanted people to do it themselves, so that they would have pride in it, ownership of it. If I just came in and gave money, it wouldn’t stay open. I tried that, in other cities. It only works if people believe in it. Believe in doing good on their own.” Frank shook his head. “I’m so sorry, Sam. I didn’t mean for anyone to get hurt.” Frank started to cry again.

Sam smiled and then winced in pain. “Frank. I am so glad I met you. And it don’t matter. We’ll make this work. I wanna make this work.”

Frank reached over to hug Sam and then realized that it might hurt. He laughed. “I want to hug you, but I can’t!”

Sam laughed too. “I’m not a big hugger, Frank. I’m just glad you’re here, and you’re OK. Do you think we could buy shopping carts for some of the guys? And we could register them with the police, so that no one gets hurt like you did.”

Down the hall, Alexis was awake. The clock above the door in the hospital read 3:30 when the nurse walked in to take Alexis’ vitals.

“Your doctor was here, asking about you.”

“Oh, OK. Can I go home? Is he discharging me?”

“No, not Dr. Mitchell .... this was your personal physician? Dr. Misthos?”

“Oh. What’s he doing here?” Alexis was very confused.

“He heard you were here, that’s all. Came to check on you.” The nurse smiled and lowered her voice. “That man is gorgeous, doncha think? You can go back to sleep now.”

“Oh.” Alexis blinked at her, but the nurse was still fuzzy around the edges. “OK.”

The next time she opened her eyes it was dark outside. The clock read 7:30. A dinner tray was sitting by the bed. Alexis found custard, ate it, and went back to sleep.

Again, she awoke, but this time it was Liz’s face peering down at her. “Alex. Alexis. Wake up. I brought company.”

Alexis tried to focus, but couldn’t do it very well. Liz reached over and hit a button that made the bed sit up for her. Around the bed were Liz, Jay, Britney and Neil, all looking a little happier than Alex thought appropriate in the situation.

“Hi.” She struggled to wake up. “What are you doing here?”

Jay smiled at her, and handed her some straggly flowers. “I won the goat.”

“You what?” Alexis’ brain finally started working. “You did? That’s great!” She smiled at Jay, who was grinning in a weird way.

“Why does he look like that?” Alex looked to Liz to straighten this out.

“He’s a little drunk. We’re all a little drunk.” Liz giggled. “Except Neil. He’s sober.”

“Which is why they made me drive them over here to see you. Hi Alexis.”

“What time is it?”

“Just after midnight. The auction just ended. We came right over.”

“Did Jay really win Maddy? Did you have to rig the auction?”

Britney piped up. “Nope. With all the excitement, we never got to that. We didn’t have time. Jay won her fair and square.”

“Oh, thank God. Does that mean it’s Saturday?”

“Yup.” Britney paused. “Well, now it’s Sunday, but just barely.”

Alexis sat up all the way, and looked at the four of them. “Do you all know what happened last night?”

A police officer poked his head in the door. “You guys better make it quick. The nurse will be coming back soon.”

“Who’s he?”

Liz said, “That is the police officer who is guarding your door.”

Alexis looked at Liz and tried to smile. She realized her face hurt. “That must be tough, Liz. Having to be nice to a police officer.”

“Oh, you are all better.” Liz started to get up. “We can leave now.”

“Wait! Why is there a police officer at my door?”

“After what happened, they thought it best. In case the killer was working with someone else.”

“The killer?” Alex was still fuzzy. “Oh.” She thought of Michael and she closed her eyes, but they shot open when she remembered the goat.

“Oh! What happened to Maddy, what happened after – “

” – after, we found Maddy eating someone’s flowers.”

“Oh good.” Again, Alexis looked panicked. “Did you feed the dogs?”

“Of course I did.”

Jay cut in. “I helped.”

“I did too,” said Britney. “They like me best.”



“Wait, wait.” Alexis shook her head, trying to clear it. “How did you find Maddy? How did you know I was here?”

Liz answered. “That’s a long story. Remember that Sheriff’s Deputy I told you about? Tanner?”

Alexis nodded and said, “The asshole?” Neil winced.

“Yes, that’s the one. He was working late, and heard something about a loose goat eating someone’s flowers near the beach. He said he had a funny feeling this had something to do with our goat, because it was too coincidental. Right after that, the radio apparently lit up, and calls started coming in about the Coast Guard and a murder and more.”

“I wish I could see the connection.” Alexis looked at the four lawyers surrounding the bed. “How did he put me together with you and the goat?”

“He said he didn’t know for sure. He just thought he should call. So he called me at home, and I went to see if it was Maddy. By the time I got there, the entire sky was lit up with flashers, and a helicopter, and your car was still in the parking lot.”

“She freaked.” Jay was still grinning.

“So what happened?”

“She called me and I called Britney, and we picked up Maddy and went to the Harbor to find Liz. We saw you being loaded onto an ambulance. Liz was a mess.”

“And Maddy’s OK?”

“Maddy was fine. We almost put Liz in the ambulance with you, though.”

Alexis and Liz locked eyes; Alex spoke first. “Wow.”

“Yeah, wow.”

“So you probably know a lot more than I do. What about Sam?”

Neil took this question. “Turns out Sam is the new administrator for the homeless program at the Mission. Just started. He is working with someone named Frank Smith –“  
”– Jesus!? He’s working with Jesus?”

Liz laughed. “Yes, same man.” She waved off the questioning looks on the others’ faces. “Guy looks like Jesus. I told her about him.”

“Is Jesus the rich guy?”

At that point, everyone looked at Liz. “We don’t know that for sure, yet.” Liz looked around at her colleagues. “I’ll explain it later.”

Neil shook his head, for all the world looking like an exasperated dad trying to ride herd on a bunch of unruly teenagers. “Sam was at the grocery store looking for a shopping cart owned by Frank Smith. He was jumped there by the man you fought with on the boat.”

“Michael.” Alexis looked sick. “Michael – is he dead?”

Liz leaned over and spoke softly in her ear, staying to hug her. “Yes, hon. He’s dead.” Alexis didn’t know whether to cry or not. The floating sensation she had experienced on the boat was definitely wearing off. She hurt, inside and out. She felt like screaming and running away, but she couldn’t move.

“Liz,” she whispered.

“Yes, Alex?”

“You once told me that I didn’t live – I just wrote about it. Remember that?”

“Yes.” Liz tilted her head, wondering where this was going.

“I think writing is way better than this. Living is not all it’s cracked up to be.”

Liz smiled at her and Britney piped in to fill the silence. “We got word from the police that they found a weapon that apparently matches the wounds on one of the dead guys. The lab is checking DNA now. But they are pretty sure he’s the guy we’ve been looking for.”

“But why?” Alexis could feel panic setting in, and the room was spinning a little, almost like wine-induced vertigo. “Why would he do that?” Michael was her friend. Her friend would never do that. But he had, and all Alex wanted to do was sleep and forget about this.

There was a rap on the door, five heads turned to see the police officer soundlessly warning them to leave. The four were gone in seconds, and the nurse walked in right after. Blood pressure, temperature, pills of some type were given: Alexis was asleep again.

The morning sun was bright enough to wake Alexis, and food was wheeled in shortly after that. Alexis was starving and ate everything on the tray, drank the weak coffee, and was looking for more when Liz came in.

“You’re awake!”

“Yes, and starving. One egg and a cup of coffee just wasn’t enough.”

“We can go get pancakes when they let you out of here.”

Alexis looked wistful. “I love pancakes.”

“I know, or I wouldn’t have suggested it! I think we can bust you out of here today.”

Just then, Dr. Misthos walked in. Liz perked right up. “Why hello, doctor. Do you remember me? Liz Jackson, from the homeless shelter. Can we help you?” Liz flowed to her feet, and Alex could see a little of the Goddess in her. Liz was a Vision too, that was clear.

“Alexis is my patient – and of course I remember you.” Dr. Misthos glanced at Alex, but smiled broadly at Liz. At that point, Alex could tell that she was no longer in the room, as far as those two could tell. *I could pretend to die and see if they noticed.* Liz and the doctor (“Oh

please, call me Greg!”) were getting along fabulously. Apparently, Alexis’ lack of interest in the doctor had given Liz the green light, and she had the doctor asking her out within a few short minutes. The two pulled out cell phones to exchange numbers just shy of five minutes. *Bloody amazing. How does she do that?*

Finally, someone realized that they were in a hospital and that there was a patient. *I’m not so patient*, Alexis thought sourly. *I have been seeing you for five years and you still can’t remember my name without looking on my chart.*

“Alexis, I hear you got pretty banged up. What happened?”

Liz interrupted, “She’s a hero. She caught a murderer.”

Alexis thought that only Liz could make “She caught a murderer” sound sexy. Liz told the story to Dr. Misthos, pausing for effect and touching his shoulder or his hand softly at critical moments in the drama. As Liz ran down the facts, she added in things that Alexis didn’t know herself. Apparently, Michael was stone cold broke, in debt well beyond what he could ever repay, and had believed the myth – there was a rich homeless man in Santa Teadora, and he had access to millions. They found clippings and notes on the boat, along with the murder weapon.

“So, like I said – she’s a hero.”

“I was worried,” said the doctor looking at Liz, “that this might be a sex-related injury.”

Liz giggled sweetly before saying “Oh that’s silly. She never has sex. But I do.” And she flipped her hair back in a slow-motion sort of way that even had the wounded Alex in awe.

*That’s it. I am never speaking to her again.* Alexis wanted to be strong, to object, to interrupt and be alluring and enticing. But she couldn’t. Her doctor – the “hit it with a book” doctor that she had flirted with for five years – was about to go out with Liz.

“Um, guys? Guys?” They both turned to her. “I’m kinda tired. If you don’t mind, I think I need to get some sleep.”

They two of them retired to the hallway, still chatting and smiling at each other.

She must have dozed off again, and woke to see a face floating by the side of the bed. It took her a second to recognize him. “Dick?”

“I left you alone for just a couple of days, and look what happens.”

Alexis cringed inside, recognizing that same line. Michael said the same thing to her only a few days ago. *Why do these men pretend like they’re taking care of me? Sure seems like the opposite to me.*

“Um. Hello. I didn’t expect you here.” She started to sit up and found the button to make the bed do it for her. “How did you know I was here?”

“I told you – I know everything.”

She smiled at him. “No, really – how did you know?”

“You’re famous, my dear. Something this exciting happens in Santa Teadora and it is big news. Your narrow escape was all over the radio this morning.”

“Are you still in town?”

“Yes, I had to stay a couple more days to finish up with Mr. McDonnell. He apparently had to deal with an emergency, and we have only finished up this morning. Then, it was not difficult to find the city’s most famous patient.”

“Well, thank you for coming by.” Alexis knew she sounded distant and uncomfortable and hoped he would blame the hospital, the situation, anything but her own feelings.

Dick gestured to the half-wilted flowers in a water glass, the ones Jay brought in the night before. “Flowers from an admirer?” He sounded a touch jealous.

“Yes, from one of the lawyers involved with the goat auction.”

“How did that go?”

They chatted for a bit, and he left without a kiss, only a promise to call again soon.

Alexis was relieved, and so tired she was sure she would sleep for a week, if only she could get home. The police officer came in.

“Ms. Trotter? They tell me it’s safe for you to go home today, and they’re pulling me off your duty. So I just wanted to tell you I’m leaving.” Alexis at least noticed that he was a really good looking guy – cute as a bug, or at least a bug with a gun strapped to his side. *How can I even think about men at a time like this?*

“No, that’s OK. I’m going home. Thank you.”

“Thank you, Ms. Trotter. You did alright out there. Remember that you did what you had to do, and he was a killer. Don’t focus on this. If you keep thinking about it, it’ll make you a little crazy.”

Alexis tried to find the right words, but subtlety was impossible today. Half to herself, she said “But I didn’t kill him.” She looked up and said, “Did you ever kill anyone?”

“Yes, I did. Five years ago. I was only on the job for about five years when it happened.” “What happened? I mean, if you can tell me.”

“The details aren’t important. But he came at me with a knife, and I shot him. You can second-guess yourself over and over again – but the bottom line is that you did what you had to do to save your own life. Try to remember that.”

“Thank you, thanks. I’ll try.” He turned to leave, and she stopped him. “Hey, wait! What’s your name?”

“Rich. Rich Davis.”

“Thank you, Rich. Thanks for saying that. Do you know any details about this – this thing?”

“The murders? A little – what they tell us at the morning briefing. Not all the details.”

“Something’s bugging me. The homeless guys thought it was a police officer, but Michael wasn’t – wasn’t... in uniform. Do they know what that was all about?”

He nodded. “We think so. The guy on the boat, the killer, wore a blue jacket, same color as a police uniform. And there was a badge on it.”

Alex flashed back to the boat, and saw the gleam of gold braid on Michael’s jacket. She cringed. “What kind of shield?”

“The Santa Teadora Yacht Club. Looks just like a badge.”

She closed her eyes, and Michael’s face appeared before her, smiling at her over lunch. So sure of himself, so smart and funny. Him and his boat, his obsession with that pretty boat. And he was gone now. She couldn’t think about the fact that it was her fault, and the thought that he was a killer was too much. She started to fall asleep again. Maybe if she could just stay asleep for a few months, this would be easier.

## **Chapter Twenty-Five**

### **All Over But The Writing**

For the next couple of weeks, Alexis couldn't do much. She had a badly sprained ankle, a concussion and a weight of sadness on her that made getting up in the morning a terrible struggle. Maddy was gone, off to Jesse's house. The dogs stayed very close, and the phone rang just often enough to let her know she wasn't alone.

Jeanine sent flowers and asked for chapters of the new books to review ("Darling, the best thing you can do is get back to work!"). Liz came by every few days, not wanting to come too early so that Alexis could sleep in. Time, Alexis realized, was the only thing that would help.

She tried to avoid reading the paper, but it was all over the front page for days. Finally, Michael's death and the homeless murders slipped onto the front of the second section, then to a little clip on page 10, then not at all. The police kept her involvement to a minimum. Aldous Henry, on the other hand, was hailed as the hero of the year. He was having a great time, it seemed, telling his story. As soon as she could walk without crutches, she wanted to go down and see him, just to say thanks. That, and she figured the story had probably improved in the telling. The new version was probably much better than the original.

It was a clear but cold November morning when Alex finally went down to see Aldous. Out front was a shapely woman, back to Alex, arranging surfboards.

"Um, good morning?" Alex asked the woman's back.



The woman turned and Alex took in a sharp breath. It was the Vision, all tanned and beautiful and sporting a big diamond on her hand. “I’m looking for Aldous – is he here?”

“Oh yes, sure. Aldous, honey – someone to see you.”

Aldous popped his head out of the shop, took one look at Alex, and walked over to wrap his arms around her. “Alex. You’re OK.” He pulled back. “Why haven’t you come by before? I didn’t know where you lived, or I would have come see you.” He turned back to the Vision. “Kindra – this is Alex. Alex, this is my fiancé, Kindra.”

The three of them sat down and talked about Michael and Aldous’ rescue. Finally, all talked out, Alex had to ask: “When did you two get together?”

Kindra blushed. “I kept coming by until he asked me out.” She laughed, and it sounded just as Alex had imagined it: a clear, tinkling sound, bells, sunshine, the sound of joy.

“I didn’t think she was coming by to see me – I thought she really liked to surf. Then windsurf. Then jet ski.”

“I was going broke renting from him until he finally figured it out!” The two smiled at each other, happy. Just happy.

“Um . . . I hate to pry, but I feel like we already know each other.” *I have been writing sex scenes with you in them for months, Kindra. God knows I will never say that to you!* “What drew you to him? The surfboards? The sun? His charm? What?”

“He talked to me – about everything! We would talk for hours, even with being interrupted by other people, and folks coming to rent, or buy some candy, or whatever. I just loved the way he talked to me.” She turned to him and shrugged, which on her was adorable.

“Still love talking to him.”

“She wants to have kids, so we’re looking for a house. Wedding is in a few weeks – do you want to come?”

“I would love to.” Alex got the details and went home, after more hugs from Aldous and one from Kindra as well.

Finally, one morning months later, the phone rang early. While Alexis was talking, Liz walked in.

“Jeanine, I don’t think that’s such a great idea. No, I heard you. Yes. Yes.”

Liz tip-toed over to the coffee maker, then to the refrigerator, and quietly sat at the kitchen table.

“But – well, you know I don’t have any children.” Alexis sighed. “OK. If it’s OK with you, it’s OK with me. Alright.” Alexis grimaced. “Ciao.”

“Ciao?”

“Jeanine likes ‘ciao.’ Maybe it’s a New York thing.”

“So what did she want?”

“Another book.”

“That’s good, right?”

“Maybe. She wants another self-help book. This time on parenting.”

Liz laughed out loud, ending in a giggling rush of words. “You don’t have any kids.”

“I don’t have a heckuva lot of sex either – and *Good Sex* is selling like hotcakes. Go figure.”

“So now a book on parenting?”

“Yep. From a person who has no children.”

“Makes sense to me.” Liz poured some milk into her coffee, and told Alexis about her date last night.