

Kiss of Fiona

A

Novel

By

Justin Golding

Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story

Opening line from Homer's *Odyssey*

Elizabeth Trupin-Pulli
JET Literary Associates, Inc.
941 Calle Mejia #507
Santa Fe, NM 87501
505-780-0721
etp@jetliterary.com

Part One

New York, New York

Wednesday, May 28, 2014 7:48 P.M.

Nathan jumped the three steps that led from his basement apartment to the shrunken sidewalk on St. Marks Place and pushed past the gathered crowds of stoners, students, aging hippies, and European backpackers. He passed a movie rental place whose walls were decorated and held together by film posters and local flyers advertising artist groups, psychics, Chinese herbalists, Thai, Swedish, sports medicine massages, editing facilities, creative writing groups, bands and the people who wanted to teach something or other to you or your children. Next to that was a restaurant offering gluten-free, wheat-free, organic, non-sweetened food: "Be good to the Earth," the sign said, "and the Earth will be good to you." All the stores here were in brownstone houses, with other brownstones offering rental accommodations in between. Nathan shouldered past a shopper who was looking at a piece of artwork that the originator was trying to sell in his street stall. The guy gave him a look and the girl he was with tugged at his arm till he turned back to look at the picture.

Nathan was just shy of six feet tall, but his shoulders looked as though they belonged to a bigger man. He was in jeans and a Police 1983 Synchronicity T-shirt. He pushed his muddy blond hair out of his eyes and drew deeply on his cigarette, thinking. Finally he made his way down St. Mark's Place toward Avenue A, then through the park to Avenue B. He came to a bar with the name Manitoba's on the sign. In the window was a poster for a '70s punk band, The Dictators. He walked in.

Heavy rock was playing on the jukebox, but the place was empty. He could see his friend Larry had not arrived yet. There were a few customers in one corner

wearing suits and looking out of place. Photos of rock stars and minor celebrities from the '70s and '80s obscured the stained walls. Nathan took a chair at the bar, avoiding the red nylon booths with bullet-hole buttons creating a criss-cross diamond pattern on the back cushions. The fabric shone and glittered wetly from the fairy lights caught in a net that hung from the ceiling. The barman looked up; they recognized each other, but no names were exchanged.

“Hey, man,” said Nathan. “How you doing?”

“Good, dude,” said the barman. “A Stella?”

“Yeah.”

The barman opened the fridge, grabbed a bottle and pulled his bottle opener from his back pocket in one smooth move. Swinging his arm back around, he connected with the bottle's top, flipped the metal disk straight into the trash and placed the beer in front of Nathan, grabbing the extended credit card with his now empty hand. “You want to open a tab?”

Nathan nodded. “What's with the suits?”

“They're from out of town.”

“Do you have the bar darts back there?”

“Yeah sure.”

The darts in his hand, Nathan walked by the suits, who parted for him. The bar ran the length of the room, ending at a beaten-up dartboard that hung on a defaced wall. On one side of the board were mirrors reflecting back the bar and, on the right side, a banister bracketed five steps that led down to a pool table.

He put his beer down and placed two of the darts into his left hand. With his right foot on the line drawn with red paint on the floor to mark the right distance from the board, he raised his right hand to throw. His first dart flew wide to the left of the twenty, hitting the five a little above the green triple turf. His next dart he over adjusted and it hit the number one to the right of the twenty, but his third dart hit snugly in the black velvety expanse between the red double and triple. He took two more practice throws before he was joined by two of the three suits.

“Hey, do you mind if we join?” asked the taller of the two men.

“No. What do you guys want to play?” Nathan asked.

“Cricket?”

“Cool.”

“Do you have a partner?” the tall guy asked.

“No, but my friend Larry should be here soon,” Nathan said.

“Paul,” said the tall guy to the one remaining suit.

“Yeah,” Paul answered.

“We need you for doubles, until this guy’s friend shows.”

Paul waited for his drink and then there was a quick flurry of handshakes and names passed around. The tall guy was John, the guy with him was Robert, who was as fat as John was tall. Paul was going to be Nathan’s dart partner.

An hour into playing they were beer buddies and Larry still hadn’t arrived. The guys were executives in the Canadian TV industry in town for a conference. With the company’s credit card behind the bar, Nathan was unable to finish a drink

without another one appearing. He tried two times to buy a round, but they yelled him down both times.

“How long are you guys in town?” Nathan asked.

“Until we drink the town dry,” Robert said.

“We leave on Friday,” Paul said.

“We’ve got a shit load of programs to sell to the American market and if we don’t we may as well not go back,” John said.

“We’ll get it done, because we are the men!” Robert said.

“Hard times?” Nathan asked.

“That’s a fucking understatement,” John said as he pulled his darts out of the board and handed them to Paul, ignoring Robert’s attempt to high five him. “I’ve spent the last month laying people off – some of them I’ve worked with for ten years.”

“It’s a bitch,” Robert said.

Nathan ignored him.

“What are you into?” John asked.

“I’m a writer, but my day job is at a phone company.”

“That’s a tough road,” said Paul. “I planned on being a painter.”

“What happened?”

“Life. John, you were going to be a writer, weren’t you?”

“What do you mean going to be – I got two books published.”

“So why aren’t you writing?” Robert asked.

“Because they took four years to write and together they sold about a couple hundred copies. I only made a few grand, which is not enough to feed a fucking parrot let alone a family.”

Nathan’s phone rang. He saw it was Jen calling him. It was a little after ten o’clock. Handing over the darts to John he held up his ringing phone and said, “My woman.” He headed for the street to get away from the jukebox and answered the phone as he stepped through the bar’s doorway. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Jen responded.

Silence

“How was the flight?”

“We made it. Thanks for asking.”

“How was Ben?”

“He slept for most of it. He only got upset when we were landing.”

“Well that’s... good.”

A group of people came around 6th street, which got his attention. They crossed and made their way to Manitoba’s. There was an even number of men and women, making a combined group of six, and they were laughing, looking happy.

“How’s your parents?” He kept his eyes on the approaching group.

“Good. They said we could stay as long as we like.”

“Well... that’s good.”

The women were beautiful. Two of them walked arm in arm and were a contrast in types. One had short-cropped blond hair, was tiny with adult curves. Her friend had long legs, midnight hair and a great smile. The other woman in the group

was pretty, but desperate. The three guys looked like models. As they passed by him and entered the bar, Nathan looked at the blonde, but her tall friend blocked him. He stood taller as they walked by him to make a point. She could look him in the eye, but she was wearing heels.

The silence on the phone had stretched too long. He thought about making repairs.

“What?” Nathan said. “You think I’m surprised?”

“No,” Jen replied. “But at least you should care.”

Jen hung up on him. Pulling out a cigarette, he lit it. Half way through, he threw it still glowing into the gutter and went back into the bar.

Where the fuck is Larry? Nathan thought.

The guys had gotten him a fresh beer. He picked it up and put half of it away. Glancing past John, he saw that the new group had taken over the pool table. He looked for the blond girl but was again blocked by the dark-haired girl. She held his eyes with an easy confidence. Nathan turned his attention back to the dart game, which was coming to a close. He was up next. Paul handed him the darts and he threw them with a little more energy, thanks to his conversation with Jen. The darts hit the board with a solid thunk and good precision. With his first throw, Nathan took out the twenties and one nineteen. Paul knuckle-bumped him as he came back for his beer and gave the darts to Robert for his turn.

“Nice darts,” Paul said.

“Thanks.”

“Did you check out those chicks that just came in?” Paul asked.

“No,” he lied.

“They’re down there playing pool.”

Nathan looked where Paul indicated with his head and John took the opportunity to get involved in the conversation. “I’d like to get my hands on any one of those chicks.”

“Let’s send over a few drinks,” Paul said.

“Good idea. Do you think those guys will get pissed?” John asked.

“I doubt it, but what the fuck. If they get upset, there are four of us and I could take two of those pussies by myself,” Paul responded.

John laughed and Nathan smiled. The guys hanging with the girls had a feminine grace. Nathan agreed with Paul, they looked like pussies. Nathan swirled the last bit of his beer in his bottle and made the decision to leave.

Paul misread Nathan’s bottle trick, “Hey Sid, give the group playing pool a drink on us and get my partner here another beer.”

“No, it’s OK, I was going to make this my last one. I’ve got work tomorrow.”

“As do we all... come on, one more is not going to make any difference.”

Nathan nodded and thought *fuck it*.

The dark-haired girl came striding towards them as Nathan took his turn at the dartboard. She was alone. Her blonde friend was watching her. She caught Nathan looking at her and scowled at him.

“Which one of you guys bought us the drinks?” she asked.

“That would be me,” Paul answered.

“Why?” she asked.

You’re hot and I want to fuck you, but Paul didn’t have the balls to say it.

“He didn’t bring his brains out with him tonight,” John said.

“Does he have brains?” she asked.

The guys laughed. She softened her insult by giving Paul a hug that squashed her breasts against his chest.

“Hurt my feelings, please,” John said.

Nathan wanted to finish his game and get the hell out, but she was standing at the top of the steps next to the board. His impatience showed.

“Give me the darts,” she said.

“We’re not finished playing,” Nathan replied.

She stepped in front of the board and held out her hand. With a ‘fuck it’ shrug he held out all three darts, but she only took one of them. As she turned back to the dartboard a bra appeared in her hands. With the dart, she pinned it to the board and then turned back to look at them.

“So, who is buying me my next drink?”

Nathan moved to the bar to finish his drink and watch the guys fight over the girl. He glanced down to see what her friends were making of this, but he saw that only the blonde was paying attention. She looked concerned.

John won the drinks race, which was a Jameson, no ice. “Here you go, honey,” he said.

“Honey?”

“It’s a term of endearment.”

“So how many Honeys do you have in your life?” she asked.

“Not enough,” John answered.

“Looking for the next one?”

“Always.”

“You make a girl feel special,” she said and threw back her drink. As John took her empty glass, she gave him a soft kiss on his cheek in thanks and whispered to him. “I prefer Fiona to honey.”

“Does that mean you’re not going to be my honey?” he asked.

“Get me another drink and we’ll talk about it.”

“What do I get if I buy you the bottle, Fiona?”

“You get my eternal gratitude.”

“I was hoping for a bit more than that.”

“You really think a forty-dollar bottle of Scotch is going to get me into bed? What type of girl do you think I am?” She stood tall, pushing her breasts forward.

“The best type and it doesn’t have to be a bed.”

“Such a charmer. Sounds like you’re compensating for something. Next!”

The guys laughed. After a moment John joined them. She gave him another kiss on the cheek that caught the corner of his mouth to soften the blow of her rejection. Nathan could not see the flirty girl while he sat on his stool. The guys surrounded her, but he was in a good position to keep stealing glances at the blonde. The rest of her group wasn’t interested in what Fiona was doing. The desperate girl had hooked up with one of the guys and the other two guys were obviously a couple unto themselves. The blonde girl ignored them, but continued to watch Fiona. His

attention was drawn back to the room when he heard the bar door open and slam shut. A man walked in by himself and took up a position at the far end of the bar. The bar was too dark for Nathan to see the new guy clearly, but he could tell it wasn't Larry, as the guy was lean. The barman went up to him and Nathan saw the man drop a note on the bar for whatever drink he wanted. The guy sensed Nathan's eyes and turned to look directly at him. They stared at each other for a moment before Nathan turned away.

"What do you do?" Fiona asked Robert.

"I'm head of production." Robert handed her another Jameson.

"What do you produce?"

"TV."

"What type of TV?"

"TV spots."

"TV spots... you mean commercials?"

"No, he means promos for the station," John said.

"Oh." Throwing back her drink, she put her glass on the bar and said, "I thought one of you was going to be interesting."

The guys let out good-natured groans and she flashed them a smile.

"Anyway." She patted Robert on his large stomach. "You're not up to tonight's physical demands." Robert laughed as loud as the other guys.

Nathan got up to leave.

"Where are you going?" Fiona asked.

"Home," he replied.

“But I’ve not talked to you yet. What do you do?”

Everybody’s attention was now on them.

“Lady, you’re not being nice,” Nathan said.

“Are you afraid to play?”

“Nah, you’re just the type I love and hate all at the same time,” he said.

“What’s life without a bit of risk?” Fiona asked.

“A poor man can’t take risks,” he replied

“Leonard,” she said.

“What is *Howard’s End* by E.M. Forster?” Nathan answered.

“Fiona,” she said, stepping into his space.

“Look lady...” Nathan said.

“My name is Fiona. My, you’re a pretty one. What’s your name?”

“I’m married,” Nathan said.

“Strange name. I don’t see a ring.”

“I live with her.”

“Children?”

“A boy.”

“How old?”

“Four.”

“You look like a man at a loose end tonight.”

“Maybe, but it doesn’t change the rules.”

“Is she expecting you back tonight?”

Nathan paused and took a gulp of his beer. Paul and John were standing behind Fiona giving him goofy smiles and big thumbs-up signs.

“I’ll just borrow you for one night.”

“What the fuck, dude?” Paul said.

“We’re all married,” John said. “Nobody is going to find out.”

“Drink up, handsome,” Fiona said, knocking back her Jameson’s. “You’ve got a busy night ahead of you.”

“Who says I’m coming?” Nathan asked.

Fiona laughed and grabbed Nathan’s face, delivering a kiss. Nathan heard the cheers, but her soft whisky lips had his focus. When she broke away from him, Nathan gave her his answer by standing up and slamming back his beer. As he passed the guys, Paul slapped him on the back and the others raised their glasses in a salute. Fiona had hold of his hand, which he placed on her hip as he moved to her side. The guy at the end of the bar started to get up, but as they passed he shared a look with Fiona and sat back down. Nathan knew he was not supposed to see the connection.

Wednesday, May 28, 2014 11:35 P.M.

They stopped in front of her townhouse apartment. Fiona got out of the cab and left Nathan to pay. The box of condoms that Nathan bought when they exited the bar stopped him from reaching his money. When he put the condoms on the backseat, he knew that Fiona could see them. The driver gave him his change, and as Nathan slid across the beaten up black leather seat, he put the condoms into his

back pocket. As soon as he closed the door, Fiona jumped into his arms and made him stumble back against the cab. For the first time the taxi driver stopped his phone conversation.

“You crazy – get off my cab.”

Nathan would have said sorry, but Fiona was keeping his lips busy. The cab driver did not wait for an apology but squealed off into the night.

Fiona was not a small woman, but her ass fit nicely in his hands. With her legs wrapped around his waist he walked to the entry. Fiona apparently lived above a funeral parlor, which registered with Nathan but didn't make him hesitate as she guided him towards a security keypad. There was a metal fence around the front of the property with a matching black gate. She punched in the code and there was a metallic click as the gate sprung open. As Nathan stepped through, she produced keys from god knows where, but his concentration was on navigating the three steps that led from the gate to her door while kissing her. The apartment's entrance was just to the right of the funeral parlor's entrance. Nathan kissed his way down her neck, as she arched her back to unlock the door. When the door fell open they stumbled into a small hallway that led to a staircase. Nathan was now faltering under Fiona's weight. She sensed this and, instead of being insulted, she started to whip him like a horse.

“Yee-ha, come on!” she said.

“You want to play games?”

“Yee-ha.”

With a heave of his arms and back muscles, Nathan flipped Fiona onto his shoulder, making it easier to carry her up the stairs. He exposed her ass by pushing her skirt up and then proceeded to slap it as he stepped onto each step. Fiona screamed in shock and pleasure.

If she had roommates or other tenants above the funeral home, she didn't care. She directed him to her front door by slapping his butt and opened the door while upside down. The light from the hallway showed a large open area, which had no furniture in it. Fiona flipped on the light as he carried her in and kicked the door shut. With the room illuminated, he could see that there were five stacks of books in the far left corner, each about four feet high, but no bookcase. There were some Moroccan-type floor pillows surrounding the stacks and a lamp, which was perched on the windowsill just to the right of the books and pillows.

"Left, left," Fiona said.

Led by her instructions, Nathan saw that there was an archway that framed the entrance to the kitchen, next to which was two doors. Darkness greeted him as he chose the correct door and entered the bedroom. He stopped just inside and tried to find the light switch.

"Let me down," she said.

With one last slap he put her down on the floor and she instantly flipped the switch. There was a mattress on the floor, with a wicker box topped by a lamp next to it. The lamp did not have a shade so it harshly lit the large bedroom, leaving parts of it in shadow. The bedspread continued the Moroccan flavor from the living room, but that was the only color in the room. A book was spread open and an ashtray that

seriously needed to be emptied sat beside the mattress. Clothes lay scattered around the room and the bare walls were the off-white color found in most rental places. The brown hardwood floors gave the room a false sense of warmth.

“Bathroom?” Nathan asked.

“Next door.”

Nathan did a little pivot to turn himself around and headed out the bedroom and into the bathroom, which took him all of four steps to achieve. With his foot, he closed the door, reached for his fly and started relieving himself of the six or seven Stellas in his bladder. Halfway through, Fiona came into the room. Nathan did a mental check – there was no way he could stop. Fiona sat on the bathroom sink.

“Can I help you?” Nathan asked.

“I got bored waiting and I wanted to see what I worked so hard to get,” she said.

“Well?”

“It looks good, but what can you do with it?”

His flow was starting to slow down, but he was having a problem controlling the direction because he was becoming hard. She noticed and hopped off the sink.

“I don’t want piss all over my floor. Don’t forget to give it a little wash.”

Nathan laughed, giving himself an automatic shake as she walked out. He gave himself a little wash as instructed and went to the bedroom. Fiona was not there. The living room was also empty. A noise brought him into the kitchen where he found her surrounded by her clothes, snorting a line of coke. She looked smaller without her clothes and her breasts hung from her body as she leaned over the

counter to get the next line of powder that she'd arranged neatly for herself. As she came to the end of the line her head snapped up and a sigh-groan escaped from her body. Her breasts gently rocked as she stood upright and the soft angles of her body made Nathan hard again.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"What the fuck do you think?"

"Hey, no judgments here."

"Do you like?" She walked towards him, her hands above her head. She walked on her toes even though her high-heels were gone. A spicy flowery scent followed her as she dropped her arms around his shoulders and pulled his head down to hers.

"You're wearing too many clothes." She bit him playfully on the lip.

Nathan picked her up and carried her back into the bedroom. He put her gently onto the mattress and undressed remembering to remove his socks. Her right hand stroked his back while her left hand played with one of her nipples. Naked, he moved onto her. They moaned as they embraced. The softness of her hairless body pulled his body into hers. He reached for his pants by the side of the mattress, took out the condoms and broke open the box. The condoms spilled onto the floor.

"You don't need those," she said.

"What?"

"It won't feel as good."

"It'll be good," he said.

"I'm clean."

“Sure?” He picked up one of the condoms off the floor.

His penis was losing its hardness. They stared at each other. She took the condom from his hand and tore open the wrapper with her teeth. She popped the condom into her mouth and pushed him onto his back to perform the bedroom trick of covering his penis with the condom without using her hands. Proud of herself, she grinned at him and proceeded to lick her way up his chest to his lips. He tried to flip her into the missionary position, but her grip on his hair and her kisses kept him on his back. With her remaining hand, she reached back and grabbed his penis firmly, pushing her body down. Nathan entered her.

He surprised himself, by lasting longer than he expected. The combination of the alcohol, age and the artificial barrier took away his sensitivity. Fiona tried to take off the condom a few times during their sexual play, but he put a stop to each attempt. They ran through a number of different positions before he came. As soon as he did, she pushed him off her and lit a cigarette. As she took the first few puffs, he rolled the cold condom off his penis and looked for a place to put it.

“You’re a keeper,” she said.

She offered him her cigarette. He took a few drags before handing it back to her.

“You worked hard,” she said.

“It wasn’t work.”

With a deep-throated laugh, she took one more pull on her cigarette, put it out and switched the light off. In the darkness he felt her move back towards him. She lifted his arm around her and snuggled her head into his chest as she pulled the

sheet over them. In a few breaths, she fell asleep, leaving Nathan to look into the empty darkness. He didn't know exactly when it happened, but eventually he did fall asleep.

Thursday, May 29, 2014 10:15 A.M.

The diner was full as he entered and made his way over to his friends. Larry was on the phone and Jamal was checking his emails. Larry moved to the center of the U-shaped booth without getting off the phone, so Nathan could sit. The waitress came over with a glass of water and offered him a menu.

"I'll have a coffee, waffles with strawberries and a side of bacon," he said without taking the menu from her.

She wrote it down and went off to get his coffee.

"You look like you had a rough night," Jamal said.

As he ran his hand over the stubble on his face, he gave Jamal the finger.

Larry finally got off the phone. He had been talking to his editor. "Where did you get to last night?" he asked.

"Me?" Nathan said. "I was at Manitoba's for a few of hours. Where the hell were you?"

"The book reading and dinner ran late. I texted you and came by your place, but you weren't in."

Larry's latest mystery novel featuring his defeated but not broken detective had been released a few weeks ago. It was number five on the New York Times bestsellers list and he was pissed. His previous four books had gone to number one.

“So, Jen’s gone for one day and Jack is back,” Larry said.

“Ease up, man,” Jamal said. “His girl just left with his kid.”

Jack had been Nathan’s nickname at Cornell – after Kerouac, not because of his writing style, but for his looks. Jamal he’d met at Tisch when they were both doing their masters, but Larry had brought the nickname with them when he came to New York to get into publishing.

“So what happened?” Jamal asked.

“I don’t know. She went to her parents’ house in Georgia and took Ben with her.”

“Are you going to go down there?” Larry asked.

The waitress brought his food and topped up his coffee for him. He added more sugar and said, “I don’t see much point. I can’t afford to go and what is there to say? We’ve said it all. She wanted me to move down there, but what the fuck am I going to do in Macon, Georgia?”

“There have been some great Southern writers. Tennessee Williams, Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe...” Jamal said.

“Katherine Ann Porter, Allen Tate, Mark Twain...” Larry offered.

“Harper Lee,” Nathan said in between a mouthful of his waffle. “Great list, but I have no interest in living in the South. It took me long enough to get out of the Midwest.”

“Hemingway was born in Illinois and...” Jamal said.

“Let’s not start another list,” Nathan said.

“Anyway, he doesn’t count,” Larry said. “He moved to Paris in his early twenties and his work was about his travels, ex-pat Americans and the wars in Europe. At least Fitzgerald, born Minnesota, wrote *The Great Gatsby* and *The Last Tycoon*. Stories that happen in the U.S.”

“I’ll give you *The Great Gatsby*,” Jamal said, “but you can’t count *The Last Tycoon*, because it wasn’t finished.”

“You can’t fault the man for that,” Nathan said. “How was he to know he was about to die of a heart attack?”

Nathan pushed his empty plate away, and held up his cup as the waitress passed by with the coffee pot. The place was emptying out, as most people got on with their morning routines.

“An insane wife and drinking every day would give anybody a heart attack,” Jamal said.

“You’re lucky Jen just left you. Zelda wrote a book about him and their failing marriage and had it published,” said Larry.

“*Save me the Waltz*.” Jamal nodded. “Not a bad novel. She wasn’t as good a writer as Scott though.”

“Fair’s fair – he did use their life together for material in *Tender is the Night*,” said Larry. “And the unrequited love in *Gatsby* was all based on the fact that Zelda wouldn’t marry him when he was a poor enlisted soldier stationed in Montgomery, Alabama. The same plot point was used in his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*. It must have been hard to know the woman you loved only married you when you became financially and professionally successful.”

“Kerouac’s first wife married him to get him out of jail. Her family wouldn’t let her touch her trust fund unless they did. They got married in the jail. Hemingway wouldn’t have been Hemingway if he didn’t have his first wife’s inheritance. He would never have gone to Paris and he wouldn’t have had the time to write.”

Nathan knew what his friends were doing and he appreciated it. Talking about their writing heroes’ screwed up lives. It seemed being a writer and having a harmonious home life didn’t often work. Still, Jen’s going had caught him off balance and he missed his son.

The waitress brought over the bill and they all dug into their pockets. He didn’t have any money on him, so he dropped his credit card on top of the bill without looking at it. Both Jamal and Larry dropped a twenty-dollar bill on top of his credit card.

“How many times was Hemingway married?” Larry asked.

“I think three times,” said Jamal. “No, Steinbeck was three and Hemingway was four times. What about Faulkner?”

The waitress came back with their change. “The card was declined. Do you want me to try another one?”

Nathan went for his pocket again to dig out his other card, but he was afraid Jen had maxed out both cards with the flights to Georgia.

Larry threw another twenty on the plate and said, “That should cover it.”

Nathan took back his useless card and put it in his pocket.

“I’ve got to hit the restroom before I go,” said Larry.

Nathan got up to let Larry out of the booth and took the chance to thank him for breakfast by looking him in the eye and patting him on his shoulder. He sat back down and picked up his coffee to finish it.

“I guess this might not be the best time to tell you, but I heard from my editor Julie, about your book,” Jamal said.

“I know. I got their rejection letter three days ago.”

“What’s crazy is that she loved *Long Journey into Death*. She begged her company to buy it, but they wouldn’t. She said it’s the first time that has ever happened to her. She was so furious, she thought about leaving. She told me, since you’re a first-time writer she wasn’t expecting the company to give you a big advance and they still wouldn’t give her the green light.”

Larry came back from the restroom but did not sit down. “I’ve got to go. I’ve got a meeting across town. If there’s anything you need, man, let me know.”

“I’ve got to go too. Belle has a show-and-tell at school and I promised her that I’d be there for it,” said Jamal.

He watched them walk out together and go separate ways. The waitress saw him looking and came over and refilled his coffee cup. He had missed work that morning, thanks to last night’s adventure, and he had nowhere to be and nobody waiting for him.

Thursday, May 29, 2014 6:10 P.M.

Nathan speed dialed Jen’s number. It rang five times and then went to her voice mail. She sounded happy and upbeat on her message.

“Hey Jen...it’s me. I’m going to try your parents’ number.”

He went through his phone’s contacts to find their number under her maiden name, which was Crisp. Hesitating for a slight moment, he hit the number.

“Hello?”

It was Jen’s father. Nathan was tempted to hang up.

“Hey, Richard, it’s Nathan.”

Silence.

“Is Jen there?”

“No, she’s out with her mother.”

“I tried to get her on her cell phone, but it went to her voice mail.”

Silence.

“Is Ben with you?”

“He’s down for the night.”

Nathan looked at the clock. Six-fifteen. Richard was lying to him. Ben’s bedtime was seven o’clock.

“Tell him that I love him and ask Jen to call me when she gets a chance.”

Richard didn’t even grunt before hanging up the phone. *Fuck*, thought Nathan, *they’re already trying to wedge me out of Ben’s life.*

Looking down at his phone, he saw that it had defaulted back to contacts and a few places below Crisp was a new name, Fiona. She must have inserted her name and number before he left her that morning. He looked at it for a moment before pushing call.

She picked up before the first ring ended, “What?”

"It's me, Nathan...from last night."

"I remember you. You were good."

"So were you."

"Of course."

Nathan laughed and felt the tension leave his body.

"Your girlfriend still out of town?" she asked.

"Yes and she might be for a while."

"Lucky me. At a loose end tonight?"

"Yes."

"There's a party at the Bowery. Show up about ten and ask for Frankie – I'll put your name on the list. Bring your smile," she said and hung up.

The heaviness of the late May day had left with the sun, and Nathan enjoyed his walk to the Bowery, particularly the women wearing flimsy tops, short skirts and flip flops. A couple of blocks away from Delancey Street he could feel the energy coming from the Bowery – the line to get in was around the block and growing. Nathan had been to the Bowery a number of times to see bands, but it had never been like this. As he turned the corner onto Delancey he saw there was another entrance to the event. A line of limousines were waiting to drop off their passengers. One of the cars pulled away and the next one pulled up to the drop-off spot. The car's door was opened by security and a long pair of legs stepped out. The crowd waited to see who it would be. Cameron Diaz smiled at the crowd and was quickly joined by her latest man. Taking time to be caught by the numerous cameras, they

made their way into the Bowery. Nathan stood back for a moment and watched. Colin Farrell walked in, cigarette in hand. Zac Efron and Shia Labeouf got out of separate limos but drew the same response from the women. There were many people he didn't recognize, but it didn't make him feel any better. Security was everywhere and flashes from a multitude of cameras kept taking his night vision. The crowd pushed him forward. He moved away from the main entrance and found a large guy standing off to the side. He had a security earpiece in and his eyes never stopped roaming over the crowd when he spoke. "You can't stand there."

"I was told to ask for Frankie," Nathan said.

The guy's eyes stopped for one moment and gave Nathan a thorough up and down, making his jeans and T-shirt feel like rags compared to the guy's thousand-dollar Italian suit. Nathan waited while the security guard made a decision and spoke into the microphone hidden in his sleeve. "Is Frankie available? I've got somebody asking."

He listened for a moment and then asked, "What's your name?"

"Nathan...Nathan Sims."

As he waited for a response he went back to observing the crowd. After twenty minutes, a woman who was over six feet tall came up to the security guard and spoke to him. His response was to point at Nathan.

"I'm Frankie. Who put you on the list?" she asked.

"Fiona."

"Fiona who?"

Nathan paused. "I don't know her last name."

He turned to leave, when Frankie surprised him by opening the velvet rope for him.

“It’s just Fiona,” she said.

“Like Cher or Madonna?”

“Something like that.” She took his hand and attached a diamond bracelet around his left wrist.

“That’s not...?”

“Yes, it is. It’s part of the goodie bags tonight and a way for security to know who’s allowed into the VIP area.”

“What if I lose it?”

“It’s yours to lose.”

Nathan couldn’t take his eyes off the bracelet.

“New to this game?” she asked.

“What gave it away?”

“Relax, you’re on Fiona’s guest list.”

With that last bit of advice she left Nathan to take care of other matters. He made his way into the club, giving a nod to the security guy who’d already forgotten he existed. There was a bar on the ground floor, which he had to pass through multiple checkpoints to get to. The security would catch a glimpse of his bracelet and let him through. It wasn’t just the security checking out his wrist. The majority of people did not have the bracelet. The official party photographers got in his path to take his picture and once or twice strangers jumped into the frame, looking for the entire world like his best friend.

It took a good five minutes before the barman took his order. When he brought the Stella back to Nathan, he caught sight of the bracelet on Nathan's hand.

"There's no charge, sir."

"Thank you."

Nathan dug for a few ones to leave as a tip.

"Sorry for the wait, but the VIP suite is upstairs, sir. They're better equipped to take care of you up there."

"Right...thanks."

Nathan left the crumpled up ones on the bar counter and moved through the crowd towards two of the largest human beings he'd ever seen in his life. They stood either side of an opening that had red curtains drawn across it. Self-consciously, he stepped forward and brandished his wrist so they could see it. The giant on the right bent slightly and swept one curtain aside for him while the second giant kept stoically still.

Nathan entered the ballroom. It was a large area with a proscenium arch stage at one end of the room and a bar at the other end. It was like a million school auditoriums around the country, except for the bar and the fact two New Orleans-style staircases hugged the walls on either side leading to a crescent-moon balcony that overlooked the floor and the stage. Other people were coming through the doorway, so he moved and made his way as fast as he could to the staircase. Big as it was, the room was packed with famous people. It was very disconcerting – he recognized so many people, but he didn't know any of them. J-Lo was on the dance floor with a man he didn't recognize. He brushed past Clooney as the man took his

drink from the waitress. Blake Lively bumped him and didn't apologize. Making his way upstairs, he found a safe place to stand and observe but not be seen. On the stage was a band called *The Stereo*. Nathan wasn't a dancer, but he found his feet itching to move. Their album had gone double platinum. A waiter would find him periodically, so he got fed with hors d'oeuvres and his Stella got replenished. It was closing in on midnight and he still had not seen Fiona. He'd texted her twice, but it was impossible to hear your phone over the music and the crowd noise. Just as he planned to have one more drink before leaving, his space was invaded by a group of four girls and two guys who seemed to be laughing about nothing. Slowly, they took up all the space until Nathan had no option but to tap the shoulder of the guy who was telling a story that only half of them were listening to.

"Excuse me," Nathan said.

The guy ignored him.

"Excuse me," Nathan yelled and this time grabbed the guy's arm, which got his attention.

"What?"

"You need to move forward a bit."

This got the guy's full attention and he turned to confront Nathan. "Do you have a problem?"

"Jerry?" Nathan said.

Jerry squinted at Nathan before saying, "Jesus Christ, Nathan, what the fuck?" He grabbed hold of Nathan and pulled him into a hug. "How long has it been?"

"I don't know - four years?"

“Shit, has it been that long? Still in New York?”

“Yeah, never left.”

“Me neither. I’ve spent sometime in L.A., but I hate the fucking place. I’m going to shoot my first feature out there later this year. I’m trying to get them to let me shoot somewhere else. What are you up to? Still writing?”

“Yeah, still writing.”

“Published?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

Nathan could see Jerry had lost interest in him. Jerry was still looking for a comfortable way out of the conversation when Fiona jumped into Nathan’s arms.

“You came!” she said.

Kissing Fiona back, he could see Jerry’s shocked expression out of the corner of his eye.

“I’m bored. Let’s get out of here,” Fiona said.

“Sure. Hey Fiona, this is an old friend of mine,” Nathan said.

“No time, no time – let’s go,” she said.

Nathan shrugged an apology at Jerry as Fiona started pulling him away. Jerry reached after him and crushed a card into Nathan’s hand.

“Call me... I need to talk to you about something,” he said.

Nathan only had time to nod at Jerry before the crowd swallowed him.

As they were leaving the club, Frankie appeared, thrust a couple of goodie bags into Nathan's free hand and said, "Your limo is in front."

Fiona air-kissed her cheeks and said, "Wonderful party."

Pleased, Frankie turned to Nathan. "I hope you had a good time, too."

"Yes," replied Nathan as he allowed Fiona to pull him out the door, where the flashlights from a bank of photographers blinded him. Guided by Fiona's hand, Nathan put up his other hand to protect his eyes as Fiona continued to move forward unaffected by the flashes from the cameras. He banged his head as he fell into the limo after her. The tinted windows held off the worst of the flash and his eyes started to recover as the car pulled away. Fiona's dress was hitched up, exposing every inch of her legs. She was staring at Nathan as he checked her out, but her eyes were hidden behind a large pair of sunglasses.

"The Park Avenue address, Miss?" the driver asked without turning around.

"No, let's go to the hotel, Wilson."

"Yes, Miss."

Instructions given, Fiona closed the partition to give them privacy.

"Don't be a stranger," she said.

Nathan moved across to her and she met him half way. Her hand went instantly to his groin and expertly started to release him. The prude in him took a quick look at the darkened partition, but Fiona's smooth technique brought his focus back to her.

Suddenly breaking away from him she asked, "Do you like me?"

"What?"

“Do you like me?”

Fiona had taken her hand off his penis and was leaning away from him.

Feeling exposed, he put his arm across his rigid cock.

“Yes, of course,” he said.

“But you don’t know me.”

“No.”

“You have a wife and child.”

Nathan put his dick back inside his pants and said, “You can drop me off here.”

“Why?”

“I don’t like the game you’re playing.”

“I’m telling the truth.”

“I never lied to you.”

“Have you ever had a Tourist Blowjob?”

“What?”

“I’ll take that as a no.” She held the button down on the armrest to open the limo’s moon roof. “The game is for you to stand up and sightsee while I take care of things below.”

Friday, May 30, 2014 2:21 A.M.

From his position on the bed he could clearly see the desks and chairs of the office building across the street from the hotel. If anybody had been working late, they could have seen him. He had discovered when he pulled out that the condom

had broken. Fiona lay next to him in the bed asleep. Pointless to wake her now, he thought. He would tell her in the morning. Movement from across the street brought his attention back to the office building. A cleaner was walking through the rooms emptying trashcans.

His mind flashed back to a pool party at the SOHO House, which was on the top of a private club's building. He remembered watching through a window as a couple made love. He was there for an industry event, and Jen was with him. It had been a late spring day just after Memorial Day and the club had opened their pool for the season. Excitement whispered through the crowd that brought everybody's attention to a small window at an adjoining building. A man and woman were naked in bed making love. It wasn't inspired and you couldn't see much as the man was large and on top of the woman. You only got flashes of her head, as the man thrust his ass at her, and her legs that she held up in the air around his waist. From the crowd's distance and because of the usual street noises, the lovemaking had no sound track and it didn't last long. The crowd recognized the unmistakable agony of the man's ejaculation thrusts and gave a cheer of approval, which Nathan and Jen found themselves joining. They watched as the woman raised her arms to give her now still lover a hug. Nathan would never know if it was the crowd's cheer or if the woman, in a post-coital haze, dreamily looked out her window. What she saw sent her lover sprawling as she rushed out of the bedroom. Sleepily looking out of the window, the man saw his impromptu audience but, confident in his performance, he strolled to the window, his spent cock hiding in his pubic hair, and drew the blinds with one final cheer from the SOHO crowd.

Turning his attention from the window back to Jen, Nathan could not contain the excitement in his eyes. Jen had been sick with a persistent spring cold and had only decided to accompany Nathan that night after a course of antibiotics had worked. They both came from conservative backgrounds and neither of them sought to experiment sexually. They were happy to keep it in the bedroom but, fresh from moving in together, Jen's cold had restricted them for the last ten days and so their need for each other hit them hard. Jen took Nathan's hand and they went in search of a place to satisfy their lust. They moved past the elevators that were by the bar to the staircase at the side and entered the stairwell that seemed overly sparse after the opulence of the pool area. The party was at the top of the building, so nobody would use the staircase to leave. Their excitement made them run down a few flights of stairs where the fireproof doors and the concrete walls muffled the party noises coming from above. They stopped on one of the platforms between the floors and had a quick look down and up the stairwell – nobody was coming from either direction.

In their two-year relationship they'd never made love to each other outside. The sex act they had just seen and the first warm weather of the year now made them reckless. Jen was wearing a short dress. Moving her thong panties to the side, she leaned against the wall arching her back to lift her ass to Nathan who'd opened his pant's zipper and had already brought his hard cock out. With her four-inch heels, Nathan only had to bend his knees slightly to ease inside Jen, who was as excited as he and ready for him. Surrounded by the muted noises of hundreds of people, Nathan lasted mere minutes.

It was the night Ben was conceived.

Friday, May 30, 2014 8:32 A.M.

Nathan woke to the sound of a heavy door closing. Fiona was not in the bed. He flopped back onto his pillow and pulled the duvet over his head and groaned.

“What’s the matter, lover?” Fiona said. “Did you think I’d run out on you?”

Nathan flipped the covers back and squinted in the sunlight. Fiona stood in the bedroom’s doorway, a bathrobe on but loosely tied and revealing more than it concealed. One of her legs was completely exposed as she leaned against the wall with her legs crossed.

“Breakfast has arrived,” she said. “There’s another bathrobe in the closet to your left.”

“Are you on the pill?” Nathan asked.

“Of course not, I’m a lesbian.”

“The condom broke.”

“I wondered why it felt so good.”

“Spoken like a true lesbian,” Nathan said. “I should have checked – been more careful.”

“Don’t worry so much, you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“One day I’ll tell you how I became a father.”

“You’d best hurry or there’ll be no coffee left.” She left the room.

He hopped out of bed, found the bathrobe and slipped it on. The feel of the material against his skin made him aware of the quality of the fabric. Entering the

living room, he stood and took in the luxury that surrounded him. The hotel room was larger than his entire apartment. Sober and not high on sex, this was the first time his mind was clear enough to consider his position. Fiona was sitting on the couch with the breakfast on the table in front of her.

The hotel had brought it up on a rolling cart, which they left in the small hallway leading from the living room to the suite's front door. The hallway was wide enough that, even with the service cart, you could walk to the door without having to turn sideways to get past it. Fiona was on her iPhone going through her messages and responding to some of them. He sat next to her and helped himself. It seemed, not knowing what he would like, she had ordered everything from the menu. There was enough food for eight people. Fiona just had a coffee in front of her, so it looked like it was all for him. There were scrambled eggs, poached eggs, fried eggs, salmon, sausages, both linked and flat, bacon, regular and Canadian. There were bagels, pastries, toast and pancakes. There were waffles with strawberries and two bowls of mixed fruit and, to round it all off, there was a bowl of oatmeal. Ignoring it all, Nathan poured himself a glass of water and fixed some coffee. Fiona's focus was still on her phone. Her robe had fallen off her right shoulder and from his side view Nathan could see the silhouette of her left breast.

Taking a sip of his coffee he asked, "Who is paying for all this?"

"Excuse me?"

"Who's paying for this?"

"Breakfast?"

"Yes."

“Me.”

“How do you get this off?” He held up his wrist.

“There should be a catch...just here.” She barely touched it and the diamond bracelet came loose. Nathan caught it and immediately held it out to her.

“You should have this back.”

“Why? I have my own.”

Nathan placed the bracelet on the table by the cold pancakes and picked up his thin white porcelain cup of coffee. As he sipped, he was aware of Fiona’s eyes on him. *After this coffee it’s time to get back to the real world*, he thought.

“What’s this about?” she asked.

“Look, I’ve had fun, but...”

“Is the girlfriend back in town today?”

“No.”

“Then why give back the bracelet?”

“Because it’s not mine.”

“Three hundred bracelets were given out last night. Do you think any of those other two hundred and ninety-nine people are going to return their gifts this morning? Most of them have probably already gotten their assistants to take them down to their local pawnshop.”

“It’s too much.”

“Who are you to decide that?”

“Who *are* you?”

“Forgotten my name already?”

“No, I mean, what are you? Are you an heiress of some large fortune? Bill Gates’s daughter? What?”

“Why does it matter?”

“I don’t know...it just does.”

“Who are you, Nathan?”

“Me? I’m nobody. I’m a kid from the Midwest who came to the big city to see if he could make it.”

“And did you?”

“No.”

“Did you try?”

“Every day. But we weren’t talking about me.”

“I’m a successful woman who knows how to get things done.”

“What do you do?”

“I bring people together; I make things happen.”

“I don’t think I can run in your world. I don’t have the bank account to keep up.”

“You don’t have to worry about that...”

“I couldn’t take...agree to that type of arrangement.”

“Strange. Women make that arrangement everyday, but a man...”

Nathan finished his coffee and stood up.

“The fact you don’t want that type of arrangement makes me want you around.”

“Thanks, but...”

“Does money bother you so much, Nathan?”

“Maybe it’s not the money, maybe it is the success. I’m more used to failure.”

He walked into the bedroom and started gathering up his clothes. Fiona followed him. They had shared every part of themselves with each other, but Nathan didn’t want to get dressed in front of her. It felt too intimate.

“May I grab a shower before I go?” he asked.

“Yes. Where are you from?”

“Bushong, Kansas. You?”

He turned the shower on and climbed in. It was so hot, he had to dance around the water jet until he had worked out the shower’s controls. Fiona had followed him into the bathroom to continue their conversation.

“I was raised by my father and because of his work, we traveled a lot,” she said over the sound of the water.

“What about your mother?”

“She was never part of my life.”

“Yeah, I had a father like that.”

Unlike Fiona’s apartment, the hotel had put out soap to be used. Unwrapping the plastic wrap and taking out the small individual piece of soap, he started lathering up his chest and arms.

“What do you do?” Fiona asked.

“I’m a customer service manager at Wind Bell Phone Company.”

“Cool.”

“No, no, it’s not.”

“Who am I to say? I’ve never done it. It might be the greatest job in the world.”

“Let me save you the trouble – it’s not. I...also write.”

“What?”

“Greeting cards.”

“No way.”

“Novels.”

“Anything I’d know?”

He turned off the shower, grabbed the towel he’d thrown over the partition and started to dry himself. “Not unless you go shopping for books in my closet.”

“How many novels?”

“Five.”

“That’s dedication. I’d love to read them sometime.”

Nathan got out of the shower and grabbed his pants. It seemed he was going to have no choice about dressing in front of her.

“In most creative industries the establishment has their heads so far up their own asses... they are never the ones to identify the new voices, the new creators,” she said.

“That sounds better than failure.”

She grabbed his hand and stopped him from putting on his pants. He stood before her naked, but this was forgotten when he saw the intensity in her eyes.

“Would you like to be successful?”

“Yes. Who says no to that?”

“Would you like my help?”

“This is not...I’m not...”

“Would you like my help?”

“Yes, but that’s not why I’m...”

“Nothing is free. You’ll owe me.”

“OK. What?”

“I want you to...how about we work that out later?”

“OK, but whatever it is, let’s say it has to be negotiated in good faith.”

“Agreed. To make it official, I like to seal my deals with a kiss.”

“I can do that.”

Fiona smiled and kissed him on the lips.

As he entered his apartment carrying the black goodie bag from his night at the Bowery, Nathan looked around at his place. *What a shit hole*, he thought. A place he would never dream of bringing Fiona. He tossed the bag, which Fiona had forced on him before he left her hotel room, onto the small kitchen counter, opened the fridge door and then closed it again – still empty. He’d have to go shopping, but he had no money and his check from work wouldn’t be in until next Friday.

The shiny black gift bag got his attention again and he emptied the contents onto the counter top. There were four boxes of various sizes inside, but the first thing he noticed was the diamond bracelet lying amongst them. Fiona must have slipped it in the bag after they had sex and he took another shower. He moved it to one side and started opening the other boxes from largest to smallest. The first box

was empty, but he could clearly see that it was meant for the bracelet. There was also some paperwork in the box, which he glanced at – in lieu of a receipt for the jewelry the party organizers had supplied the supporting documents to prove ownership. In the three remaining boxes he found a Rolex watch, diamond stud earrings and diamond cuff links, all with accompanying paperwork. He didn't know how much it all cost, but he figured it was far more than he earned in a year. This reminded him that he hadn't called his boss yet and it was nearly mid-day. As he made the call, he looked at his bounty waiting for his boss to answer. He found looking at his diamonds took away any fears about his boss being angry with him. His call went straight to voice mail.

“Hey, Bob, I'm still not feeling well. Sorry about calling so late, but I had an appointment at my doctor's and I had no cell service at his office. Hopefully, with the weekend, I'll be better on Monday.”

Nathan slid all the gifts back into the bag and went to his desk, opened his computer and started checking the value of each item.

Five hours later, after visiting three different pawn shops, he was \$75,000 richer. The New York streets he normally wandered aimlessly were dangerous. The cash was in his backpack and he had both straps on his shoulders and the clip that went around the chest clipped. If somebody wanted his backpack they were going to have to take him with it.

At his bank the cashier's eyes widened as stack after stack of money came from Nathan's backpack. He had sixty piles of ten \$100 bills and ten piles of twenty-

five \$20 bills for the grand total of seventy-five-thousand life-changing dollars. The cashier brought over a supervisor and a counting machine. He felt the eyes of the other customers on him.

“Do you want to place all of it in your checking account, sir?” the cashier asked.

“Yes, please.”

“You know it won’t make any interest, sir?”

“That’s OK.”

“We’ve got a number of excellent saving’s accounts that will make as much as three percent on your money, sir,” said the supervisor.

“Maybe some other time.”

“Yes, sir. Will there be anything else?” the cashier asked.

Nathan realized that he needed cash.

“No,” he said.

He walked out of the bank to the ATM outside the building and put in his card. He punched in his PIN number and stood looking at the amount of money displayed on the digital screen. After a few minutes, he had to punch in his personal code again, because it had timed out. This time he drew out eight hundred dollars, the largest amount his bank allowed him per day.

Saturday, May 31, 2014 1:18 P.M.

Nathan grabbed a Stella from his fully stocked fridge, ignoring the dirty pots and open containers on the counter, and slumped down in the love seat in the sitting

area to eat his dinner and watch TV. The news was on and a reporter stood in front of the Bowery filing a report: "...the thief was estimated to have escaped with about two to three hundred thousand dollars' worth of goods. With me is Frankie Laguiro, the organizer of the party at The Bowery." The camera panned right and zoomed out so that Frankie was included in the frame with the reporter.

"Ms. Lagiro..." the reporter said.

"Frankie, please," she said.

"Frankie, could you please tell us what happened?"

"We had a number of special gifts for our VIP guests. Unfortunately, some of our guests have been contacting us since the party to tell us that they were missing certain items. When we couldn't locate them, we had to call the police."

"What were some of these items?" the reporter asked.

"Bracelets, earrings, cuff links and watches," she answered.

Nathan muted the TV and called Fiona.

"What?" Fiona said.

"Is that how you always answer your phone?"

"Yes, it saves time."

"I just saw Frankie on TV."

"Frankie...?"

"From the Bowery party...the party organizer."

"Oh, yeah, Frankie."

"They've reported that some of the goodie bags have gone missing."

"So?"

"I don't know ...I thought..."

"What are you doing tonight?"

"Nothing I couldn't change."

"Great, meet me at the Garden at seven."

Standing outside Madison Square Garden's main entrance, he tried to call Fiona but got no answer. Just as he was about to text her, he felt a tap on his arm. It was the small blonde from the other night at Manitoba's bar. They had not yet been introduced to each other.

"Hey," Nathan said.

"River." She held out her hand to him

"River, nice to meet you. I'm Nath..."

"Nathan, I know. Fiona asked me to get you."

"Oh."

"Follow me and put this on."

Nathan followed River through a side door that was opened for them by a security guard, who checked the badge that River had on her wrist and the all-access badge that he was in the process of putting around his neck.

They entered the bowels of the Garden. River was wearing a blue dress that made him want to go swimming. She was wearing heels that were at least four or five inches, which only brought her up to his chest. There was a part of him that felt like he knew her, but he dismissed it because it would be hard to forget a woman who looked like her. There was a confidence about her and the strength of her small

body was clear in the way she moved. Caught in his ponderings, a normal state for Nathan, he accidentally touched her ass when she suddenly stopped walking. It seemed they had arrived at their destination. As a security guard opened a door for them, she turned and gave Nathan a look that made him raise his hands up. But before he could apologize more, a scream of pleasure came from Fiona, who was already in the luxury box. "Nathan, my hot lover man!"

With a smile, Nathan entered and was engulfed by Fiona. There were other people in the room, but they didn't pay much attention. Their focus was on the basketball game being played, or at least the guys were watching. The women hanging on them pretended to watch the game, but their full attention was on defending their turf. One of them even had her head bobbing in the lap of one of the guys, but he still maintained his attention on the game. River apparently wasn't attached to any of the guys. The girls gave her a look she ignored. She leapt onto a stool by the bar with an athletic move and then picked up a book that she'd earmarked.

The private box had a bartender and waitress on hand to take care of people's needs. The room was comfy, even with about twenty people in it. The buffet food was on a table that was pushed against one wall. The bar had been set up just to the right of the door as you entered. It was small, but fully stocked. There were three flat-screen TVs showing the game – one behind the barman's head, the second above the food table and the third directly across from the food table. At the front of the room were four banks of eight stadium-style seats where you could watch the game on the basketball court live, but only half of those seats were filled. There were

two security guards on the inside of the door and, of course, the guy outside the door. Standing at the opposite side of the small bar to River was a tall wiry man with lamb-chop sideburns and grey speckled hair slicked back with gel. He wore sunglasses and leaned against the bar like a man who'd learned to sleep standing up. He had a glass of water in front of him and an untouched sandwich. It was Wilson, Fiona's chauffeur. Nathan gave him a nod which he ignored.

On the catering table was a wide variety of food and drinks. The waitress walked back and forth with plates of food and drinks. The drinks you had to get yourself.

"What do you want to drink, sir?" the waitress asked.

"Stella, please."

"Do you like basketball?" Fiona asked.

"Yeah. I'm a Kansas boy. The game was invented there."

"Oh dear, River's bored," she said.

River turned a page and continued reading.

"Not long now," Fiona said to River, who continued to ignore her. "She's mad at me. I hate it when she's upset with me. Promise me you won't ever be mad at me."

"I'll do my best," he said.

"That's what I like about you – no bullshit."

Turning, she walked to the front of the room and sat next to one of the men watching the game. Nathan thought he looked vaguely familiar. The girl who had been occupying the seat gave it up for Fiona and went to the table for a quick hit of

fairy dust. The guy tried to ignore Fiona and continue watching the game, but something she said upset him.

“Are you fucking crazy? You can’t make me do it,” said the man.

If Fiona was shocked, she didn’t show it and it was clear that she didn’t feel threatened by the man even though he had stood up and moved into her space. Nathan started to move towards them, but not as fast as Wilson, who’d suddenly come to life and walked towards Fiona.

“It’s fine, Wilson,” she said.

Without comment, Wilson went back to sleep, leaning against the wall.

“Sit down, Mackie,” Fiona said.

“Fuck...” he said.

“Mackie.”

Wilson twitched and Mackie saw it. Thinking better of it, Mackie retook his seat, after taking one more look at Wilson. It suddenly came to Nathan where he had seen the guy before. He was Mackie Phillips, the front man for *The Stereo*. The other guys were probably part of the band and that, of course, explained the groupie girlfriends. The confrontation had taken their attention briefly from the game, but it just as quickly returned. Even the girl giving the blowjob only stopped to give her jaw a rub and then went back to work.

Taking Wilson’s place at the bar, Nathan said, “What this about?”

“Business,” River said.

“A secret then?”

“What do you want?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“Everybody wants something, especially from Fiona.”

“I don’t...well maybe world peace.”

“So sit back and shut the fuck up.”

“What did I do to piss you off?”

“All your questions. You got to fuck a pretty woman. That’s cool, right?”

“And that makes you the disapproving girlfriend?”

“It’s not like you’re available, is it?”

“What has Fiona told you?”

“You have a wife and kid.”

“We weren’t married and she’s left me.”

“Really. How long ago?”

“Four days ago.”

“Shit.”

“It is more complicated than that.”

“Sure, it always is.”

“So, you’re looking out for your BFF?”

“We’re not friends.”

“What the fuck are you then, business associates?”

“We’re not friends.”

“Oh...?”

“It’s complicated.”

“How long has it been complicated?”

“Why the fuck do you care?”

Mackie had gotten up again, but this time Fiona stood with him. Mackie pushed her away from him and Wilson was on him. Mackie went to push Wilson away when he froze. The movement broke River and Nathan’s conversation and they watched the scene play out. The rest of the room had moved away, congregating around the drug and food table. For a brief moment, Nathan saw the gun Wilson had pushed into Mackie’s gut.

“What the hell...?” Nathan said.

“Get out, while you still can,” River said.

“What?” Nathan said.

Looking down into her eyes, he realized her earlier aggression had been replaced with a tenderness he hadn’t earned.

“She can’t make you stay, but she can make you want to stay,” River said.

Wilson’s gun had disappeared into his clothes. Before Nathan could question her more, Fiona appeared at his shoulder. River’s hand hovered close to Fiona’s but she did not take it. It was Fiona’s turn to ignore River. Mackie went to the drug table and started snorting a large amount of white powder.

“I’m hungry,” said Fiona.

“Me, too,” said River.

“How about you?”

“I could eat,” replied Nathan.