

The Naked Angel

A Novel

By

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## Chapter One

After catching a cab from La Guardia airport, I stayed long enough in my apartment to drop my suitcase. I barely acknowledged the skyline of New York, which normally filled me with excitement, even after seventeen years of living in the area. I walked seven blocks and half an avenue over to reach what had become, since being ousted from life, my local, O'Flaherty's on West 44th Street between 9th and 10th avenue. It was one of many Irish-themed pubs in New York, but at least this one was owned and run by an Irishman. The bar played towards America's romantic notions of what they believed Ireland to be and therefore it was an odd mix of Americana and authentic Irishness.

It suited me fine being as I was an Englishman abroad. I had not lived in Britain for many years and I had absorbed mannerisms and attitudes from my adopted homeland since uprooting and moving from England many years ago - I still had my Englishness, but now it was veined with American opinions and characteristics. No longer could I sit calmly through bad service or apologize to every human being within my vicinity for simply existing. My 'can do' attitude jarred violently with the 'can't do' attitudes of old friends and family back home. I had no patience for this nation of conformists from which I had sprung, until I had suffered the ruin of my own empire - with experience came knowledge, and then empathy. Like the great lost British Empire I was born into, my memories of my family were a heavy lead cloak that descended upon me in penance for past glories. It tainted the very atoms that made up my new lonely life and impaired my ability to start afresh.

As I walked by the strangers that were my neighbors eager for their latest fix of the New York nightlife, I looked at their happy faces excited about celebrating the long weekend of the resurrection by drinking and trying to get laid - even the Jews got into the game. I kept my observations to a minimum, because nothing made you look more like an outsider than gawking, not that there was much to look at in my part of New York that had been my home for the last four months. There was just row after row of early twentieth century buildings with stores on the bottom floor and small cramped apartments on the four or five floors above. The stores provided for all the needs of the local populace – dry-cleaning, liquor, delis, drugs and a plethora of different foods served by restaurants from around the world and of course pubs, lots of pubs.

The Irish escaping the potato famine arrived to find the squalor of the city's shantytowns, but with no other options had settled this part of New York. Packed like rats, they found work along the docks of the Hudson River or on the railroads that carried freight into the city along 11th avenue.

Up until 2001 it had still been a low rent family neighborhood, but the developers finally got their way after 9/11 and difficult zoning laws were finally put aside to allow people like me to come in, which 'gentrified' the area and made it completely un-affordable to families that had lived there for generations. You could never accuse New York of being sentimental when there was a buck to be made. Now the area was filled with gays who'd emigrated up from Chelsea, actors going to The Actor's Studio or working actors who liked the closeness to all the theaters and businessmen like me who enjoyed the short walk to work in mid-town.

North of me was Mammy and Daddy central, otherwise known as the Upper West Side. They were the most dangerous sidewalks in the city. Families pushing strollers would happily run you into buildings, or fruit and newspaper stands and would sneer at you for being an uncaring bastard, if you dared to raise your voice in complaint. I only entered this territory if invited to dinner by friends who'd clung onto the city even after having children.

South of me was more of the same, except it was gay. Chelsea was the lighthouse to every gay boy from the small towns and cities of America. They would get off the buses, trains and airplanes where they'd hidden their sexual desires in the heartland of unforgiving churches, where they would have been stoned or worse condemned to Hell by their family and friends. As they crossed the invisible lines into their own personal Oz their mental shackles would fall from them and they would be welcomed into the bosoms of men who could tell them it was fine to be who they were born to be.

I was half way to O'Flaherty's, when I decided I'd better call Sarah.

The phone rang a few times before my ex-wife answered, "Hello."

"I'm back in New York," I said. "I can pick up the kids tomorrow and you can go on your date."

I didn't mean to add the last bit - it just came unbidden from my petty side.

"The kids have made other plans."

"Great."

"Look, they're in bed now, but I'll talk to them..."

"Don't bother."

“The world doesn’t revolve around you, Steve.”

“You’ve made that clear.”

“Me? You’re going to blame this on me? Poor little Steve, thrown out of his home and nobody loves him.”

“Fuck you.”

“If you had, you’d still be living here.”

I walked half a block in silence. I could hear the static breathing of Sarah on the other end of the line. As I crossed the street against the light and dodged around a slow moving car, I said, “I didn’t get it.”

“Oh Steve.”

Was she upset for me, or the financial security that was going to be denied her?

“What happened?”

“They’ve been unhappy with my performance lately.”

“It’s to do with her, isn’t it?”

The silence was on my side this time.

“Not only has she messed up our marriage, but your career as well?” she continued. “What a fool you’ve been...”

I could hear the tears in her voice as I snapped my phone shut, while Sarah was in mid-sentence and walked into the sweaty warmth of the pub. Quickly I took off my overcoat that protected me from the chill of the March night outside.

“Hi, Steve.” The usual?” asked Nelson.

“Yes.” I replied

“I thought you were in LA for the week?” Nelson asked as he poured me a pint of Guinness.

“I just flew back tonight.” I replied, “I finished my business early and didn’t want to stay over.”

“Why not? The weather had to be better than here,” he said, “It’s like the middle of fucking winter. It’s days like these you think you’ll never see the sun again.”

He put my pint down in front of me and wandered off to serve the next customer without waiting for my answer or for me to pay him.

Maybe after a few pints I would tell Nelson the real reason I had left LA early. I picked up my drink and tried to rid my mouth of the taste of my latest failure with a long deep pull on my pint, but the bitterness remained, as would the after effects of my disastrous meeting.

“John, it’s good to see you again,” I lied shaking the hand of a man I loathed.

John Russell had made partner two years ago mainly because of his father, who was a Senator from New York. The company got a lot of legal work through this connection and John had benefited from it. Rumor had it that he hadn’t been seen in his office since making partner, which was not all bad considering that on his best day he had been only a fair lawyer. John was generally to be found on the golf course or in the bed of his latest mistress. The fact that he was at this meeting did not bode well for me.

“Where are the senior partners?” I asked.

He didn't meet my eyes when he responded, "They had another meeting, Steve. They sent their apologies and asked me to handle this...I mean discuss your promotion."

"Why?" I asked

"I told you Steve, they had another meeting..."

"I don't mean that. Why are they refusing me my promotion?"

"Steve, we can be civil about this."

"I've given twelve years of my life to this fucking place and they don't even have the decency to tell me to my face why they are shafting me. They sent you, a daddy's boy who gets my job because of who his father is instead of what he has achieved. Do you even know why I'm not getting this promotion?"

John's slate blue waspy eyes had taken on hardness during my tirade I had never seen before. He was usually the laughing fool at the board meetings and company functions.

"Maybe you are not getting the promotion because of moments like this, Steve. You have lost one major account and we had to take you off another, because of diplomatic lapses, shall we call them, like this one."

"What about all the business I have gotten this company over the years? How much money have I made this goddamned company?"

"You've still got your job, haven't you?"

"Is that a threat?"

"We know you have been going through a tough time recently, Steve. What with the divorce and the affair..."

“Don’t you judge me, you bastard. You’ve screwed your way through half the cocktail waitresses in LA.”

“But it doesn’t affect the way I do business and that doesn’t seem to be the case with you.”

“Fuck you!” I said as I stormed out of the boardroom.

I really had few options in front of me. Leave the company and start over, which would mean trying to get on a partnership track at another company. At my age that would be nearly impossible. I could start my own company, but I’d have to throw in the nest egg I’d built up over the years to get it going. If Sarah and I were still together she’d have supported me in this decision, but now she was looking out for herself and would probably not sign off on this, so I would not be able to get access to the funds, because they were in both of our names. The only other option was to go back to work with my tail between my legs like a good little boy and eat whatever crap they threw at me, because after this humiliation everybody would know that I’d been castrated.

I ordered another drink and thought about what would be the repercussions of this most recent incident. Probably once the Easter weekend was over, I would face a tribunal, which would end with me getting some bullshit warning. A part of me wished that they would fire me so I could leave with my golden parachute, but I knew the bastards wouldn’t make it that easy for me. You didn’t get rich by giving your money away. They would try to force me out or fire me, so that I wouldn’t get a dime.



As I thought about this latest mess I had gotten myself into Nelson whisked in replacing my old glass with a freshly filled pint. Once again, no money changed hands. Nelson would produce a bill at the end of the night that I would pay. Nobody checked their bills - we just knew or at least sensed that Nelson would never cheat us. In this place, he was the judge, the juror and the law. He had the power to exile you and he had the power to welcome you. He was the reason I had chosen this bar to frequent. My phone buzzed for the third time in my pocket as Sarah helplessly tried to contact me to continue our conversation. I didn't have the will power to start another conversation that would end at the same destination.

Lost and adrift, I'd entered Nelson's small cosmos three months earlier. He shook my hand and passed judgment upon me before serving me my first pint in my new home. The other regulars had waited for his verdict. He put the pint down in front of me and I stood ready with payment. Nelson ignored the money and said, "I'll get you at the end of the night, sir." And turned away to serve another customer. I had passed the 'Nelson test' and it was not long before the other patrons engaged me in conversation.

I had been eternally grateful, because in the last few months all I had seen was disappointment, ridicule or pity in people's eyes. There had been enough of my old self left for Nelson to give me a passing grade. I felt so ostracized I would not have been surprised if he had refused to serve me and had thrown me out like some leper.

I had tried a few other pubs closer to my apartment, where beautiful youths floated through with the confidence of inexperience. The barmen ignored me as they

fought to capture the attention of these ethereal girls. I had felt like an un-cool old leech waving impotent hands, with money in them, hopelessly trying to get another drink. Here at O'Flaherty's I felt like I was one of the gang.

Nelson was past such frivolous hormone-induced actions as chasing after young and unobtainable girls or at least he would not allow it to get in the way of his earnings. He was an Irish ex-pat who had arrived in New York nearly thirty years ago. He had a Beatles mop top that would have been the height of fashion in the late sixties. His hair was pure white, but it turned a jaundiced color under the bar lights.

O'Flaherty's had become a home to another exiled and un-loved orphan of the world. I spent the first few months, after Sarah asked me to leave, in a hotel, which was a few miles from my home in Montclair, New Jersey. I tried to stay close to my family because I thought they still needed, and wanted me, but I was wrong. I had become the Ex. When I moved to a rented apartment in Hell's Kitchen, it was my acknowledgment that my life had changed. I had what most men dreamed of - a return to carefree adolescence because I no longer had the responsibility for the family I once had. It truly was a nightmare for I discovered I wanted my family and the honor of being their protector and confidante.

Every night I would leave the prison of work and make my way to O'Flaherty's. I would order dinner from their limited menu and drink my first pint of Guinness. I did not go with my fellow workers for after works drinks because it was awkward for them and me. The double whammies of the affair, and the divorce left everybody speechless. To add to this my professional demotion, which everybody

would have heard of by the time I entered the office on Monday, I realized there was no way back for me.

My routine had taken on a ritualistic pattern that a religious cult would approve. I ate dinner while reading the paper to distract myself and polished off my first couple of pints. Then I would move from the small dining area to the main pub and sit at the bar. As it would still be early, I was guaranteed that my regular bar chair would be available. I would nurse the next two or three pints as the pub filled up. By 10:30 there would be a huge crowd of people laughing, drinking, and desperately trying to forget what a crap day they had and the even worse day ahead of them tomorrow.

The crowd was filled with wannabe actors, writers, directors, painters, sculptors, fashion designers, art directors, and even the odd producer trying to get laid. The pub was in what was considered theatre row, and was surrounded by theater companies ranging from the big Broadway giants to the smallest of off-off-off Broadway black box theaters that held twenty or thirty friends of the cast, but were generally empty. The great and much-touted mythical brilliance of New York Theater, which most of the country treated like bad medicine if it wasn't another jaunty happy family musical, was on display here nightly.

All these talented and not so talented people had left family, friends, and loved ones to make this trek to their Mecca only to find themselves instantly dismissed, ridiculed and pressed into slave labor in the Big Apple's catering industry. If they did manage to get work, it would be with the joy of knowing that

they must work for free. If they got the big break, then they would be 'lucky' enough to work for scale, which was less money than waiting tables.

I admired, and concomitantly loathed these passionate, idiotic people who chased their dreams against all logic or rationale. How many 'no's' does it take for a person to realize that they are not good enough, not pretty enough, not big enough, small enough, happy enough, gay enough, mad enough, smart enough, or not fuck-able enough to succeed?

I had gotten to know some of these passionate people by their first names. I would play pool or darts to pass the time and we would break into simple non-offensive conversations about how certain New York sports teams or celebrity were doing.

"Did you see the Knicks, Yankees, Rangers, Nets, Jets, Giants last night?" or "Did you see Halle Berry, Jennifer Lawrence, Reese Witherspoon, in that film or magazine?"

The faces and people would change but the questions remained the same. I would join in as enthusiastic as the next man. I would even initiate the question to begin the conversation all because of my desperate need to avoid the stark-empty-white-sterile apartment that contained my life.

Around twelve o'clock I drank the dregs from my glass and said goodbye to Nelson and a few of the other guys who were regulars. This was my self-enforced curfew that allowed me to function the next day. Early on, I used to stagger out of the pub at 4am with the other diehards who had nobody and therefore no reason to go home.

The cold midnight air was invigorating after the stale warmth of the bar. The numerous drinks had insulated me from the wind that eternally blew down the avenues of New York. I put my coat on rather than carry it and ambled off home to fight with another sleepless night.

As I walked up 10th avenue, a Simon and Garfunkel song came to mind, brought on by the pints I had drunk or maybe the jukebox.

Slow down, you move too fast  
You've got to make the morning last  
Just kickin' down the cobble stones  
Looking for fun and feelin' groovy!  
(La,la,la,la,la,la, feelin' groovy)

New York was my destination in life even before I knew it myself. Raised in England, I was fed pieces of Manhattan's mythical brilliance throughout my youth and young adulthood. Allen's movie Manhattan, where he and Keaton talked all night and sat on a bench in Sutton place, with the Queensboro Bridge like a Titan raising high above them in the background. A Bridge every New Yorker called the 59th Street Bridge, because of the song by Simon and Garfunkel. Life and love happened in New York, Cage and Cher outside the Met. in Moonstruck, Murray and Weaver doing their own odd romantic dance in front of the same building. New Yorkers also prided themselves on their toughness the Dakota, where Rosemary's Baby was shot and so was Lennon and killed. A place named sarcastically for the state, because when it was build in the 1880's people thought it so far from the

center of the social scene that it might as well have been in North Dakota, even though the address is 1 West 72nd street.

All the songs that serenaded me, drew me everyday to this island of dreams and nightmares – Joel's 'New York State of Mind,' Sinatra's 'New York, New York,' Sting's 'An Englishman in New York,' Lennon's 'New York City,' Fitzgerald's 'Take the 'A' Train' and 'Manhattan,' Springsteen's 'Incident at 57th Street' and 'New York City Serenade,' Waits', 'I'll take New York' and you'd have to add the Pogues, 'Fairytale of New York' to anybody's list. All these artists walked the same streets as me and were inspired by this unique world. A town where Mohammed Ali faced his first ever defeat about ten blocks from where I was, by the gloves of Frazier in '71. I remember being allowed to stay up late to watch it with my father and him telling me excitedly that it was going to be the fight of the century and that was how I remembered it. It was Ali's big comeback after he'd fought the Government draft. He beat them and he came back to the Garden three years later to avenge his loss to Frazier. Every block, every street had a history, had a story. This was what brought me first to New York and from the wreckage of my life, this was what brought me back. I sought to resurrect myself in the place, where Sinatra said, "If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere."

I stopped off at an all-night store, Do Doo-ing my way into the store to pick up some mints for the morning. The Indian cashier looked red eyed at me quickly deciding I was of the harmless crazy variety before ringing up my mints and dismissing me from his world. I continued to sing the '59th Street Bridge' song like a broken record as I crossed over to the west side of 10th and 48th making my way

home to 51st and 10th. As I crossed, a harsh laugh exploded from an empty parking area that had consumed all the buildings on this city block. It disturbed me because I was used to the towering crowded feeling of the concrete trees over my head and I felt uncomfortable in this open wasteland. There were many open eyesores like this parking lot in my neighborhood, servicing the people who drove through the Lincoln tunnel and needed immediately to rid themselves of their cars.

The laugh came again, suddenly and it did not seem to be part of the normal city noises. I stopped singing and tried to disappear. Keep walking, don't look, don't get involved. Whatever was happening had nothing to do with me. The taunting laughter was mixed with two or three voices. I didn't know for sure because I was still refusing to look.

"Hey babe, you look good tonight. Do you want daddy to show you a good time?" one of them said.

"I think she wants all of us," the other assailant answered.

"A bitch like this has got to be in heat to come out like this," a female voice said.

Why didn't the person trapped scream for help? Not that I was going to help, but there might have been somebody close by that would. This was New York home to eight million people, there had to be a few brave ones living here. A yelp of pain broke my mental pleas for a hero,

"You bitch! You broke my finger."

"Getting nasty is she? Well I like getting nasty too."

"Cut her, Blond, show her who's boss."

There was still no scream for help. This strangers' courage shamed me into getting involved. Terrified, I turned to see a naked woman in the badly lit parking lot. Two men and the woman I had heard taunting her were inching closer. With his platinum long mane, Blonde held a blade low and to his side. The naked woman glowed with a pulsing white light and I knew if I didn't say something now it would be too late. "Hey," I croaked loud enough to be heard by me and me alone. Licking my lips I tried again, "Hey." The shock of my voice being flung into the fray brought all their attention onto me at once. I nearly wet my pants, but somehow I remained standing.

"What's going on here?" I said. Amazingly or more to the point stupidly, I started to walk towards them.

"This is none of your business. Walk away while you still can," said Blond.

"Yeah, jerk. You are going to get blood on that nice suit, if you don't get out of here," said the woman.

My eyes were locked onto their victim's eyes. I kept on walking, I should have been running away, but instead I was walking calmly towards Blond and his knife. It was her eyes - her eyes were making me do this. I had expected to see fear, pain, and desperation, but all I saw was tranquility. This was what dragged me towards her - a naked woman in the chill of March was being attacked and she was at peace. I needed that peace. I had known no rest or solitude since I had been exiled from my life.

"I think you are the ones..." I didn't get to finish my sentence.



Blond cut me across my left arm - I screamed and clutched my injured arm. My clothes had taken most of the blow, but the blade had drawn blood. Blond's cut had brought me swiftly back to the reality of my danger, but not fast enough to avoid his crater-faced friend cold cocking me. Finding myself on the ground I hung desperately onto consciousness knowing I would never wake up if I lost this battle. I sought out the blue eyes of peace that had gotten me into this predicament to anchor my awareness and prevent myself from slipping into black. An old army laced boot ended my fight, snapping my head back and I fell into the darkness of my self-made mistake. In the early hours of Easter Friday, I died – but I would be re-born.

## Chapter Two

I ran through the towering arbored avenues of New York. A pervasive darkness descended upon the mysteriously empty city. The only sound was the echoes of my panting breath. The phantom filled windows reflected my fear back at me from a hundred stories high. The platinum blond lion snapped at my heels and prevented me from saving, being saved by the peace held in the blue-eyed lady.

I tried to double back at every cross street, but a crater-faced leopard shadowed me on my right and a she-wolf on my left. My breath grew desperate and every step was filled with the expectation of being shredded by the claws of the pursuing lion. The pain finally came and I crashed to the ground, but the pain came from my head and not my legs as I had thought it would.

My sight returned with the pain, but long moments passed before I could see the world around me. The parking lot's black tarmac moved beneath my body as I tried to remember the events that had brought me here. Blood seeped from the side of my head and left a bitter metallic taste in my mouth, before it reached its final destination of a small pool that had collected on the ground. I brushed my hand against my head instinctively to check the wound only to silently curse myself as the throbbing pain turned to bolts of lightning.

Panting softly I waited for the pain to subside and my vision to return. I turned onto my side and looked around, I was still in the parking lot and as far as I could tell I had only been unconscious for a short time, whether that was a few

minutes or a couple of hours I did not know. In front of me Blond lay on the ground staring at me. Panic flooded my body with adrenalin and I made ready to flee when I became aware that Blond's days of violence were over. Somebody had twisted his head into a position whereby nobody could sneak up on him again. The residue of his last expression still remained in his eyes, and it was one of surprise.

On the flat surface of the parking lot I could make out two more unmoving mounds, which I could tell were human, but thankfully I could not see what had been done to them in the poor light. They were both clothed so the naked lady had probably been taken by whomever had killed these three. They must have just left me, mercifully thinking I was already dead.

I stared bemused at Blond with sick fascination - I had never seen a dead person up close. My father had died when I was a boy, but I had not been allowed to see his body and his casket had not been left open because of the damage he had suffered in his car crash. Death up close seemed so different from the dead bodies I had seen on the news or in the movies.

I could tell Blonde's body had been stripped of its engine and I was fully aware, as I had never been before, of what a huge difference there was between an alive and a dead person. I'd been in the presence of drugged, stupid, handicapped and depressed people and had seen how this had diminished their humanity or spirit, but I had never witnessed or experienced the complete emptiness or void left when the body stopped working. How could a broken neck cause such a difference? Humans broke arms, legs, wrists, feet and all other manner of bones within the body, but the moment the brain or heart stopped working and you died, some

invisible aspect of our humanity was lost, never to return, and what was left was just a physical replication of what we once were.

I dug into my coat pocket looking for my cell phone and felt relief as my hand quickly found it. My first thought was to call Sarah and tell her of my narrow escape. Would she care that I had nearly been killed? Would she rush to my side? Would the cold mask she had worn for me since my infidelity be smashed and the warm loving wife I had once known resurface? These thoughts tantalized my mind for a few seconds before I dismissed them and decided to call the police instead. After all, murder had been committed even if the people who had been killed had been scum. There was also the young woman to be considered - maybe the police would find her alive but I doubted it.

I dialed 911 and pushed my send button, maybe I would get a medal for my foolishness. Perhaps that would remove my present title of philandering slime bag loser and get me the new title of hero, even though I didn't actually save her, but I might get points for having tried. My reverie was broken by a high distressed digital beep. I looked at the screen of my phone, which read, "No Signal."

"Fucking-stupid-piece-of-shit-company-phone," I said to my unaffected phone that had heard this type of abuse from me before. I threw a few more choice swear words at it for good measure. I was still in danger and I needed to get my ass out of this parking lot. Pushing myself up onto my knees I turned to scan the other side of the lot, before screaming like a little girl. Somebody was behind me. I attempted to leap to my feet, but I lost my balance and crushed down onto my butt giving my already bruised brain whiplash from my sudden up and down movement.

White pain clouded my world - my out of shape body gave me one more chance and returned to me my eyesight. I peaked through my fingers at the still crouching figure of the naked lady who had been behind me the entire time. She still sat on her heels and had quietly watched me as I had done my strange human pogo stick routine. The dampness in the front of my pants brought home the fact that she had made me leave behind two different bodily fluids this night. This was not turning out to be the most heroic of rescues.

“Hello,” I said.

She did not respond. She just looked at me with unblinking eyes. I could not help but check her out. Any guy who has been caught by his girlfriend looking at another woman would tell you it was not an option. It was like breathing or swallowing, you just did it. To my utter amazement and a little bit of pride I started to have the stirrings of an erection. She was beautiful and I wasn't as hurt as I had feared.

I tried again, “Hello. Are you hurt?”

Her skin still glowed, but now there were dark marks on her body, which was blood. Blond must have cut her before...before what? Who had killed him and his friends? Why did they save us and then leave the rescue mission half done? She and I looked at each other as these thoughts rumbled through my damaged brain. Questions to be answered later by the police or her - I had to get us out of here. Naked Girl must be in shock that was why she wasn't talking. Once she got some clothes on and had something to eat I was sure she would spout her story like a broken water main and I would be begging her to stop talking.

I gingerly got to my feet and stood for a few moments before taking the adventurous step of trying to walk towards her. I stopped a couple of paces from her - she didn't stand up, but she did watch me very closely.

I held out my hand and said, "I would like to help you. I live one block up. We can go there, clean up, and call the police."

She stood up and faced me without my help. I tried to keep my eyes off her breasts and on her face, but a silent cool evaluating voice whispered 36-C, maybe 38.

"I would like to help you, if you will let me." I said aloud. I tried to smile to reassure her, but it turned into a grimace because of my scalp wound. She grabbed my still out stretched hand with a strength that made my knuckles crack and said, "Vinculum."

A surge of images swept me into the realms of the unknown. Chariots rolled over hills towards ancient city walls, men screamed in triumph and pain as they engaged in open warfare. A trumpet sounded and continued to grow in volume until voices screamed, wrenched in agony from throats, which echoed the trumpet's destructive powers and brought down battlements. I saw a people walking through desert lands. I saw brief glimpses of babies being ripped from mother's arms. The reel seemed endless and I felt my sanity starting to be torn from my body.

Mercifully the cacophony of moving pictures came to an end with what seemed a visualization of the makings of Earth and the surrounding Solar system. One minute there was blackness the next I was looking at a NASA like picture of the Earth, but what separated the darkness from the appearance of my global home

world was a sense of immense power being unleashed. In the midst of all these visuals there were audible words being spoken, which I did not understand,

“TU ES DUX ET EGO SACRIFICIUM.”

The parking lot simmered back into focus as I lay sobbing, the naked lady cradling me in her arms - my head rested against her hard belly just below her gently hanging breasts. The blood that covered her was still sticky and I realized the depths of my distress when I had no urge to suckle upon her nipples. I rested in her arms comforted by her warmth and the safety of her gaze while my body and mind processed this latest trauma listening to her repeat softly like a prayer what I had heard in my own personal movie show.

“Tu es dux et ego sacrificium, Tu es dux et ego sacrificium, Tu es dux et ego sacrificium, Tu es dux...”

After a few minutes, my sobs subsided. I wiped the tears from my eyes and took a few calming breaths to help me regain my composure. My tears seemed to have cleansed me and had unraveled a tight knot I had been carrying around inside my gut. I had not cried when my wife asked me to leave - nor had I cried whilst my life had crumbled around me, but here I was crying like a newborn in the arms of a stranger - it felt good. Feeling calmer, I shakily got back to my feet. I turned and held out my hand to help her up. This time she did not hesitate - taking my hand she stood up. Thankfully she really didn't need my help because in my weakened state I would have been pulled down on top of her. Not a bad thought, I just didn't think she would have appreciated it, after all of tonight's activities. I took off my coat and

offered it to her. She looked puzzled - I mimed putting it on her. Understanding she let me help her on with the coat. She left it hanging open and made no attempt to hide her nakedness. I buttoned the coat for her - I wanted to get to my apartment without another incident.

Unconsciously, I took her hand and started to move my damaged body towards home. I did not try to speak to her, as she obviously did not speak English. The four flights of stairs to my apartment nearly defeated me. White stars flashed before my eyes as I searched in my trouser pockets for my keys. Missing the keyhole a few times I was able eventually to open the door and stumble in - she had stopped holding my hand by the second flight and had been physically supporting me. I would have just stayed on one of the landings and given up all hope if not for her help. I made it to my couch and collapsed. Since my separation, I had fantasies of bringing women back to my apartment, but none of them started with them having to carry me up the stairs. I laughed at the absurdity of my situation - I was with a woman of deepest beauty and I was covered in my own blood and piss. How could she fail to fall madly in love with me?

As I lay on the couch trying not to move because of the pain, I tried to pull my thoughts away from her and back to the business at hand. I failed. Naked Girl sat kneeling directly in front of me and I kept getting lost in the exquisiteness of her face. It seemed to me to be perfect in all ways. There were no blemishes, birthmarks or moles - it was just one smooth, symmetrical canvas of alabaster silk. Her blond hair, that I knew to be real, had none of the harshness of Blond's bottle look. It glowed with warmth that hid a greater fire and at that moment it framed a face that



looked worried - all the time she was in danger she had been unconcerned, but now she was distressed because of me.

What had passed between us? I knew a bond had been forged. I was a lawyer and I knew when a contract had been entered into, but what had I signed? To what had I agreed? She hovered over me not knowing what to do to help me. Maybe I needed a hospital? I should call the police the inner practical me said, but I just couldn't find the energy to reach the other end of the couch to the phone. As I slipped into exhausted sleep the selfish me whispered, "They were dead. What did it matter if I called the police tonight or tomorrow morning? They would still be dead." I agreed with the selfish me and ignored my practical self and went to swim in the pain-free sea of sleep.

I stood upon the shoreline of a raging river. I could not see the other bank's side it was so immense - white maned waves roared repeatedly to the top only to plunge viciously down into the main body of water. The process was being repeated endlessly as far as the eye could see. A figure stood guard over me as I descended the few yards down to the banks of this natural barrier where a ferryman stood waiting to give passage over this bronco-ride of a watercourse. I tried to catch a glimpse of my companion, but no matter how fast I turned around she, because instinctively I knew it was a woman, was always behind me. I felt her anxiety as I approached the ferryman.

A stream of people, as limitless as the water that roared between the borders of mud and rock, walked towards the ferry from all directions. They moved past my

companion and me never touching us but light breezes of their passing stirred my fears. The barge that was always on the verge of being filled never did and each new person who climbed aboard was able to find one more place in the hull.

The ferryman looked from me to my blazing hidden protector and said, "He cannot enter. It is not his time. If he enters now he forfeits his chance at redemption."

I could understand the ferryman, but he spoke no language I had ever heard or known.

My protector responded, "It has been preordained. The Guide has been chosen and the lost souls must be brought home."

"The souls you speak of do not reside within the confines of this realm," answered the Ferryman.

"I know this well. They lie outside of your lands, but we must cross the breadth and width of your cursed realm to reach the place where the souls are lost.

The Ferryman's expression did not change but his face registered the truth of my protector's statement. "You are correct. The way to them is through my lands, but this man can never leave if his feet touch the soil of Hell."

"It has been preordained. We are the guide and the sacrifice. The laws that have stood for all eternity must be set aside, as they were once before when the lamb was sacrificed, so will they again."

With a deep bow of respect he allowed us to join the other travelers upon his ferry. The words that I should not have understood seemed familiar, "The guide and the sacrifice," I had heard that before, but at that moment I could not place where

and the harder I tried to access my knowledge the more it slipped away from me. A circle of space opened up around my protector and me. It seemed our fellow passengers were loath to come near her. Glad for the space, I settled down upon the deck, resting my head at her feet.

My companion, after one last stern look at the other passengers, sat behind me and pulled me effortlessly into her arms and rocked me gently as I stumbled away from the waking world. The comfort and warmth of her hurried me towards the deeper realms of dreams and I carried with me the words she whispered to me as a lullaby, "You are the guide and I am the sacrifice. You are the guide and I am the sacrifice. You are the guide..."

## Chapter Three

I woke up because of the numbness in my right arm and the rancid stench of my own body. I was still on the couch. I had woken a few times throughout the night troubled by dreams or pain from my body, and each time her face, which hovered close by, calmed me enough to send me back to sleep. As I opened my eyes the first thing I saw was her worried face a couple of inches from my nose. A small part of me had hoped that I had had a particularly vivid and bad dream brought on by food poisoning or too much drink, but all the proof I needed that last night happened knelt in front of me. As I moved to get off the couch my headache returned with a vengeance - I went into my bathroom to find some painkillers to at least dull the volcanoes exploding under my damaged scalp. My naked foreign beauty followed me.

I threw four tablets into my mouth and used my hand to scoop water from the tap to swill them down. The tablets exploded inside my stomach damaging the delicate balance that had existed. The explosion awoke the dormant acid that always lurked waiting for its opportunity to race up and do a dance at the back of my throat. My sternum turned into a hot bar of metal as acid burned a trail from my stomach to my throat. I looked at my reflection in the mirror - the whole right side of my head had swollen to three times its normal size. The two halves of my face no longer fit together seamlessly. My right side had turned into a large mountainous range with peaks and valleys that came in many different colors. The left side of my face was a boring pale white with the usual curves and dips you expected to see. My right eye

was black and puffy, but it had not closed completely, so I still had my sight. I would not be able to see my usual family doctor until after the Easter holiday and the thought of going to a hospital emergency room and waiting hours to be seen by a doctor was not appealing - even though I knew having my head checked out would be the sensible thing to do.

I changed my focus from my face to the woman who stood behind me. She still wore my coat, but my memory didn't need any new updates. It had recorded every pleasant curve and swoop of her body from last night. It's amazing what the memory chooses to remember.

"What the hell are we going to do?" I said to the mirror.

She smiled at me. It was my first smile from her and I immediately wanted more.

I turned to face her and said, "I think we both need a shower and then we should get some breakfast. We'll decide what we are going to do after that."

She smiled at me again. I knew she could not understand me, but it felt better to speak aloud.

"Do you want a shower first?" I asked her.

She just stood in the doorway continuing to smile at me. I could really get used to having her around I decided, as long as she kept smiling at me. Enough people in my life were looking at me with disapproval - she could help rebalance the situation.

I bent down and turned on the shower. Blood rushed to my head with the maniacal joyfulness of puritanical nuns who had discovered a sinner. Resisting the

urge to pop the entire bottle of painkillers, I turned to her and silently offered her the first shower, even though I stood before her in soiled clothes. She made no move towards the shower - she just stood in the doorway smiling at me. Well chivalry only goes so far, so I closed the door on her, got undressed, kicked my suit into a corner and climbed into the warm soothing rays of the water. As I put my head under the showerhead, water rushed into my every pore cleaning away the piss and blood from the night's misadventure. I placed my hands on either side of the wall willing myself to ignore the tenderness of my head and instead I focused on watching the blood red water pour down the drain.

I dried myself and put some antiseptic cream on the wound on my arm. Blonde's knife had not cut me deeply, but it would leave a scar. My head still ached, but it was no longer bleeding. The guy's army boot had broken the skin on my scalp, which had scabbed over nicely during the night.

I put on my dressing gown and opened the door to find her exactly where I had left her when I had started my shower. Revived from my shower, I felt a little guilty especially when I noticed some dried blood on her neck. She could be injured or in pain and I had only thought of myself. I brought her into the bathroom and sat her down upon the toilet seat.

"I have to open the coat to check if you are injured," I said.

She looked at me without comprehension. How could I make her understand so I wouldn't freak her out? If I just started to unbutton the coat she might think I was trying to rape her. Not that I was in any shape to have sex, or at least I didn't think I was, but she might not know that.

It would not look good if she started screaming. She didn't last night, but maybe now she was over her shock. She didn't look scared. I mimed taking off the coat, but she just looked at me uncomprehending. Finally, out of options, I started to take the coat off. She watched my fingers undo the first few buttons and then carelessly turned her attention back to my face. Blood once again rushed to my head, this time to my cheeks, which changed to a bright red.

I brought the coat down to her waist, so she would still be covered from the waist down. I tried to have a clinical detachment as I took a cloth and started to wipe the blood from her body, trying to find any cuts, but I was no doctor. The stirrings of my irrepressible friend made me ashamed of myself, but I was not used to giving beautiful women sponge baths. How did male gynecologists prevent themselves from walking around the office all day with woodies? I guess it was easier if you weren't attracted to the women. After I had wiped her down and checked her for any wounds I put the coat back on her.

Miraculously, she had no cuts or bruises. All the blood, and there was a lot of it, was not hers. She must have been standing very close when our rescuer had dealt with Blond and his gang. The blood must have been theirs or maybe some of it was from our rescuer. Perhaps that was why he didn't stay - he may have been hurt himself and he must have staggered off to get help for himself and us and by the time they got back we were gone.

I had been able to wash some of the blood off to check her body for damage, but she still needed a shower to clean herself. I turned on the shower again. The painkillers were finally starting to work so my head felt like a baseball been hit for a

home run instead of a thermo-nuclear detonation test site. I got a fresh towel from the closet for her and scooped my ruined suit up off the floor so she wouldn't have to put up with the smell of urine. With my suit in one hand I turned to close the bathroom door, only to find her right behind me. I dropped the clothes in the hallway and took her back into the bathroom.

"You have to take a shower," I said.

She frowned at me.

"Shower," I said pointing at it for emphasis. She looked where I pointed and then back at me with an expression that clearly indicated she had no idea what I was talking about.

I moved her closer to the bath and reached out with my hand to capture some of the water so I could splash her face, but with a speed and strength belying her size she caught my wrist and redirected it onto me. The bones in my wrist started to scream from the power of her grip and automatically my other hand grabbed hers in a vain attempt to break her hold. I felt like a helpless child in her grip. No matter how I twisted and pulled I could not release my arm.

"Please, I wasn't going to hurt you," I said, "it was water, water can't hurt you. Please let go of my wrist. You are going to break it."

I had stopped struggling and spoke to her through my pain. As soon as I stopped trying to free myself, she let me go. We stood staring at each other, me panting lightly from my exertions - she seemed unaffected. It seemed I had two options: leave her all messed up and dirty or climb back into the shower and demonstrate what I wanted her to do. I took off my robe and stepped into the



shower for the second time that morning. She instantly joined me, without taking off my coat. I took off the coat and placed her under the jets of warm water - she did not protest. Her hair became matted instantly and her body glistened with pearls of water as it rippled down from her head to bounce and drip from her chin, fingers and nipples. I picked up the soap and showed her what to do with it. Placing the soap in her hand I mimed again what I expected her to do. Slowly at first, but then with greater energy she started to wash herself.

Figuring she had it all worked out I stepped out of the shower, but she stopped and stepped out with me with suds all over one side of her body. I stepped back into the shower - she copied me and begun once again to wash herself. I stood there naked with an erection, throbbing in time to my headache, watching her clean herself. I could not help but think that this was not how it happened in Penthouse letters.

The interesting shower experience increased my appetite so I moved into the kitchen, after finding one of my large t-shirts for her. She had followed me to the bedroom naked and waited patiently as I found something suitable for her to wear. Back in the kitchen, I dug around in my fridge and found a couple of reasonably fresh bagels. I turned and bumped into her. She looked painfully attractive standing there in nothing but my old Jets football shirt, which caused familiar stirrings in my loins. I couldn't remember the last time I had had more than three erections before 9 o'clock in the morning. Probably in Sarah's and my first year together, when we had spent many a full day in bed.

Putting down the bagels I took my sex goddess by the shoulders and guided her to one of the two kitchen chairs that were placed in front of a tabletop that folded and unfolded from the wall. This marvelous contraption allowed the real estate agents to say that my apartment had an eat-in-kitchen, which raised the rent by another \$200 a month. Smiling, she happily complied and I was able to move around my small galley kitchen making coffee and toasted bagels without running into her every two seconds. It was pleasant, but hunger was taking priority over my juvenile enthusiasm to play bumping games with her.

I had a small portable TV in the kitchen, which ate up what small counter space I had. In my old life I had been used to watching the morning news in the kitchen as I readied myself for work - it was a practice I had found hard to discontinue. As I waited for the bagels to toast, I turned it on. It was nearly 8 o'clock so the bodies of Blond and his friends should have been discovered by now. It was Easter Saturday, so it was a holiday weekend, but there was a huge Jewish population who would be ignoring it and continuing as normal, as well as many Muslims and Asians. Tourists would also be coming into watch shows or to spend a romantic long holiday weekend in the City that had captured the world's attention through film, TV, theater and music.

The first customer at the parking lot would have arrived no later than 5-6 o'clock in the morning and even a busy New Yorker could not ignore three dead bodies. News reporters, who scanned the police waves, would have been on the scene within five minutes of the report going out. Scraping cream cheese across the crusty craggy surface of the bagel, I waited for the fluffy segment about the latest

wedding the show was picking up the tab for to end and the news update to come on.

I placed a cup of black coffee and a bagel in front of her and joined her at the table with my own breakfast. I nibbled my bagel gingerly trying to bite and chew with my left side off my mouth only. The painkillers had taken the edge off my headache and were helping with the damage to my face as well, but each time I chewed it felt like someone was drilling for oil in my head. I gave up on my bagel and was half way through my second cup of coffee when they cut away to a newswoman who smiled at us, the viewers, to offset the dire news she was about to deliver.

There were a couple of murders, a threatened bus strike, a pothole cover that had exploded, and the weather was near a record low for the year, but there was no mention of three dead bodies in an empty parking lot. There was no way this story could have been missed or for the police to keep it quiet, even if they had wanted to. This was the media capital of world - it was a ferocious beast that constantly had to be fed new sensational stories. The story of three dead people, one of them with his head twisted like a corkscrew to face the opposite direction would have been greeted at the newsrooms like a birthday present.

The show jumped happily from death and destruction to the upcoming Easter egg hunt planned in Central Park. I sat swirling the last of the coffee in my cup at a loss of what to do next. Naked Girl had not touched her breakfast.

I put my cup down and sighed, "Who are you? Where do you come from? What is your name?" I asked her.

My voice moved her attention from the TV and onto me. She gave me a smile that could have won Miss Universe but did not respond to any of my questions. I had not expected her to, considering until this point she had only spoken a foreign language to me. I knew she did not speak English. She wasn't speaking Spanish - there were so many Spanish-speaking people in the city that you couldn't help but pick up a few words. Living in this town you met people from all over the world, so you learned to recognize different accents. She didn't sound European - perhaps she was Russian?

I sat mulling over our position. I had planned to call the cops this morning, but according to the news there had been no murders in the area last night. Would they think I was crazy? Was I? I knew something had happened last night. My face was evidence of that, even if I didn't have Naked Girl sitting across from me making my body act like a teenager.

I could just throw her out of my apartment and dismiss her from my life. She was nothing to me and now she was safe or at least in no immediate danger. Even though I thought this I knew I could not callously show her the door. Besides, something had passed between us last night, what I did not know, but it was something that made me feel uncomfortable. My mind shied away from the word spiritual, but that was what it felt like. I was not knowledgeable about spiritual experiences so I didn't ignore the possibility. As a lawyer you learned to keep all options open until you gathered enough information to delete potential ideas.

It was not that I didn't believe in God - it was that I hadn't spent much time thinking about Him. My mother had been a lapsed Catholic and my dad's family at

best could have been described as Church of England. Football had been my religion growing up in an old Victorian house on Endymion Road, right on Finsbury Park in North London. Arsenal was my team - my dad and I would catch the tube and go the one stop to get to Arsenal tube station every Saturday during the season. One of my greatest childhood memories was when my team won the double in 1971. I was eleven. It was to be my last good childhood memory. A year later my dad died in a car crash on the M1. My father being the smart businessman that he was had life insurance so we did not suffer financially, but my mum moved my brother and me to Bristol to be closer to her family. In a matter of two months I lost my father, my friends and the only world I had known. When my brother and I started our new school I had a hard time fitting in. Between thirteen to seventeen years of age, I went through a growth spurt that took away all my equilibrium. Just trying to kick a football became an exercise in the obscured. Because of this I became a target and it wasn't long before the bullying started.

My younger brother, Phillip, didn't have any such problems and was a star on the football team. I can't blame him for avoiding me at school. He saw what was happening and he wanted no part of the black isolated world I walked in, but I believe this was the root of when we grew apart. Even to this day we didn't have a close relationship. We would call each other on our birthdays or on Christmas or New Years, but that was the extent of our contact. As soon as Philip turned eighteen he went to college in his beloved London and became a doctor. He married some semi-famous actress and started a family. London for me reminded me of my father,

so was never an option. I didn't want to be reminded everyday that my happiness had been stolen from me by an accident.

Books, music and films were my salvation during this time, before I escaped to the sanctuary that is the British university, which was different from the American college system in one major way. The government paid for students to go to school, so the only way to get into the limited number of places available at university was to get great grades in your 'A' levels. This basic necessity rid me and probably many other tortured school souls of all the bullies who all seemed to have one common quality – they never excelled in academics. University was also a start over. In school, girls were unavailable to me, the low man on the totem pole, but in university, suddenly I was cool, for my intelligence, but also because I'd started to finally fill out. I started to lift weights and the scarecrow boyish stick that I'd been began looking like a man. The full beard I was able to grow also helped matters.

There were other nasty surprises to come with our family move to Bristol - eighteen months after my father's death my mother started dating.

When she asked me if I was 'OK' with it, I said yes, but I cursed every man who came to the house to pick her up or drop her off after a night out together. My brother and I were offered no help through this period in our lives. To this day, we had never talked about what we had gone through - there was no priest, vicar or counselor to speak to. We lost our dad – 'deal with it'. We lost our friends and home – 'tough, deal with it.' We lost our mum to every man she dated – 'who cares, get on with it.' So we did.

I never prayed to God for help in trying to understand what had happened to me. I cried, but I didn't cry to Him. It was not that I felt uncomfortable with the thought of having a religious moment, I just felt it was outside the scope of my knowledge.

So I learnt at a young age to keep to the practicalities of the situation - the only person who could answer my questions was Naked Girl and communication was not the strong point in our relationship. I needed somebody I could trust who could act as a translator. The name that came to mind made me uneasy. Karen Kaplan was one of Sarah's oldest friends, but she was also a professor at Columbia. Her field was linguistics and art history. If she didn't know what language this woman was speaking, she would know somebody who would. The only problem now was that she might refuse to speak to me.

Naked Girl sat watching TV as if she had never seen such a wonder before and she still had not touched her breakfast. She seemed content to wait on me as I formulated our next move. I needed to know what had happened between my being knocked out and then waking up to find three dead bodies before I felt comfortable going to the police. I sighed, got up and started looking for Karen's telephone number. I was almost hoping she would refuse to see me because I could already envision her disapproving stare when I walked into her office with this beautiful stray at my heels.

Today was not going to be any better than yesterday it seemed. My only hope was that Karen would not feel the need to crown me with one of her academic books, for Sarah's sake, before I could explain my situation. I did not think my head

could handle another blow. As I entered the second bedroom I used as my office and a bedroom for when my kids visited, which was never, I felt my new shadow following behind me. I felt the great desire to turn around and yell at her that I didn't know what to do, that I was just as lost and confused as she was, but I didn't. It felt good to be needed again.



## Chapter Four

Karen Kaplan was with my wife on the night I met her. In the ensuing seventeen years she had not changed, except for a few faint lines around her eyes. She was a small wiry woman, who stood barely five feet in height and her chest was flatter than an ironing board. I had always liked her, which was not true of many of my wife's friends. I enjoyed talking to her. She was one of the more interesting people I knew in life - she was the archetypal girl that when set up on dates people would gush about her personality, because unfortunately she did not possess a face with which men fell in love.

Sarah did not have this problem - I had watched men crash and burn all night trying to pick her up in the bar where we met. Their mistake, I thought at the time was that they kept ignoring Karen.

"Hello, could I buy you ladies a drink?" I asked them. In my first few years in New York I never said 'Hi'. Saying hello let the ladies know I was British and that normally got me the chance to talk to them, even if I didn't get them all into bed. I also purposely included both of them in the offer.

They checked me out and I passed the mysterious test that women put men through.

"Two gin and tonics," said Karen.

"Two gin and tonics coming up," I repeated.

I quickly returned with the drinks, "My names Steve..."

The three of us talked into the small hours of the night. The guys

I had come with left hours earlier giving me childish thumbs up signs to show me their approval.

When we as a group said for the fourth or fifth time that we should leave because of the hour I still had not solved the issue of how I was to ask for Sarah's number without offending Karen. If Karen had been just a little prettier I think I might have been asking her for her number that night. No woman had ever made me laugh as hard as she had, but she could not compare to Sarah's beauty. It is the shallowness, or insecurity of men - we all wanted the most beautiful woman who would accept us. If they were intelligent, that was a bonus, but not essential.

Karen realized my dilemma and probably desiring her bed, resolved the issue, "Why don't you give him your phone number, Sarah?"

"Shut up, Karen, he hasn't asked for it."

"Well?" said Karen.

"Ah, yes. I would love to call you sometime, Sarah. I have had a wonderful time tonight," I replied.

College, a set of weights, a good job and an accent that the locals loved allowed me to hunt in deeper waters than I could have back home and beautiful Sarah fell for it all. The days of being a scared skinny schoolboy was a long way behind me.

She took a pen from her purse and quickly scribbled her number on a dry napkin. She held it out to me and said, "I only want you to take this if you are going to call me. Don't spoil this evening with phoniness."

I took the napkin and said, "I'm an Englishman so I always keep my promises and I will be calling you next week, I promise."

Sarah smiled at me and Karen said, "I'm glad that's sorted out because I can barely keep my eyes open. Come on, Sarah, I need my bed."

I watched them walk out of the pub, arm in arm, to catch a cab downtown to 8th and Broadway where they shared an apartment together. Before they left, both of them gave me a kiss on the cheek. Karen's had been friendly like a sister's, but Sarah's kiss had caught the edge of my lips - her hand had touched me gently on the shoulder as she had leaned in to plant this promise of future joys upon my cheek and her scent, which invaded my body through every pore brought an uplifting joy to my soul. I floated home and was barely able to restrain myself from calling her the moment I entered my apartment.

My happiness was deflated slightly by the workload that greeted me the next morning on only four hours of sleep, but after my third coffee of the morning I was ready to go to war. I was young, I was twenty-five, so I did not need sleep and I had found love or at least somebody I thought I could love. I was working as a lawyer for J.P. Morgan's, a financial house. My undergraduate degree was in history and to this day I can spend hours reading books that most people pass by without a second glance in the bookstores, but there was no money in that field and I couldn't see myself teaching. So I went to law school and landed a prestigious job at a Fortune 500 Company. I went from student gigs in Oxford to a one-bedroom apartment in

the Murray Hill district of New York. My apartment was an easy walk to the 6 trains on 33rd and Park Avenue South.

Nearly everyday I would catch the train to Wall Street and enter my new world of high-powered capitalism. My job paid me a salary of \$65,000, which was more money than I had ever dreamed of having and I felt like the world was at my feet.

I met Sarah on a Wednesday night, so I had to wait until Monday of the next week before I could call her. Her kiss disturbed my sleep at night and I had to fight with myself not to call her earlier. If I had, I would have broken the rules of the dating game and I would have put her in a tough spot. If I called her on the Thursday or Friday and asked her to see me that weekend, which I desperately wanted to do, I would have been insinuating that she was a loser with no plans or friends - or worse, I would have made her announce early in our relationship how much she liked me, if I forced her to cancel all her plans on such short notice. So I had to call her on the Monday, as I did, and ask her for a date for the Friday. Then she was easily able to say that she could rearrange her plans, which she did, because I had given her enough notice to do so, and the both of us could act very casual towards each other on our date.

For the first few months, I only met Karen when I came to the apartment to pick up Sarah. Our whirlwind romance had no room for anybody but ourselves, but it was not long before Karen started going around town with us. She never seemed to mind being the third wheel when we went to the movies, dinner or the Hamptons for summer weekends. Sometimes she would have a boyfriend, but they never

lasted long. For the most part, her boyfriends were social morons or so pug ugly Karen must have had nightmares at night, if she slept with them. We never talked to her about this, we knew she deserved better, but most men could not see past her outer shell and see the brilliance that was Karen. She seemed to accept this and blazed an incredible academic trail for herself, instead of marrying and putting her career on hold to raise children, as did Sarah and many of their other female colleagues.

When I met them they were both half way through their graduate degrees in Art History at New York University. Karen had already obtained an MFA in linguistics, but she wanted the MA so she could go on to do a PhD. Just before their graduation I proposed to Sarah and a year after she picked up her degree we were married. Of course Sarah picked Karen to be her maid of honor. Not long after, they had an argument that nearly ended their relationship. I remembered storming over to their old apartment to confront Karen. (Sarah was now living with me.) I left behind me a hysterical fiancé who was declaring that our wedding was ruined because of Karen's refusal to attend.

I pounded on the familiar door and was greeted by another wailing woman. Like most men I was uncomfortable around crying women, but I knew I had to get this situation resolved.

"What do you want?" Karen said between sobs.

"What the hell has happened between you and Sarah?" I asked. "I just left her crying on our bed saying you were not coming to our wedding."

"I'm not," she replied.

“Why not?” I asked. “You are the person who helped Sarah and me get together. You were there at the beginning. It won’t be right if you were not there at our wedding.”

“Well, you are going to have to manage,” she replied. “You have each other, why do you need me?”

“Can I come in?” I asked noticing the lady across the hall had come out to get a front row seat.

“Yes.”

We moved into the living room. Karen had not gotten another roommate after Sarah had moved out declaring she was old enough now to warrant her own apartment.

We had been Karen’s entire social scene and when Sarah moved it had been a huge blow to her. She hid it well and Sarah did not notice or had chosen not to, because she was so caught up in her own happiness. Karen hung out with a few other people besides us from her college days, but they had, for the most part, moved out of the city and taken jobs all over the world or gotten married, gotten pregnant and dropped out of sight.

“You know how much Sarah and I care about you, Karen.” I said. “You are one of the team. We are like the three musketeers. You can’t break up the team now. We need you Karen.”

“You need me? You need me?” she said, louder the second time. “How selfish are you two? You really do deserve each other. All you can think about is each other. What about me? Eh! I have nobody, nobody! You two will walk off into your own

personal sunset and I will be left behind - I won't even be needed or be wanted as the oddball friend when you start having kids. I will be forgotten, you want have any time for good ole Karen, good ole dependable ugly Karen who can't get a man..."

A fresh round of tears choked off her words and I awkwardly stretched forth my arm and patted her on the shoulder. I really did hate it when women cried. I also confirmed the truth of her statement with my silence. I would have insulted her, if I tried to lie to her and tell her that 'no, you really are beautiful.' The other whammy that stood against Karen and destroyed any chance of her finding a man was that she was street smart, intelligent, highly educated and she didn't know how to keep her opinions to herself. Faults most men were not willing to overlook, unless the woman had a face and a body like Heidi Klum.

"We are not going to desert you, Karen," I said. "We are just getting married. Nothing is going to change. The only difference will be that Sarah will be a Walters instead of a Johnson."

"She still hasn't told you then?" she replied after blowing her nose on a paper tissue that looked like it needed serious back up.

"Told me what?"

"That she doesn't want to take your name."

"What?"

"This is so typical of Sarah," sighed Karen. "She has never been good at frank conversations. She wants to keep her own name. As you know, she is an only child so there is nobody else to carry on her family name."

“So she wants to keep her name?” I felt a little silly repeating everything Karen said.

“That’s what she told me. Maybe she has changed her mind,” Karen said offering me an out.

As we moved on to the safer topics of Sarah’s failings, Karen’s tears came to a stop and with a few more snorts into her defeated tissue, the sensible, practical woman I knew returned. We took a cab over to my apartment and with a few more tears Sarah and Karen were reconciled and were once again conspiring together to produce the wedding of the century. Karen did not ask me to keep our conversation private from Sarah, but I did. Sarah was just so happy to have her friend back she was not willing to risk losing her again by opening up old wounds. This was the only time I was to hear Karen express anger or self-pity over the face and body God or her genes had given her in life.

These memories came unbidden to me, as I searched for her number. I knew I had it, but over the years it had been easier to ask Sarah, who had Karen’s numbers memorized, instead of searching for it. I had not spoken to Karen since I had moved out of my house, but I knew that she would be fully aware of the split between Sarah and me. Sarah called Karen at least once a week, when we were married. Now that we were on the path to divorce I was sure they were speaking every day. She was the person my soon-to-be ex-wife would lean on the most in these difficult months. I finally found the number in an old address book - I had her work number at Columbia University as well as her home number. Looking at the clock on my desk I



saw that it was nearly ten o'clock in the morning so I decided to try her work number first.

I was almost certain I would find her at her desk because Karen was Jewish by heritage. She was more of a cultural Jew than a practicing one and so did not observe most of the holy days of her own religion, let alone any other religions - the holy days that she did observe were only to keep her mother happy. These two or three days out of every year allowed Karen's mother to torment her about her lack of a man. Which of course was Karen's fault, because as she was told every year, "You spend too much time studying instead of looking for a man?"

Karen had cracked-up Sarah and me with renditions of some of the wilder and bizarre pronouncements made by her mother when she had been cornered at her parent's table on some annual holy day or as Karen called them, 'torture days.' Easter Friday would be like any other workday for her, although she had not been averse to celebrating Christmas with the kids and us.

As she said, "It's wonderful getting presents because a nice Jewish boy got himself into trouble."

She had even agreed to be the Godmother to our eldest child. At the Christening, she had made jokes the entire time and had only stopped when the priest gave her a stern look. Humor was the weapon she used to hide behind and protect herself from a brutal world that did not appreciate an intelligent ugly duckling.

I sat in my black executive chair holding the page of my address book open at her number. I was honest enough with myself to realize I was trying to put off

calling her. I was afraid of yet another rejection, one that would hurt deeply. I cared what Karen thought of me, we had a lot of history together. To avoid her had been acceptable - after all she had been Sarah's friend first - but it had also helped me evade the potential of being eternally banished from her life, a thought I found unbearable.

My sub-conscious mind was working frantically to find an alternative so I could divert this potentially ego-crushing conversation. As I sat there lost in thought, Naked Girl, who had been watching me closely as I procrastinated, came up to me and got my attention by touching my shoulder. I looked up at her from my seated position and was amazed to see a single tear leave her right eye and carve a path down her beautifully sculpted nose and get lost in the curves of her heavy red lips. Did she have lipstick on? There was no lipstick in my apartment and she obviously did not bring any with her, but her lips looked so red, so inviting.

Naked Girl squeezed a little harder on my shoulder to bring my free-flowing mind back to the present. I stopped looking at her lips and brought my eyes back to meet hers. She did not look upset. The rest of her face was unmarred, registering none of the usual signs that would indicate the type of distress that would cause her to cry. No puckered brow, no sniffing, no trembling lips and no additions to the one tear that had left a gleaming trail down her unforgivably perfect face. She did not try to verbally communicate with me, but warmth flowed from the contact her hand made on my shoulder and removed the anguish I felt when I thought of calling Karen. One moment I was paralyzed by my concern of being rejected and the next I

held the phone listening to the familiar purr of a phone waiting to be answered. The ring stopped and Karen answered,

“Hello?”

I panicked and went to disconnect the line, but Naked Girl’s hand left my shoulder and gripped my phone hand, preventing me from ending the call.

“Hello, is there anybody there?” asked Karen. “Hello?”

I brought the phone back to my mouth and answered, “Hello, Karen. It’s Steve, Steve Walters.”

Karen did not respond so I was forced to continue, “I hope you don’t mind me calling?”

“No Steve, you just caught me by surprise,” she said. “I just haven’t heard from you in so long I just thought...well, you know...anyway it’s good to hear from you.”

She was not turning me away, she would still be my friend. I wanted to do one of those stupid dances that football players did after scoring.

“I need some help with something...” I said.

“Look, Steve, I am not getting involved. I love you both so I am not going to take sides. I think you were an idiot to do what you did, but as I told Sarah, I’m not getting in the middle. You two have to sort this out, even if it is the last thing you do together.”

“It has nothing to do with Sarah and the kids,” I said.

“Oh,” she said, “What is it then? What do you need?”

“Look,” I said, “It’s a bit hard to explain on the phone. Something happened to me last night...I met somebody who...I mean I didn’t meet – meet somebody, I mean...oh God can I just come to your office and explain it to you?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be bringing somebody with me,” I said.

“Who?”

“She’s part of what is hard to explain about last night.”

“Oh, Steve, what trouble have you gotten yourself into now? Sarah has told me that you have been fucking up your professional life as well as your personal.”

“Well, news travels fast.”

“Well you should answer your phone and then maybe Sarah wouldn’t feel the need to call me.”

I tried not to feel guilty, but I did. “All our conversations are ugly now.”

“What do you expect?”

“I don’t know.”

“It will never be the way it was, Steve. You’d best face that fact.”

“I know.”

“Do you need a lawyer?”

“No,” I said, “I don’t need a lawyer. Well I don’t think I do. Look I’ll make a lot more sense if I can come over and explain it all. I can be there in an hour.”

“What about the kids? Are they coming as well?”

“No, they have other plans today.”

“Sarah had them cancel them.”

“Shit. She never told me.”

“Check your voicemail Steve.”

“I still need to see you.”

“I’ll be here, Steve,” and she hung up in her usual brisk way.

I turned to Naked Girl, who was still standing next to me, “Well she didn’t tell me to get lost.”

Karen had agreed to see me and Naked Girl gave me another smile. Life suddenly seemed a lot more hopeful. “We have to make it up town and you need some clothes.” I said checking out her bare legs. I took her by the hand and led her into my bedroom to dress her - I resigned myself to the fact I was about to be inflicted with my fifth or sixth erection of the day.