



Reluctant Press presents:

MEMORIES

Briana Vermont



An 'ADULT TV' E-BOOK

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Reluctant Press TG Publishers

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Memories

By Briana Vermont

Illustrations by David McKinley

Chapter 1

“Run.”

Just one word, but it wakes me from a sound sleep, into a cold sweat. Just one word, only a dream, but it was the most frightening dream of my life. I lie in bed, playing it around in my head, pretending to analyze it. Run? Run where? Run from, or to? Run from, I assume, for no good reason other than it seemed like that kind of a dream.

Just one word. Nothing before it – nothing that I can remember, anyway. And I woke too quickly for anything to follow. Spoken quietly, almost a whisper, really. But commanding, implying all that would happen if I didn't do as instructed.

It wasn't the word. Not just the word, anyway. It was also the eyes. The eyes, looking directly into mine, the fear they held as they spoke that one word, “Run.” Fear for me? Yes, but fear for the speaker as well. Was there anything else, any other clue? No, just the word. And the eyes.

Yes, I'm pretending to analyze the dream. There isn't enough to analyze – certainly nothing to hold me here for this length of time. The truth is, I'm afraid to open my eyes.

Silly, to be so afraid. Frightened by a dream, a fragment of a dream really. A fragment too short to be considered a thought, much less anything as grandiose as a dream. Ridiculous.

Relegating childish thoughts to those places where such things belong, I push past the dream and, determined to get on with my day and all the important business it would present, I open my eyes...

To utter confusion. This is not my bedroom! Confusion turns to shock as I realize, I'm lying in an alley. Curled up behind a dumpster, lying in trash and who knows what else, afraid of a stupid dream when I'm alone in the dark, exposed and vulnerable, possibly miles from my...

From my, what? What was I about to say? My home? I can't picture a home. A house? Apartment? Nothing, I can't remember where I live. I need to find a phone, call...

I have no idea. Friends? Family? Who do I call, I can't remember! I can't remember a name, a face, a number, anything!

Who am I? I have a name; I know I have a name! I have a life, somewhere, not here, anywhere but here. I stand, and start to run, run from the dumpster, from the alley, from the garbage and roaches and piss...

A block away I stop running. I'm trying to run back, back to my life, but I don't know where that is. I can only run from, and I can't even remember what it is I'm running from. I know now that I've already run from, and not just from the alley. Something before the alley, something worse. I ran to the alley, from the other. The alley was once a beautiful, safe oasis that I ran to. I need to slow down.

I walk the streets. It's late at night, and I see almost no one. I reach a main street, and a few cars drive by, the occupants going about their lives. I envy them; having lives, somewhere to go, out of the cold.

I realize I'm cold. I'm wearing only jeans and a dark T-shirt, and it's cold enough to see my breath. I scan the street for anything that might be open at this hour. There's a light coming from a window nearby. I approach, and try the door. It opens, so I enter, noting the low sounds of the late-night pub. Quiet conversations from the few customers, glasses hitting wooden tables. I walk up to the bar and sit down, happy to be doing something normal, something, familiar? Normal, anyway.

"You can't stay here," says the bartender, an old relic who probably hates anyone who hasn't been a regular for twenty years. "If you want to stay, you better be ordering something, kid."

Kid? How old am I, anyway? Like everything else about my life, I have no idea. Of course, anyone under forty is probably a kid to this old fossil.

"So?" he questions. "You ordering? And you better show me some money first, if you expect to see a drink." I pat my pockets, looking for – anything. Except they're as empty as the rest of my life.

"Hey!" A man suddenly sits on the stool beside me, startling me. I didn't even hear him come up. "No need to be like that, Collin. Set us up with two beers, I'm buying."

Collin? The bartender doesn't look like a Collin. He looks less like a Collin than anyone I know. Which, right now, is nobody. So okay, I guess he can be Collin.

“I want to see some ID,” says Collin, glaring at me. ID? How old am I? I look at my smooth hands, my nearly hairless arms. Maybe I am a kid! But no, I can’t be, I mean, I feel older than that. Collin is waiting, so I pat down my pockets a second time. Still empty.

“Collin,” the man rebukes him. “Stop being unfriendly. Two beers, come on now.”

Collin pulls the beers, glaring at me the entire time, finally putting them on the bar in front of us. He eventually stops glaring, but only, it seems, because he’s beginning to feel self-conscious. He looks around the bar as if I’m a glare-magnet he’s trying to pull away from.

“Come on, let’s find a table,” says the man as he sets down a fiver. He picks up the two beers and leads me away from the bar, away from Collin’s disapproval.

I sit at the table. The man places the beers on the table, then sits across from me. He just looks at me, saying nothing. I pick up my beer and drink.

The man picks up his beer, but before he drinks he says, “So, you got a name?”

A simple question, but it startles me. I watch as he drinks, watch him watching me. I swallow to clear my throat and answer, “Not really.”

He looks at me as if he approves. “Smart,” he says. “Names can lead to trouble. Better off without them, maybe not always, but sometimes.”

He takes another drink, looking at me. “I have a name, but you can call me John,” he says. I nod at him, take another drink. I’m too tired, too disoriented to talk. Fortunately John doesn’t want to talk, so we drink quietly at our table.

He’s older than me, much older. Maybe thirty, or thirty-five. I guess I’m starting to buy into the idea that I really am just a kid. Not a bad looking guy, still with most of his hair. Might have been an athlete when he was younger, but out of shape now, the effects of a hard life showing. He catches me looking at him, so I look down at my beer instead.

We sit like this for another twenty minutes, maybe half an hour. I can tell he’s watching me, although I keep my head down, don’t look back. Collin shoots his looks of disapproval, but brings two more beers when John asks, accepts the payment. It’s warm in here, and I’m so tired. I think I may have fallen asleep a couple of times.

As I’m getting close to the end of my second drink John asks, “You have somewhere to stay tonight?”

I swirl the beer in the bottom of my glass, watch as it picks up the foam from the sides, draws it down into the liquid at the bottom. I shake my head.

“Come on then,” he says. He finishes his beer and stands, shrugs into his coat as he heads for the door, walks out into the night. I stand and follow, leaving the last of my beer on the table. There’s nothing but foam left, anyway.

John crosses the road and I follow. He leads me for three or four blocks. I try to walk beside him, but his strides are much longer than mine so I end up walking behind, doing a quick run to catch up every once in a while. Eventually we arrive at a three-story apartment building. He unlocks the front door, leads me to a first-floor apartment and opens the door for me.

The apartment is small, but nicely furnished. The front door opens directly into the living room where he has a TV, a couple chairs, and a couch where I expect I'll be sleeping. John takes off his coat, hangs it in the closet, and I head straight for the couch.

"Wait a minute," he says, and I stop myself from sitting. He's looking through the closet, through the jumbled mess of items on the floor. He finds a cardboard box, pulls it out, hands it to me.

"You'll find something you can wear in here."

He points me in the direction of the bathroom, so I enter with the box, closing the door behind me. I set the box on the counter, unfold the lid and look inside.

I look inside.

I look in the box.

I...

There is very little in the box, but what there is, is mostly, women's clothing. A colorful skirt, a cute T-shirt, some mismatched socks, a purple slip. I pull the items out, push them around, looking for anything he might have meant for me to wear, but there is nothing. I close the box and look up, catching my reflection in the bathroom mirror.

Oh.

Oh, this is embarrassing. All this time, and I had no idea. No idea that I am, in fact, a girl. I look at my reflection, and my cheeks begin to burn red.

I study my reddened face. Soft eyes, pouting lips. Nicely shaped eyebrows, high forehead. Cute, turned-up nose. Traces of eyeshadow and mascara. Very cute, very pretty, but completely unknown to me. I must have looked at this face every day of my life, but it's a complete stranger staring back at me.

There's a band holding my hair in place behind my head. I reach around and pull it out. Long, thick, blond-brown hair falls over my shoulders. I stare at the girl, me, looking for anything familiar.

At least I know now, I'm not a kid. The girl must be – I must be around twenty.

John must be wondering what's taking so long. I put the box on the floor, pull out the purple slip, and hang it on a hook set in the door.

I pull my T-shirt up, but catch sight of myself in the mirror as it pulls out of my jeans. I stop, and look at the gap, my flat, smooth stomach. Slowly I lift the shirt, watching, noting the curve of my waist, the way my navel moves in and out with each breath. I lift the shirt over my head, then look back to the mirror in time to see my hair shake out, fall over my soft, narrow shoulders. I drop the shirt to the bathroom floor.

I stare at the mirror, and continue my strange, private striptease.

I step on the heels of my running shoes, pulling them off without undoing the laces, kick them away. Then I undo the top button of my jeans, making a small v, exposing more of my belly. As I unzip the jeans, the v widens, exposing more flesh, until the flesh ends at a line created by my white cotton panties. I have to wiggle in order to work the jeans over

the curve of my hips, then step free, leaving the jeans in a heap on the floor. I never look away from the girl in the mirror.

Looking in the mirror, at my tight, young body, wearing only a white bra and panties, I note that I have some serious curves. I watch as I reach up behind my back, attempt to undo my bra. I wanted to see it fall loose, slip down over those shoulders, except I can't get the hooks undone. After a couple frustrating minutes I finally pull down the shoulder straps, shrugging my arms out gracelessly, then spin the bra back-to-front, finding the hooks and undoing them. I hang the bra on the doorknob, and look back to the mirror.

...

I...

...

I watch myself, in the mirror. I try to stand perfectly still, except I sway, slowly, gently, and...

...

My breasts are perfect. Amazing. Full, rounded, soft and smooth, nipples pointed slightly upward...

I...

I tear my eyes from the mirror. Grab the slip off the door, find the opening at the bottom, pull it down over my head. My arms slide under the spaghetti straps, and the satiny material slides down over my body. I pull my hair through, shaking it out so it falls down my back, frames my face as I look back to the mirror...

...

The material clings to my body, emphasizing my slim waist, round hips, even rounder breasts. My nipples poke through, creating tiny bumps, puckering the material, pointed slightly upward...

With a conscious effort I pull away from the mirror, breaking



the spell. I reach up under the slip, slide my panties down, wiggling my hips to get them over the curves. They fall to the floor around my ankles, and I kick them off. I sit down, pee, wipe myself, wash my hands. I open the bathroom door and step out.

John is waiting for me, wearing just his jeans, his shirt lost somewhere in the apartment. He holds me by my shoulders, slides one large, strong hand up, under my hair, around the back of my neck, his thumb gently touches my ear. I tilt my head back into his hand, close my eyes, let him take hold of me, take care of me. His mouth on mine, somehow we're in the bedroom, I'm lifted like a doll into the bed. A bristly cheek scrapes my soft skin, against my face, then my neck, now between my breasts. The slip comes up and over my head, I pull his head to my chest, feel his face scrape my breasts as he moves his mouth with agonizing, delicious slowness to my nipples.

One rough, weathered hand cups a breast, tweaking one nipple with thumb and forefinger as he gently tongues the other, sending electric shocks to a point between my legs, deep inside of me. I grab his chest, massaging, pinching, coaxing him to move up on top of me, but he only switches breasts, driving me out of my mind.

I grab him between the legs, guide him to me, find the place, feel him glide smoothly inside, an itch that needed scratching for so long. His mouth on mine, one arm beneath my head, the other still massaging my breast, pinching me painfully, delightfully, rubbing me in just the right way with each twisting motion of his hips until I explode...

* * *

The next morning I'm lying in bed, John's bed. John is snuggled up behind me, one arm wrapped over my waist. I feel his slow, deep breath as he sleeps. It's a comfortable arrangement, safe, warm, and I wish it could last.

I fell asleep quickly last night, but only slept for a few hours. The clock read 5:30 when I woke; that was over an hour ago. Frustratingly, no memories have come back to me. So for over an hour I've lain here, racking my memory, going over what little I know.

Which is very little. The only thing I really know for sure is that while I'm here I feel safe, and warm. But no longer comfortable. I've been still for too long, trying to let John sleep. Slowly, carefully I slide forward, away to the edge of the bed. Even in his sleep he seems to understand, and he rolls over in the opposite direction. I stand and look back, to make sure he settles back to sleep. He does.

I leave the bedroom quickly, quietly, closing the door behind me to keep out any noise I might make. I go to the bathroom, closing the door behind me. It looks the same as it did last night, the box of clothes taking up much of the floor, the filthy jeans and T-shirt tossed in the corner, my white bra hanging from the doorknob. The girl with the long, blond-brown hair is still standing on the other side of the mirror, watching me.

I look at her face – my face – closely, hoping for any sign of recognition, but there is nothing familiar. I notice there's a scar on my left eyelid. Healed over long ago, nothing that anyone would ever notice, especially with a little makeup. But still, a scar on my eye. It must have been painful, and frightening. Blood dripping down my face, afraid I may have lost my sight, destroyed my looks, a doctor making tiny, careful stitches to my eyelid. Except, I don't remember any of this. I know it happened, the evidence is in front of my

face. The evidence is my face. How can anyone forget something like that? Why can't I remember?

I kneel down beside the tub, run the water. It takes a long time, but eventually warm water comes from the tap. I stand, step into the tub, pull the plastic curtain around me, and pull the knob to activate the shower. I shrink from a brief burst of cold, but then the warm water reaches the showerhead, pours over me. Warm water on my face, releasing all tension, banishing all bad thoughts. It soaks into my hair, drips down over my breasts, my belly, my back and my legs. I raise my arms, to make sure my armpits get wet, I cup my hands between my legs, making sure every part of me feels the cleansing, soothing warmth.

There's a shampoo bottle on the side of the tub. It's a good brand, I recognize the name. I don't dwell on the irony that I can remember the name of a shampoo, but not my own. I just squeeze some into my hand, and begin massaging it into my hair, into my scalp. I work the shampoo into the length of my hair, pulling it all forward over my shoulder. I watch as the suds drip down my body, over my breasts, between my legs. I take a handful of suds and work it in between my legs, cleaning, front and back.

Then I just stand, feeling the force of the water. My eyes are closed; the water warms me all over. I don't want this moment to ever end. I've rinsed the soap from my hair, my body, long ago, but I continue to stand in the warm spray, simply enjoying the peace of this moment.

Without my asking it to, my hand reaches down and shuts off the water. I would have stayed here all day, but I suppose that's not such a good idea. John will not be happy if there is no hot water left. I pull back the plastic curtain and step out of the tub.

There's a towel on a rack, beside the toilet. I lift it from the rack; use it to pat my face dry. I pat my hair until it no longer drips, then wipe my shoulders, my arms, my armpits. I dry my breasts, following their curves; dry my flat belly, around to the small of my back. I dry my ass, around to the front, the triangle of fur between my legs. I dry my thighs, the back of my knees, my calves, my ankles and feet. Then I go back to my hair again, folding it into the towel, squeezing the water from my hair into the towel. When I'm finished I fold the towel in half lengthwise, and place it back on the towel rack.

I find my panties on the floor, pick them up, shake them out. I look at them closely – they should be good for another day's wearing. They have to be, I don't have anything else. I quickly step into them, pull them up, adjust them over my hips.

My bra is hanging from the doorknob. I pick it up, take a look. I intended to inspect the hooks, figure out how it does up before attempting to do so behind my back, but something else catches my eye. The bra has a brand name tag on one side. That's not unusual, but it looks like there's some handwriting on the back. I step closer to the bathroom light for a better look. On the back of the tag, written in purple ink it clearly says, "Sara N."

Sara. Is that my name? I try it out a few times. I looked at the girl in the mirror and said "Sara" out loud. It fits. Even though I still don't remember, it seems right. I look at the writing on the tag, and have an idea.

I leave the bathroom, taking my bra with me, and go to the kitchen. Looking around, I find a pad and pen by the phone, pick them up, sit at the kitchen table. I arrange the pad in

front of me; take the cap from the pen and write, "Sara." Comparing the handwriting to the writing on my bra tag, it's difficult to tell, but I think they're the same. I wrote this name, in this bra.

Holding my bra and the pad close together, I look at them again, read them both, and smile. I can hardly contain myself. This is my name! I know my name, and it's Sara! I laugh as I stand from the table, holding my bra in front of me. I know two things. I know my name is Sara, and I know that I'm the kind of girl who writes her name in her underwear, which seems very sensible. I know three things – I'm also the kind of girl that uses a purple pen. Maybe I can change that. I read my name again as I return to the bathroom.

Which is locked. I jump back, but the knob begins to turn, the door pushes open. John is on the other side, washing his hands.

I stand, almost naked in front of him, watch as he finishes. "I was just going to finish dressing," I tell him.

"Sure, come on in, I'm done," he replies.

I step past him, around the box of clothes, sit on the toilet and pick up my old, filthy T-shirt. I don't want to put it on. I push my old jeans around the floor a little with my foot.

John finishes drying his hands, using the same towel I just used for my shower, watches my discomfort. He shoves the towel back onto the rack and tells me, "Take anything you want from the box."

I drop the T-shirt quickly and stand. "Are you sure?" I ask.

"Sure," he says. "She's never coming back for any of it."

He doesn't elaborate on who "she" is, and I guess it doesn't matter. He leaves, but I suddenly remember. Crossing to the door and sticking my head into the hallway I call after him, "My name is Sara."

"Okay," he calls back.

I close the door, return to the mirror with my bra. Taking one last look at the hooks, I slide my arms into the shoulder straps, adjust the cups under my breasts, stretch the back straps behind me, try to fit the tiny hooks together. With some effort they fit into place. I look in the mirror, make a final adjustment for comfort, then look in the box.

There isn't much to choose from. I find a pink, short sleeve blouse with a cute lace collar, and a skirt made from bright, colorful, horizontal strips of cloth. They don't completely match, but I put them on, thinking about what to do next.

There's no makeup in the bathroom, or in the box either. Maybe John will give me a little money to go out and get a few things. There are a lot of things I can do around here for him. For one thing, I can wash his towels. He can go out to work, while I straighten the house, do the shopping, greet him when he comes home with a hot meal after a hard day. Everything will be perfect.

I look in the mirror and smile. The skirt fits nicely, but the top is a bit tight around my chest. I adjust it down, pull it forward as best I can until it looks nice. I take a comb from the countertop, comb out my hair, still damp. I wish I had just a bit of makeup.

I pick up the box, my old clothes and shoes, straightening up the bathroom. The box goes back to the front hall, maybe I can straighten the closet later, fit the box back in after taking whatever else I might use. I leave my shoes by the front door.

"John," I call as I walk to the kitchen where I find him buttering a piece of bread. Maybe I should make him breakfast? I'm still carrying my old clothes. "Do you have a laundry hamper where I can put these?"

John looks up from his bread. "Just drop them anywhere if you're leaving them," he says.

"Oh, I, um, okay," I stammer. "Can I make you some breakfast?"

He doesn't answer, but instead tells me, "I've called a cab for you."

There is a short silence, as a sad realization comes to me. I look down as I ask, "To go where?"

"Anywhere," he replies. "Wherever you want to go."

"What about the fee?" I ask quietly.

John pulls out his wallet, counts out some bills, folds them over and hands them to me. "That should cover it."

He walks me to the front door. I don't have a purse, but there's a small pocket in the skirt and I fit the bills into it. I drop my old clothes, put on my shoes as he stands nearby.

Suddenly I realize, whatever I'm running from is still out there. I quickly look through the box one more time, anything that will hide me. There's a pair of Roy Orbison sunglasses, a horrible knit cap. I take both, put them on.

John opens the door. As I leave I notice a pile of mail on a table by the apartment door. His name is Richard. He shuts the door behind me.

I find my way out of the apartment building, wait at the front door for a few minutes until the cab arrives. The driver steps out, opens the door for me, and I get in. He gets in the front and asks, "Where to, Love?"

I pull out my small bundle of bills, and ask, "How far can I get on..."

He's given me a hundred pounds. Tears squeeze their way out of my eyelids as I think, "Oh great. Now on top of everything, I guess I'm a prostitute."

"Is there a train station in this town?" I ask, pulling myself together.

"Right, Love. Have you there in five."

Chapter 2

It's been over four months since that first night. I can't believe I was so naïve. Thinking that John – Richard – would take care of me. That all my problems would disappear when a man came into my life.

I suppose it's so deeply ingrained into us. From the time we're little girls, we're sold this fairy tale of a man who will love us, take care of us. A romantic courtship, a beautiful wedding. A beautiful princess in her long white gown, and the groom, so handsome in his tuxedo, vowing his love, all eyes stare as you dance, envious of a love so eternal, meant only for you.

Then you'll stay home, cook and clean, do some shopping, while he goes off to work. You'll never need to worry, to wonder where the money comes from. He buys you a house, car, food, clothing, possessions, everything you need, everything your children need, and you never once have to wonder where it all comes from, worry if you might lose it all. No, he does that.

What a load of bollocks. Everything in my life was gone, including my memory. The only thing left was the fairy tale, and I fell for it. I actually believed that John would save me, that I would never need to worry ever again, because I had a man to take care of me. He didn't even tell me his real name.

At the train station I looked at the departures board through eyes that kept blurring with tears. Whoever, or whatever I was running from began to mean less and less, as I now simply wanted to leave this memory behind. Ironic, the only memory I had, I wanted to forget. Maybe that's all life is, a series of horrible events you would rather forget. Maybe I was one of the lucky ones, who actually managed to achieve it. Maybe I was foolish for wanting my memories back, if my past life was anything like those previous twelve hours.

I chose a train almost at random. My criteria were few: leaving soon, and traveling a long, long way from here. I'm still not sure where 'here' was, and I didn't care where 'there' was. If I was supposed to run, I would run as far and as fast as I could, and no one would ever be able to find me.

A hundred pounds doesn't last very long. A cab ride, a train ride, a meal and a night at a hotel, then all I had left was pocket change. The fairy tale had some serious flaws in it.

That first day I wandered the streets of my new town, my new home. It had the appearance of a summer destination, but according to the newspaper it was only February and so things were very quiet. The sun was warm, but if a cloud went over it became chilly quickly, and so I bought an old jean jacket from a second-hand shop. It's a good thing I did, as I had nowhere to go that night and spent most of it lying on a bench in a park.

I woke the next morning, sore and frozen. I had never been so cold and miserable in my life. Probably. I still had no memory beyond the previous two days. I couldn't go on like this, I knew that. I just didn't know what else to do. I moved to another bench that was partially lit by the morning sun, where I curled up and cried for a while. It might have been a few minutes, it might have been an hour, I couldn't tell any more. I wanted to forget everything, start fresh all over again, but the memory trick didn't seem to work like that. I was stuck with this life as it was, horrible memories, bitter cold, no prospect for improvement.

Eventually I got up, set out, and wandered the streets, seeing everything in this town for a second time. It was colder than the day before, a nasty wind blowing in from over the

water, and I struggled to continue. Some of the shops started to open toward mid morning and I found refuge within a small restaurant.

“Morning, love,” called a woman from the back. “Find yourself a seat and I’ll be right with you.”

She disappeared before I could explain, I only wanted to get warm, would only stay for a moment. Except I was so tired, and the sudden heat took the last of the strength from my legs. I fell into the first chair I came to.

The woman took a few minutes to return. In the meantime I could hear her speaking to a man in the back, opening and shutting cupboards and drawers, setting up for the day ahead.

“Oh, not a nice day for a stroll,” she laughed as she approached the table where I had collapsed. She looked more closely at me, and added in a more serious tone, “You look positively chilled, dear. Are you visiting nearby?”

I shook my head. I didn’t trust my voice, didn’t believe it would actually form words with my body in its current frozen state.

“What can I get you, dear?” she asked, some concern entering her voice. “You look like you need a hot cup of tea for starters, yes?”

I pushed my frozen fingers into the little pocket of my skirt, forced them to pick up the coins within, spilled them out onto the table. “I... have...” I managed to say, pointing at the pitiful collection of coins. It added to 37p.

“You put that away and never mind,” she said kindly. “We’ll start you off with a bit of tea and toast, then, and see if you’ll be wanting anything after. You’ll pay us next time you come in then, right?”

“I, can’t...” I managed to say.

“Yes you can,” she replied. “A bit of tea and toast isn’t going to bankrupt us, is it?”

She brought me my tea and toast, with a small pot of jam. A few customers came and went throughout the morning, and Mrs. Minns, as she later introduced herself, continued to fill my cup. By noon I was quite warm, but too tired to stand and so I stayed throughout the lunch service. Most of the customers were locals as this was definitely the off-season for a seaside town. Mrs. Minns knew most by name. I received a few curious glances, and a couple of patrons attempted to strike up a conversation with me. I smiled and nodded shyly until they would say, “Have a nice visit,” or something equally polite and dismissive.

By mid-afternoon the restaurant was cleared, and I was once again alone at my table. I was warm, I had collected my strength, and there was no reason to stay. I stood, and walked toward the door.

“Oh, one minute love,” called Mrs. Minns from the back. “Wait right there,” she said as she disappeared into the back for the thousandth time today. When she returned, she was literally dragging the man I had seen through the kitchen door all day.

“Sara, this is my husband, Gerald,” she said by way of introduction. “Gerald has been meaning to speak to you about something, haven’t you Gerald?” This last she said with a glare at her husband.

Mr. Minns looked around the restaurant, but under his wife’s stern gaze he eventually looked at me and said, “There’s a lot of washing up needs doing in the back.”

Mrs. Minns gave an exaggerated groan of frustration and told me, “What he’s trying to say is, if you’re planning to stay in town for a while and need a job, we could use your help here. We can’t pay you much, but you’ll have a few pounds spending money, right?”

I’m not sure if I intended to take the job or not. I know I said, “Thank you,” and went into the back, intent on at least paying them back for the meal I had received. Mrs. Minns found me an apron and some rubber gloves, and I set to work on the backlog of dirty dishes from the lunch service.

* * *

As I said, that was over four months ago. Mr. and Mrs. Minns not only gave me a job, but also let me stay in their home. They originally had two daughters, although one had moved out some time ago. I share a small room with their remaining daughter, Rachel, who completely resents my presence. She’s a fat cow, who should either be out on her own or else doing my job, except she would rather sleep late, eat, shop and complain. Still, I have nowhere else to go, nowhere else that I belong.

For the first few months I went to the restaurant every day, mostly helping out in the back but also clearing and resetting tables. Business was slow, and so the work was easy. I’m not sure if Mr. Minns resented my presence or not, as he and Mrs. Minns could easily have handled the load. After all, everything they paid me was money straight from his pocket, even if he did deduct room and board from my pay. But I was grateful that they took me on, and did the best job I could for them.

I’ve only had sex once since I arrived here, but it wasn’t nearly the experience I had that first night. The restaurant would receive weekly shipments of food, delivered in a van by a local man name Davyn. I met him on my second day with Mr. and Mrs. Minns. He wasn’t a particularly attractive man, but he was tall, with broad shoulders, and the way the muscles moved in his upper arms as he unloaded the boxes held me spellbound.

He would unload crates, usually assisted by Mr. Minns. I was certainly never asked to help, as they had far more muscle power between them than I could ever hope to contribute. The first few times I saw him I stayed out of the way, busying myself with tasks elsewhere in the kitchen, but always where I had the opportunity to catch a glimpse as he worked, see his forearm extensor and flexor muscles in action, the way his deltoids, biceps and triceps shifted under his shirt as he worked. The effect was hypnotic.

After seeing him a couple of times, I worked up the nerve to smile at him as he passed by. I started to pretty myself, removing my apron and rubber gloves when he arrived, making sure my hair was nicely brushed when he was expected. Then I worked up the nerve to speak to him, offering him a cup of tea for take away. I would carry it out to the van for him, hand it through the window as he was about to drive off.

One day I handed him his tea, but just stayed at the van, chatting. I knew he was interested in me, had seen the looks he gave me over his shoulder as he passed by. I was flirting, enjoying being with him, knowing that I had the power to keep him from his work. He had other places to be, other deliveries to make, but here he was, talking to me, flirting right back. The next thing I knew he leaned forward, kissed me through the open window. He tried to pull back, except I wouldn't let him – I gently held his lower lip with my teeth, letting out a low giggle. He didn't need much coaxing, and kissed me that way for a long, long time.

"I've got to go," he eventually told me.

I stepped back from the van, watching him, smiling wickedly. "See you next week,



then," I said as I turned back to the restaurant, flipping my hair over my shoulder and emphasizing the roll of my hips with every step. I know he was watching me – I didn't hear him start the van until I was back in the building.

The next week he showed up a half-hour ahead of schedule, and worked quickly to unload the boxes. When he finished he returned to the van, and I followed with his tea. But instead of closing the back doors and returning to the driver's seat, he climbed into the back once again, urging me to follow with a tilt of his head. I stepped up behind him, and he pulled the doors closed behind us.

The back of the van was tall enough to stand, but cramped. There were shelves lining both sides, and boxes stacked everywhere. It was also very cold, being refrigerated. He immediately wrapped his arms around me, and I pressed myself into him, absorbing the warmth of his body.

Soon he was kissing me, and I kissed him back greedily. His strong hands were under my

blouse, first on my back, but soon fondling my breasts. My hands grabbed whatever flesh of his they could find, feeling the strength of his shoulders, the firmness of his thighs and buttocks.

Suddenly he dropped his pants. I hadn't expected this. Call me naïve, but all I wanted was some kissing and maybe a bit of slap and tickle, I didn't need any more. It never even occurred to me that you could possibly have sex in the back of a freezer van. I mean, it was freezing. There was certainly no room to lie down. And I couldn't help thinking, here we were standing over a box of fresh broccoli that's going to be in someone's dinner tonight. It was hardly hygienic.

Davyn was persistent, his hands under my skirt, working my knickers down till they hung off one ankle. He lifted me, braced me against a stack of bagged, frozen peas, entered me.

At this point I really just wanted it to be over. The thrill was gone, my backside was frozen. I hugged him to me, made little moans and squeals to encourage him until he finished in a spasm of ecstasy. He slowly slid me to the floor, where I quickly pulled up my knickers and rearranged my clothes. When he let me out of the van I headed straight to the washroom to clean up, checking to make sure none of my misdeeds showed on my face. When I returned to the kitchen, the van had gone.

The next week Davyn showed up early again, unloaded the van quickly. I could tell that he was looking at me every time he walked through the kitchen to the storage room, but I couldn't look back. I stood at the sink, wearing my apron and rubber gloves, washing my pots and pans. I could tell he was trying to catch my attention. I just couldn't look at him. He stood around for a while after he was done, which must have made Mr. Minns wonder, but eventually he left.

The next week was much the same. Davyn was early, finished quickly, then stood in the kitchen. Eventually he asked me, "Chance I might get a cup of tea, Sara? Take away?"

"Sure," I replied. I removed my gloves, found a cup, placed a tea bag inside and filled it from the kettle. Then I handed it to him. I still couldn't look at him.

"Thanks," he said, moving away toward the back door, watching to see if I would follow. I didn't. I put on my rubber gloves, and returned to my pans. He closed the door, more firmly than necessary, and I imagined him storming back to the van.

From then on, he simply ignored me. For the first couple of weeks he ignored me deliberately, with great animosity. But since then he's ignored me quite naturally, as if I don't exist, as if what happened ... never happened.

* * *

About a month ago a young man came to the restaurant. I didn't actually know him, but I had seen him around. He was in his late teens, and attended the nearby secondary school.

It was mid-afternoon and so we weren't very busy, just a few people from nearby shops on tea break. The restaurant is not a place where young people usually hang about,

and so I was surprised to see him enter. Then, bold as brass, he walks straight to the back room. I was heading that way and so followed, ready to call for help if necessary. As it turned out, it wasn't.

"Mr. Minns," he called out in greeting.

Mr. Minns was startled and looked up, but a grin of recognition spread across his face. "Keith! How are you boy?"

"Same as ever, you know me," replied Keith. By this time Mr. Minns had crossed the distance of the kitchen to greet Keith with a friendly hug and slap on the back. I had things to do elsewhere, but was curious and so quietly slipped past them, busied myself with a bit of washing up, trying to look like I wasn't paying attention when really that's all I was doing.

"You playing rugby this summer?" continued Mr. Minns.

"Nothing serious this year," replied Keith. "Just me and my mates is all."

"Now that's a shame," said Mr. Minns.

"Yeah, well, finishing my A-levels, leaving for university in the fall, too much to do so something's got to give, know what I mean?"

"Still, bloody shame."

"Yeah, well," replied Keith. "So I'm hoping, you'll be able to take me on again this summer? Help me to put away a few quid before I leave in the fall?"

Mr. Minns' smile quickly vanished, and his voice went low. "Things are – different, this year," he said slowly. He turned and looked at me, and Keith followed his gaze. Suddenly I wished I weren't in the room, wasn't eavesdropping on their conversation. I looked down at the stovetop I was supposed to be scrubbing, and scrubbed. Keith and Mr. Minns eventually looked away, and continued their conversation.

"We've taken on a full timer," said Mr. Minns, with another glance and tilt of his head in my direction, as if Keith wouldn't know whom he meant. I looked down and scrubbed furiously.

"Oh," said Keith, obviously not having expected this turn in the conversation. "It's just, working here, you know, the past three summers, I thought..."

We didn't find out what he thought, as the sentence drifted off, unfinished. After a pause Mr. Minns told him, "Yeah, well, like I said things are different this year. But, hey, Keith, be sure to drop in when you're around..."

Mr. Minns saw Keith out through the restaurant. The stovetop was already spotless, so I moved on to other tasks. Throughout the day, though, my mind kept returning to that conversation, the disappointment in both Keith's and Mr. Minns' faces.

I didn't belong here. I was only here because I had nowhere else to go, because Mrs. Minns was kind enough to help me. But I shouldn't be here. Mr. and Mrs. Minns don't need me, not really. Right now, the restaurant isn't busy enough to justify my being here. And soon, when the summer trade arrives and they do need someone to help, it should be Keith working here and not me.

Oh, I have no doubt that Keith could readily find a summer job elsewhere. This isn't the only business in town, after all. There are plenty of places that will need some extra help once summer arrives. But my being here has changed things. Not a lot, but some, and that's too much. Until I find out where I truly belong, I can't allow myself to take someone else's place. I thought all afternoon about what to do.

That evening at the Minns' home, Mrs. Minns was in the kitchen fixing a late dinner for Rachel. Mr. Minns was in the kitchen as well, relaxing at the kitchen table as he usually did this time of night. I felt the time was right to announce my intentions.

"I've been thinking," I told them, "maybe it's time that I moved on."

"Brilliant," said Rachel. At least I assume that's what she said; it's often difficult to tell with her mouth full. "I'll get the door for you."

"Rachel," admonished Mrs. Minns. Then she turned to me, concern in her voice, "Sara, where would you go? What would you do?"

Of all the things I expected she might say, these were the only questions I was unprepared for. I tried to answer, but ended up only shrugging and looking away.

"Summer's almost here," continued Mrs. Minns. "That's when we'll need you most."

"You can find someone else to hire," I suggested.

"Keith was by today," said Mr. Minns brightly. "He's anxious to come back."

Mrs. Minns shot him a glance, and he went quiet. "You want to move on, I can understand that," she said. "But let's go slowly, think about some options for you. Maybe in the fall, if you've got a little money saved up, then we can find something for you."

Everyone was quiet for a while, as we all sat and listened to Rachel eat. Mr. Minns had obviously been looking forward to working with Keith. Today had been very uncomfortable working with him in the kitchen, and I didn't expect it to get any better.

"I could maybe make more money if I worked somewhere else, outside the restaurant," I suggested.

"Now that's a good suggestion," said Mr. Minns happily. "She can bring a little money into this house for a change. I'll bet Keith is still available."

Still, Mrs. Minns appeared unconvinced. "Oh, Sara," she said. "I was really hoping ... Waiting on tables is more of a strain on me now than it used to be. I was hoping you might help this summer, not just in the kitchen, but also taking some of the waitressing duties when the restaurant gets busiest in the evenings."

Mr. Minns nearly choked, and said, "A waitress? Her? She'll scare the customers, she will!"

"What are you talking about?" said Mrs. Minns, knowing very well what he was talking about. Ever since Davyn, I had let myself go. I wanted to be invisible, unnoticed by anyone and everyone, and so spent no time on my appearance. I worked in the kitchen where no one saw me and no one cared how I looked. Why shouldn't I let my outward appearance match my inward depression?

"Sara is a beautiful girl," she argued. "She'll do just fine at the tables."

“She’s going to need some better clothes,” said Mr. Minns. “And does she even know how to put on makeup?”

“We’ll get her some clothes, and yes, she knows how to put on makeup,” said Mrs. Minns sternly, and then she turned to me. “Sara, is that alright? Will you stay on for the summer and help me?”

I didn’t know what to say. No, I didn’t want to be a waitress. I didn’t want people to see me, to have to smile, be polite. I wanted to hide away forever, to hide my pain and emptiness. But I also didn’t want to hurt Mrs. Minns, who had been so kind to me. And I didn’t want to hurt Mr. Minns, who had also helped me, even if he didn’t want to. That just made him all the more self-sacrificing.

“What if I got a job during the day, then came to the restaurant at night?” I asked. “You could hire Keith to help Mr. Minns in the kitchen, and then I’d be there for you when you need me most.”

Everyone thought about this. Finally Mrs. Minns said, “Sara, that’s a wonderful suggestion. Let’s look around tomorrow and see if we can find someone who’s hiring.”

* * *

As it turned out, I didn’t know how to put on makeup. A month later, and I’m sitting in my shared bedroom at Rachel’s small desk, applying my makeup and thinking about this. It’s such an easy thing; it’s second nature to me now. A little concealer, some foundation, powder to set, dark powder on the eyebrows to accentuate. Dark eyeshadow along the upper lashes, medium and light eyeshadow blended to create shadow and depth, eyeliner along the lower lid, two coats of mascara, avoid clumping. Blush on the cheeks, lip liner to shape the mouth, and finally lipstick.

I watch in the mirror as my hands complete the transformation. Jars open, brushes fly, pencils and tubes leave traces of colour in precise patterns over my skin. Simple. I do it every day, twice in fact, plus occasional touchups. I could never forget the process, if I did my hands would take over and complete it automatically without my needing to think at all. And yet, somehow, I did forget.

I think back over my life, these past four months that are all the life I know. All the things I’ve forgotten and had to relearn! I don’t even know how it’s possible. I have some form of amnesia, that much is obvious, and yet it’s unlike any form of amnesia I know. There are numerous types, all with their own special quirks, but some things are consistent. Like, you never forget *everything*. In cases where people have lost all of their past memories, at the very least they retain their ability to perform the regular routines they’ve always performed.

So how could I forget how to put on a bra? Or take it off? I’ve had to relearn how to put on pantyhose, and how to walk in high heels. And don’t even ask about my first period, what a horrible shock that was! I mean, I’m a woman! Surely I’ve done all these things a thousand times. They should be ingrained in my memory, indelible, accessible to me as easily as speech. But for some reason, they’re not.

If, as an example, an accountant were to get amnesia, he would retain his ability to perform math. Unless of course the horrible idea of facing a life as an accountant was what pushed him to lose his memory in the first place. Is that what happened to me? Did something happen that was so horrendous, I could no longer face any aspect of my life? An image of those eyes, telling me to run, enters my mind involuntarily and causes me to shiver.

The moment passes, and I return to the present. I finish my lipstick, and smack my lips at the pretty young woman in the mirror who I've come to accept is me. She smiles back, a sparkle in her eyes that wasn't there a month ago. I'm starting to like that girl, even if she is keeping secrets from me.

This is my favourite time of the day. My day job has just ended, and I have an hour to myself before my job at the restaurant begins. I always come back here, to this room, Rachel is always out and I don't know where but I don't care either because I'm completely alone. I look in the mirror, taking the time to fix my hair, my makeup, and more and more I think about who I am rather than whom I might have been. I have no past, no hint of who I was before, but now I have a present, and who knows, one day I may even have a future. The girl in the mirror radiates a confidence that I find reassuring.

The day after our discussion in the kitchen, Mrs. Minns became serious about finding me another job in town. I know she was worried about me, the depression I had fallen into. Whether she knew about Davyn I don't know. I haven't told anyone about my amnesia, I've been too ashamed, too worried what people might think, what they might do. Especially considering, I'm not sure I want to find my old life. If someone were to find it, bring it to me when I was unaware, I'm frightened of what might come with it.

This was the day I truly found out how little I knew about anything. Mrs. Minns wanted me to look respectable for meeting prospective employers. She told me to shave my legs, and put on makeup. I simply stared at the equipment set in front of me. I had no more idea how to use any of it than if I had been set at the controls of a jumbo jet.

I'm sure Mrs. Minns thought I was being obstructionist. Maybe she gave me the benefit of the doubt, and assumed I was simply nervous, or still depressed, which I was. I stayed in the bathroom overly long, working on my legs with the razor, making little progress on the several months of growth. Eventually Mrs. Minns had to leave to help open the restaurant, calling to me that I should follow as quickly as I could.

The makeup went just as badly, maybe worse. I didn't know what anything was. I made a few faltering attempts, and in the end had no choice but to wash it all off. I applied a coat of lipstick, the only item I recognized with any level of certainty, then ran out to the restaurant with my well-bandaged legs hidden beneath my usual baggy trousers.

Even though I looked no different than my usual bedraggled self, except for the addition of a smear of red coating my lips, Mrs. Minns greeted me as I entered with a kind remark. She told me that I was to have the day off, and called to Mr. Minns that we were leaving but she would be back shortly.

We walked down the street for a couple of blocks, to an area of the downtown with which I was only minimally familiar. Even though it was a small town, I hadn't gotten out much, and I looked at the shop windows as we walked past. Mrs. Minns stopped in front of a hair salon, and I followed as she entered. The door brushed a bell as it opened, bring-

ing a woman from the back to greet us. I recognized her as Mrs. Dinwall, a friend of Mrs. Minns and one of the people who showed up at the restaurant for a cup of tea two or three times each week.

"Mary," she greeted Mrs. Minns, although I appeared to be invisible to her. "Back so soon? You were just in last week. Never mind, have a seat and I'll be right with you."

"Not today, Karen," replied Mrs. Minns. "I have to get right back to help Gerald. Sara is hoping you'll help her with a new look, though."

Mrs. Dinwall appeared to notice me for the first time, and turned to look me up and down. "Sara, of course. How are you? Yes, wow, where to start?" She turned back to Mrs. Minns and asked, "So what did you have in mind for her, Mary?"

"You're the expert!" she replied. "Something she can easily take care of, and maybe you can give her some help with makeup."

"Hmm," hummed Mrs. Dinwall as she circled me, pulling at my hair and tilting my head this way and that. "We could cut it short, maybe a bob with fringe across her forehead, a tight perm, blond highlights?"

"I'm sure it will be beautiful," said Mrs. Minns.

Now, I've come to love Mrs. Minns, but she is at least forty years older than me, which is to say, her ideas of style are at least forty years out of date. And I didn't trust her friend Mrs. Dinwall in this respect either. I mean, cut off my hair? I was about to turn and run, when a girl about my age came in from the back room and attempted to join the conversation.

"She already has beautiful waves in her hair, do you suppose..." she said.

"Thank you, Julie," interrupted Mrs. Dinwall. "Can you get out the equipment at station 2?"

"Can Julie do my hair?" I heard myself saying. I had no idea if Julie was a hair stylist, or how she might finish her sentence, "Do you suppose..." I just knew I would trust a serial killer to stand behind me with a pair of scissors before I would trust Mrs. Dinwall.

"Julie has only been here a couple of months," said Mrs. Dinwall. "I've been here thirty-seven years. Don't you worry, I'll take care of you," she reassured me. I was not reassured.

"I'd like Julie to do my hair," I repeated meekly.

Julie came over to offer her support, for which I was truly grateful. "It's alright, Mrs. Dinwall, I can take care of her. If you like, you could go with Mrs. Minns for a cup of tea. I don't mind looking after the shop for a bit."

Mrs. Minns, bless her heart, realized what was happening and chimed in, "Oh, Karen, do you have some time? I'm looking at new curtains for the restaurant, and I could use your eye for colour."

Mrs. Dinwall and Mrs. Minns left happily, chatting about curtains and tablecloths and the folly of youth, and Julie closed the door behind them. She leaned against the door as if bracing it against their return, and breathed a sigh of relief. I laughed at her comic performance.

“So, what’s the average age of the clientele in this shop?” I asked with a smile.

“Average, about 97,” she replied. “Although, we had a woman the other day who couldn’t have been any more than 60. So, let’s see what we can do for you today.”

Julie and I became fast friends immediately. My months of depression slipped away, as we talked about anything and everything. Another thing I had forgotten, it seems. A girl needs a girlfriend, someone who can understand her, and make her laugh.

After an emotional debate, Julie managed to convince me to cut about six inches off my hair. My hair was so long, I wouldn’t even notice it she told me, and we needed to lighten it so the natural waves would come out. She cut and styled my hair, refused to change the colour as it was “already way too perfect, I would kill to find this colour in a box.”

By the time Julie had washed and cut my hair, Mrs. Dinwall had returned, and tried to take over. She wanted me to sit under a hair dryer, but Julie intervened.

“Oh, Mrs. Dinwall, I was going to show Sara how to dry and style it herself at home,” she told her.

Mrs. Dinwall started to argue, except at that moment one of her regular customers arrived, looking for her usual blue rinse or whatever. I gave Julie a look of mock horror, and she crossed her eyes for only me to see, and we laughed.

Julie showed me how to blow-dry my hair, making it appear tousled but not messy, then flip it over my head to apply a light mist of hairspray. Then a few quick turns of a curling iron, break up the curls with your fingers, brush lightly where needed and voila! I looked amazing.

Julie then introduced me to the mysterious world of women’s makeup. She presented each tube and jar of coloured cream, powder, and wax, demonstrating their use, allowing me to try for myself, until it was committed to memory and all that was needed was practice. Julie finished up every step, with the touches you expect from a professional beautician.

Did I say I looked amazing before? Amazing was just the beginning. I was stunned at the transition. I hadn’t felt this good about myself in months. The girl in the mirror was everything I wanted to be. Pity I’d dressed like such a slouch this morning.

Julie packaged up my things at the counter, while Mrs. Dinwall saw to her customer. “What’s this?” I asked, picking up a bottle she hadn’t gone over with me.

“That’s your homework,” said Julie with a smile. “Nail polish, put it on tonight.”

“All finished?” said Mrs. Dinwall, coming over to see me out. She took a good look at Julie’s work and added, “Next time you’re here, we’ll try to do something special for you.”

“Thank you Mrs. Dinwall, but I love it,” I told her. “Mrs. Minns is going to help me to find a nice new outfit to go with my new look.”

“Oh, Mary asked me to tell you, she’s busy today but you should have a look through the shops and see what you like. She’ll come out with you tomorrow.”

I had a sudden inspiration, “Can Julie come with me?”

"Julie has work to do this afternoon," said Mrs. Dinwall. But then she looked at our disappointed faces, and the clock, and relented. "Come back in an hour. She can be finished then." She wasn't completely cold-hearted!

* * *

Thinking back on it now, I have to laugh. That was the best day of my life, before or since. It was the day I got my life back. I doubt any of my lost memories could possibly compare with the incredible freedom that gave me.

I remember racing home, looking for a nice outfit to wear, as if I were going on a first date. In a way I suppose I was. I wanted Julie to like me, I wanted her to be a part of my life so much. My clothes were all wretched, but somehow I found something that would do, and returned to the salon to meet her.



It was as if we had been best friends forever. Julie helped me to find two perfect outfits that I could wear for waitressing or job searching, or for just an afternoon in the beautiful summer weather. As it turned out, I didn't need to search far for a job, as one of the dress shops we looked through needed a salesgirl. If they'd seen me the day before I doubt they ever would have thought to offer me the job. But with my new hair and makeup, a beautiful summer dress, and my best friend making my depression a distant memory, I was offered the job before I even mentioned I was looking.

My hour between jobs is up, and without even realizing it I've returned to the restaurant. Mrs. Minns greets me cheerfully, I see Mr. Minns and Keith

are working away in the back, cooking and cleaning, happily discussing the latest football match.

Keith is like all boys his age. I suppose he's not much younger than I am, but the age difference to me seems immense. He flirts with me, and I must admit I let him. I flirt right back, but always letting him know that I'm way out of his league. Oh, we've kissed a few times recently, when we could get away with it, but it will never go any farther than that. He's just too young.

That's my life. Always busy, two jobs that I love, no stress, a best friend who is amazing, a cute guy to snog when the feeling comes over me. I have everything I could possibly want. Which is why this persistent, nagging feeling that something important is missing worries me so.

Chapter 3

Half way into the evening shift, and Keith is already hard at it. I mean really, he is incorrigible! Every time he can catch my eye, he'll wink and give me a nod toward the dry storage closet, our favourite spot for a few minutes alone. The dinner rush has died down, but I still have a few customers waiting for me. I've just served starters to that table of four, and they'll be wanting their meal within a few minutes.

I set down the dishes I've just cleared, and head back to the tables. He catches my eye and does it again! I laugh inwardly, shake my head at him, no! He puts on that innocent, what's-the-harm look of his and I give in. Why not just give him a taste? I roll my eyes and head for the storage closet, Keith drops his dishcloth and follows...

There's a crash from the restaurant, like a table going over! I turn from the storage closet, rush past Keith to see what's happened. As I pass through the door to the restaurant, I scan the area, take stock of what is going on. Mrs. Minns is at the register, looking shocked. Most of the patrons are standing, some remain seated, but all are looking at my table of four. A number of people are in my way, already crowding around the commotion. I elbow my way past to see what's happening.

As I approach the table, I get my first glimpse of the chaos. The table hasn't gone over, but one chair has, the tablecloth is pulled so that two meals are lying amongst broken dishes on the floor, wine glasses are overturned, their contents spilled across the table.

All four patrons are standing, the two women yelling frantically, the younger man holding the older from behind, shaking the older man furiously. Madness!

Quickly I realize what has happened, my mind makes sense of the bizarre tableau. The older man can't breathe, he's choking. Something is lodged in his throat, the younger man realized this, rushed to his aid, and in the process of getting the old man to his feet they knocked over the chair, pulled the tablecloth, knocked over the plates and glasses.

There's nothing I can do to help. The younger man is performing the Heimlich maneuver, a procedure taught in health and safety classes for assisting victims who are choking. His technique isn't perfect, but it should be effective.

Except it isn't. The older man can no longer stand on his own, he's being supported by the younger, his knees buckling. The younger man pulls furiously, swinging the older man as he collapses.

I look closely at the older man. It's only been a few seconds since I heard the crash, ran to the table, but already the skin on his face is mottled, his mouth hangs open, his lips and tongue swollen...

"Stop it!" I yell, approaching the table. I'm ignored, as the younger man continues his furious thrusts, the older man sinking to the floor.

"Stop it!" I try again, right into the younger man's face, and try to pry his arms away from the victim. He's strong, and won't let go. "He's not choking! He's having an allergic reaction!"

He doesn't let go, but he stops his upward thrusts, simply holds the collapsed man, and looks at me.

"Does this man have allergies?" I ask. I look at the older woman, the closer of the two, but she appears to be beyond speech.

"Only to shellfish," says the younger woman finally. "But there was none on the menu."

I resist the urge to strike her as I say, "Two of you ordered scallops. Lay him down on the floor."

The man is set on the floor, and even though he can't breathe he looks at me with what I interpret as relief on his face. I raise his feet, to assist blood flow to the brain. By this time, everyone in the restaurant is crowding the area.

"I need you all to step back, give him room," I tell them. Mrs. Minns has arrived. "Mrs. Minns, call 999, ask for an ambulance. Tell them we need an epinephrine kit."

Mrs. Minns nods and runs off to the phone in the office.

"Does he have any medication?" I ask. His wife hands me a bottle of antihistamine tablets. Useless, as he can't breathe let alone swallow.

As we wait, the man's eyes eventually close. I open his mouth, look at his throat. It's completely sealed off. There's no way the paramedics will be able to get an intubation tube through. How long has it been since the crash? At least three or four minutes.

"The ambulance is on its way," says Mrs. Minns, arriving out of breath from the office.

"How long till they get here?" I ask.

"Ten minutes," she tells me.

I feel his pulse, it barely registers. "He'll be dead in less than two," I say. "Give me his jacket."

The younger man picks up the jacket off the floor, straightens it, hands it to me. I quickly roll it into a pillow, push the man up onto his side, shove the jacket between his shoulders, roll him onto his back again.

Looking around the room, I see what I need on a nearby table. I find a new drinking straw, pull off the plastic wrap, pick up a clean steak knife, return to the man on the floor. I feel his throat, looking for the right spot, the thin part of the larynx, press the sharp edge of the knife downward...

"What are you doing?" asks the younger man, grabbing my hands.

I try to pull away, but his grip is much stronger than I could hope to resist. I try to explain impatiently, "It's called an Emergency Tracheotomy. He can't breathe. He'll be dead long before the ambulance arrives. Let me go, I can save him."

He looks hard at me, defiant at first, but then relents, maybe he saw something in my eyes? He lets me go, nods reluctantly.

No one else will interfere now, everyone watches as I cut into the soft tissue of his throat, force the plastic straw through the hole, work it down his throat toward the lungs. A breath of air rushes from his lungs, through the straw. People who can see applaud, but something is still wrong.

He doesn't breathe in. I'm holding the cut closed around the straw, but let go for a moment. There's almost no blood from the incision. I feel for his pulse with my free hand, but he has none.

"Hey, Heimlich!" I yell at the younger man. He looks at me and I continue, "Do you know CPR too?"

"A little," he says noncommittally.

"Well, get down here and do a little, right here." I gesture with my free hand, indicating where he should press. He's kneeling beside me, hands ready. "Both hands, one on top of the other, right here. Press like this, one, two, three..."

Heimlich begins, pressing on the man's heart, forcing it to do its job, pumping blood. I hold the incision closed around the straw. He needs oxygen. Normally you would do mouth to mouth, or a proper tracheostomy tube would have a ventilator pump. Inspiration hits me, and I lean down, blow air into the end of the straw. After two breaths his eyes open wide, air is sucked through the straw into his lungs. I feel his pulse and tell Heimlich to stop.

"Don't move, don't speak," I tell the man. "You can breathe now, we're waiting for the ambulance, everything is going to be okay."

Everything is calm for another five minutes, until the ambulance arrives. Then all hell breaks loose, all over again. The paramedics aren't in a listening mood, aren't in the least willing to accept medical advice from a little girl. There is no way they will let me near the epinephrine, or allow me to replace the straw with a tracheostomy tube. They seem to believe he is a stabbing victim.

A gurney is brought into the restaurant, the man is loaded onto it and wheeled out to the waiting ambulance. I am not invited to ride with them as the attending physician. I do

receive an invitation from the local police, though, who have also responded to the emergency call. As the girl in possession of the bloody knife, covered with blood on her hands and clothes, they want to ask me a few questions.

* * *

As I approach along the hospital corridor, I can see that the door is open. Still, I stop at the opening, more to collect my nerves than anything else. The older couple from the restaurant – who I now know to be Dr. and Mrs. Grange – is in the room. Dr. Grange is sitting up in the bed, His wife at his side, speaking to him quietly. They haven't noticed me standing here, so I knock tentatively on the door.

Dr. Grange looks up from his hospital bed, sees me. "There she is!" he rasps, his throat obviously sore and causing him some difficulty. "Sara, yes? Come in, come in!"

I approach the couple apprehensively. I mean, what can they think of me? I'm not even sure what happened any more. I have memories of the events in the restaurant last night, but it's... it's hard to explain. It's like they aren't real, didn't really happen. Maybe like a dream, but not really. It's more like, having watched a film that you didn't understand, then remembering yourself as the lead character. I wish I could explain it.

I remember the commotion, Dr. Grange being set on the floor, me holding a bloody knife at his throat, the ambulance attendants shoving me away, the police taking me, asking me about my bloody hands, just wanting to wash but not being allowed. All their questions, but I had no answers. What could I possibly tell them? I don't even know my full name. For some reason they don't press charges, but I'm warned not to leave town.

"I've been told you asked to see me," I say. "I've been told to apologize."

"Apologize?" replies Dr. Grange. "Whatever for?"

"For, um..." I clear my throat, nerves stealing my voice. With a tremor to my words I tell him, "The police say I poisoned you, and stabbed you. I want to... apologize for that, I think."

Dr. Grange simply stares at me, then laughs, and chokes. After a moment to collect himself he asks, "Whatever would make you believe that?"

"It's what I'm told," I respond. "And, I'm not sure any more. From what I can remember, maybe it's true."

Dr. Grange looks at me again. "Well, I must admit my memories are a bit hazy as well, but I can say for a fact that you didn't poison me. That was my idiot son-in-law."

"Harold!" scolds Mrs. Grange.

"I'm sorry, your son-in-law?" I ask.

"Yes, our daughter's husband Roger," answers Dr. Grange. "The other man at our table last night. They tell me you called him 'Heimlich'." Dr. Grange laughs, initiating another brief coughing spell before he continues. "Oh dear, I'm afraid that's the kind of label that just may stick for a while. He ordered scallops last night, insisted I try them. He thought they were scalloped potatoes."

“And you’re allergic to shell fish, is that right?” I ask, recalling some of the previous night’s events.

“Quite right. But before I can tell anyone what’s happened, Heimlich has me up on my feet, crushing the life out of me! I knew I was going to die, but I must say I was more upset by the indignity of it all than anything else. I was never as grateful to anyone as I was to you for convincing him to set me down.”

“And then I stabbed you,” I say.

“Well, I must admit I was not conscious for that part of the festivities,” Dr. Grange jokes. “But from what I’ve seen and been told since, I would say you performed a masterful piece of surgery. I’ve been a doctor for forty-five years, retired these past seven, and only once was called on to perform a tracheotomy. That was in my surgery, with an assistant and all the proper tools and equipment. I’ve discussed it with the doctors here, and believe me, everyone is impressed.”

One word from his speech strikes me. Trachie-something, where have I heard that word before? Then I realize, it was me. I said it last night. How was I able to use a word I don’t even know?

Dr. and Mrs. Grange are looking at me, waiting for a response. “Um, thank you?” I say.

“May I ask, where are you currently practicing?” Dr. Grange asks.

“Practicing?” I say stupidly.

“Yes, what hospital? Or are you in private practice?”

“Oh, no!” I exclaim, suddenly realizing what he is implying. “I’m not a doctor.”

“Still a student?” he persists. “I should have known, you’re obviously far too young to be a doctor. Working your way through, good for you. What college are you attending? Who are your professors, I may know some of them. I’d like to speak to them, put in a good word for you.”

“I’m not a medical student! I’m not any kind of student, I’m nothing, just a waitress, nothing more,” I say, becoming increasingly anxious over his questioning.

“You left school?” he asks. “But why? You obviously have talent. It would be crime if you never finished.”

“Is it the expense?” asks Mrs. Grange. “We can help you. Please, let us help you.”

“Yes, of course!” says Dr. Grange. “Believe me, Sara, it’s no inconvenience to us. You’ve given me back my life, and money is one thing we have plenty to give. Please say you’ll accept.”

“Please stop!” I blurt out. “I’ve never been to college! I have no medical training! I’m glad I was able to help you, but I just want to go home now.”

Dr. Grange is silent, thinking. Then, “Rubbish. You performed an emergency tracheotomy last night.”

“I don’t even know what a trachie-thing is!” I say, tears forming in my eyes.

“You certainly knew last night,” Mrs. Grange tells me. “I distinctly remember, you even used the term.”

"I can't remember now!" I manage to say, before I collapse in tears. Then it all comes out. I haven't told anyone, in all these months. I don't know why. Shame, maybe fear? It doesn't matter why, because now, in front of these two total strangers I break down, sob uncontrollably as I tell them everything. How I woke with no memory, no idea where I was or how I got there. The fear that drove me to run, wanting to hide. Wanting to make a new life for myself, how it all fell apart. Never knowing who I was, where I belonged. I don't know if they understand half of what I say, as I try to speak while my chest heaves and my nose runs and tears stream down my face. It takes me a long time to calm down, but when I do I find Mrs. Grange holding me like a child.

"Sara," Dr. Grange says, once he sees I'm calm and capable of listening. "You must know, your former life, good or bad, is still inside you. Everything you do or say or think, everything that makes you Sara, draws on those experiences. Without understanding your past, you can't understand who you are, why you think the way you do, why you react the way you do. Your actions and reactions, your own thought processes are a mystery to you. Sara, you need to face this or it will tear you apart."

"I... tried..." I sniffle.

"You've been through a terrible ordeal," Dr. Grange continues. "But you've been attempting to face it alone. This problem can't be solved that way. Part of you wants to find your past, but another part wants to keep it hidden. You can't trust that part, it will always mislead you. What you need is an objective observer, someone to guide you. If you're willing, Sara, I would like to help you."

"I've had a thought," Mrs. Grange adds to the conversation. I suddenly realize she is still holding me, still stroking my hair. With some embarrassment I sit up as she continues. "We were just on our way to our home in France for the summer. Why don't you come with us, be our guest? You'll love it; it's a beautiful estate in the southern mountains, lovely for walks, with a picturesque village close by. Please say you will."

"No," I say immediately with hardly a thought. "No, I can't. I have a life here now, friends, people who care about me. No, I need to stay here."

"Sara, listen to yourself," Dr. Grange tells me. "Which part of you is speaking, the part that wants what is best for you, or the part that wants to hide your past? I know, Sara, that you have a nice life here. You have friends, a place to live, maybe a boy you like. But you also know, you have another life somewhere else. And from what happened last night, we know it's a very different life to this one. It is quite likely a very extraordinary life."

"I don't want to lose what I have here," I tell them.

"You owe it to yourself to find your other life. When you find it, if you still prefer this life I'm sure it will still be here. But at least you'll be able to make a choice."

"Please say yes," Mrs. Grange says to me.

"Yes," I say immediately with hardly a thought.

Chapter 4

It's been a month since I arrived in France with Dr. and Mrs. Grange. What are the major events in my life since leaving England? Let's see...

The Granges' daughter Caroline lent me her passport so I could travel across the border. We took the Chunnel across to France, then drove through the French countryside to the Granges' summer home, which is every bit as beautiful as they described. Mountains surround us in all directions, with tiny French villages clinging to their sides like you might picture in a children's storybook. We're a mile from the nearest village, easy walking distance and I walk there almost every day.

Dr. Grange contacted his lawyer to discuss my predicament. His lawyer recommended a private detective, who has made some inquiries. I've asked that he should remain discreet, as I still fear what my old life may bring with it. He has apparently claimed this is hampering his investigation, but I have insisted on this. So far, he has determined that there is no Sara N. listed as a missing person in the United Kingdom, and I do not match the description for the small number of Sara Ns listed as missing from North America or other parts of Europe. He has asked a couple of times to be allowed to post a photograph of me, but this I have absolutely refused.

I've made some small attempts on my own to look for my past. Dr. Grange allows me to use the computer in his study, and I've occasionally gone onto the Internet, searching on combinations of words such as "Sara N" and "missing." Believe it or not, this produces thousands of hits, most of them little girls who've lost their kittens. Sometimes when I have nothing better to do, I look through the images, hoping to find one of me, but so far no luck.

Probably more productive are my daily talks with Dr. and Mrs. Grange. Most mornings we have tea on their balcony, and Dr. Grange gently prods at my memories. He'll tell me about his medical training and practice, hoping it might connect with memories of mine, but so far nothing. I'm beginning to think that perhaps I have no such training, but he continues to insist that this is quite impossible.

One important thing that came out of these discussions, however, was the fact that I was not on the pill. Dr. Grange quickly wrote a prescription for me, which I filled the same day. What a chance I had been taking! Bad enough to be lost and alone in the world, but to be lost and alone with a baby to care for, I can't imagine how I would have coped. How could I possibly forget that I required birth control? No matter how many times this happens to me, I never have an answer.

And of course, there's a man. His name is François, and he lives in the village. He speaks only French, and I speak only English, but we communicate on a higher level. Most days I find him in the café on the main street, and when I see him, I sit at his table. He looks at me, and in the most incredible French accent he always says, "Laisse moi tranquille, vous folle anglaise."

After some time spent just sitting in the café, enjoying each other's company, François will stand and we leave. We wander around the village, François always leading the way,

speaking to me in his romantic French accent, gesturing with his hands in a way that is so continental and sophisticated. For my part, I've told him all about myself, even though I know he can't understand a word. Maybe it's because he can't understand that I've been able to be so open and honest with him.

Then he will take me to his apartment, and make love to me. When we finish he will light a cigarette, look at me with his amazing eyes and say, "Allez à votre maison, folle anglaise." I wish I understood his words, but I have no doubt as to their meaning. I'll kiss him, get dressed, and walk home, looking forward to seeing him again the next day.

* * *

"Bonjour, Émilie," I say, practicing my French as I enter the café. Émilie owns and runs the café that I love so much, where I meet with François most days. I look around, but the tables are nearly empty, and François is not at his usual window seat. "Où est François?" I ask. Where is François?

Émilie looks up and smiles at me. She speaks in French, far too quickly for my limited understanding, gesturing at the window seat, gesturing at the other tables in her small café, counts to three as she points out the window (I understood these words, but what she meant is beyond me), then gestures helplessly with a shrug of her shoulders.

"I see," I say, although all I really understand is that François is not here. I turn to leave, but Émilie begins speaking rapid-fire French once again. I turn back to her, my incomprehension visible on my face, and she stops, thinks.

Émilie comes out from behind the counter, motions me toward a small table at the back. "S'asseoir ici, the English tea, yes?" she says in a halting mixture of French and English. However, she makes herself clear. I have no other plans for the day, so I sit.

"Yes, thank you," I say. "Merci," I add quickly, once again practicing my limited French vocabulary. "Milk, no sugar."

"Meelk – Non, shu-gar!" Émilie says, forcing her lips out as she attempts to imitate my words and pronunciation. She laughs at herself, she has a beautiful laugh. I watch her as she returns to her counter, busies herself with cups and kettles, still talking to me in her captivating French accent even though she most certainly realizes I don't understand a word.

Émilie is a very attractive woman. Older than me, she must be about thirty-five, but still vibrant and youthful. She's one of the few people from the village that I know by name, though I now realize that is my fault. I realize, I've ignored her and everyone else as I've spent all my time with François. Watching her now, carrying on her one-sided conversation, smiling at me, I realize that I miss the company of another woman. François is handsome, yes, but sometimes I feel that I need something only another woman can give.

She picks up the tray she has been arranging, and steps out from behind her counter. As she is bringing it to my table, her one other customer stands and leaves. Émilie calls out to him, waves to him a goodbye, as she continues toward me. She sets down the tray on

the next table over, transfers a teapot, cup and saucer, small pitcher of milk and a spoon to my table in front of me.

Émilie gestures at the empty café as she continues speaking to me. Her voice is captivating, I could listen to her all day. Except, I realize, she has stopped speaking and is looking at me. I simply stare, I don't know what she wants. She begins speaking again, gestures at the empty tables once more, then the empty chair beside me, the steaming coffee mug in her hand, my table.

"Oh!" I shout in understanding. "Oh! Yes, please join me!"

Émilie pulls the chair over to my side of the table, and sits facing me. She is wearing a short skirt, as am I, and our bare knees touch. She continues her conversation, her eyes

sparkling, laughter on her lips. Her voice is like crystal wind chimes, a constant, lovely sound I could listen to forever.

Whenever she laughs, I laugh. Every once in a while she will stop talking and ask for my acknowledgment of what she is saying with a "Oui?" This means "yes," I know that much. Then I will say "Oui!" back to her, and she laughs, and talks some more.

I watch her lips as she speaks, full and red, with so much expression, every word she speaks looks like a kiss. When she's about to laugh she bites her lower lip first, as if to hold it back. When she is telling me a secret she pauses, licks her upper lip, then smiles and moves closer.

And her eyes! So round, so clear, when she makes eye contact she won't let go. I stare into those eyes, become lost, wondering if I'll ever find my way out again, wondering if I'll ever want to, then she'll release me with a blink as she smiles, laughs, and sits back once again.



I'm watching her face, and realize, she is no longer talking. She looks at me, waiting for a response? I'm not sure. "Oui?" I say, half response, half question.

"Oui?" she says in surprise, then laughs. I guess that wasn't the answer she was expecting. "Non, non, non," she tells me, and gestures for me to come closer. I move to the edge of my chair, as does she, and she reaches her arms up and around me. For a moment I think she is about to kiss me. I'm shocked, but also curious what it will be like. But she doesn't kiss me of course, she simply wants to reach my hair. It's tied in a big ponytail at the back, which Émilie releases and then sits back. I hope my embarrassment is not evident on my face!

Émilie speaks to me again, mimes shaking out her hair. I shake out my hair for her, fluffing it up and over my shoulders. She reaches out with one hand, pushing my hair back from one shoulder. She leans forward, resting her other hand on my leg. I notice, when we moved together Émilie's left knee moved between my own, spreading my legs slightly. Her naked thigh is against my own, warm, soft, and smooth. With sudden shock I want to put my knees together, but can't.

Émilie is still intent on my hair, brushing it out with her fingers, arranging it over my shoulder. "Vous êtes une belle fille," she says softly. I don't understand, and simply shrug my shoulders. She pouts, thinks, and with inspiration says, "Beautiful – girl! Belle fille, beautiful girl."

This surprises me, and I blush. She moves closer, and her thigh pushes further forward against mine. Émilie places one hand behind my neck, uses the other to turn my chin left and right, keeping up her constant stream of conversation. She traces the arch of my eyebrow with her middle finger, touches the corner of my eye, straightens an eyelash gently. She touches her own lips, tracing them with her little finger, then mine in the same way.

This is still a simple conversation between two women, isn't it? We're talking about hair, and makeup, that's all there is to it, nothing more. I watch her lips as she's touching mine, and imitate her pout, accidentally kissing her little finger.

Émilie smiles, noting my embarrassment, and turns her attention to my uncovered shoulder. She touches my bra strap, lifting it, her fingers underneath, sliding them down toward my chest. She asks a question, but I don't understand. Releasing my bra strap, she undoes one button of her blouse, encourages me to look inside. I look, but I still don't understand.

Émilie explains. Using both hands, she traces my bra straps, from my shoulders, down over my chest, then cups my breasts in her hands. I'm speechless, but then she releases me, takes my hands in hers, and places them on her chest, forcing them to make the same cupping motion she made on mine. Oh! Of course, I understand now. She is not wearing a bra, we're talking about clothes!

She mimes that I should reach behind me, release my bra, but I shake my head, no. Émilie won't accept this as an answer, though, and reaches behind me herself. This time, her lips are so close I can taste her sweet breath in my mouth as she reaches behind me, releases the clasps. She slides her hands up to my shoulders, reaches into the sleeve of my blouse, grasps the strap of my bra and pulls it through the sleeve. I assist by bending my elbow, allowing her to work the strap over my entire arm. She reaches down the front of

my blouse, grasps my bra and pulls it through the sleeve. Reaching up my other sleeve, she grabs the bra, pulls it through, and it drops off my arm.

She's removed my bra, without removing my blouse over it. I didn't even know you could do that! Émilie folds the bra in half and places it in my purse, continuing to talk quite naturally. She reaches back to my chest, cupping my breasts once again. The feel of her hands, moving the silky material across my breasts, gently touching my nipples, is electric. I reach up and touch her breasts, and she smiles at me.

Émilie releases one breast, uses that hand to reach behind my back once again, I don't know what for this time. She pulls me closer, her lips so close – this time she – actually kisses me, and I let her. My hands are behind her, pulling her toward me, her hot thigh sliding ever forward against mine until it reaches the end and can go no further. Her knee presses against my most intimate area, her tongue gently parts my lips, probing, so good, pulling me closer with one arm, the other hand cupping my breast, then suddenly one finger flicks my nipple through the soft material of the blouse, and...

My insides ignite! I grab Émilie, pull her to me, kissing her hard, pulling her knee tight into my crotch, afraid the sensation may go on forever, but hoping it will just the same...

And then I'm holding her, and she's holding me as I gasp for breath. After a while Émilie pushes me out to arms' length and looks at me, smiling, brushing my hair back from my face.

Émilie stands, crosses the café to the front door, and turns the sign to read "Fermé", closed. She comes back to me, takes me by the hand, and I stand. She kisses me again, quickly, gently, then leads me behind the counter, through the back door. There's a narrow set of stairs leading up, and without a word she takes me to the top. This is her apartment, above the café. She leads me to her bedroom, where she slowly undresses me.

* * *

Lying in Émilie's bed, her naked body stretched out before mine, bathed in the bright glow of the sunbeam that enters her bedroom window. She is so beautiful, so perfect, I reach out to touch her face, make sure she's real. She smiles at my touch, takes my fingers in her own, kisses them gently.

Another thing I'd forgotten, or maybe I never really understood – a woman can have more than one orgasm. Many, many more. If Émilie could give me such pleasure just with her knee, you can't imagine what is possible when she uses her hands, her lips, her tongue...

And just as exciting, I kissed her, touched her, brushed her breasts against my cheek, took her nipples in my mouth. There is hardly a square inch on either of us that remains untouched, unknissed, unexplored. And it all felt, so, right.

Familiar. Yes, this time, the only word for it is familiar. And yet, it's not so straightforward as to say I have been with a woman before. I believe it to be true, even though I have no such memory. It's just that, I'm equally convinced that I have never had a lesbian expe-

rience – that part was completely new, unexpected. Shocking, but amazing. Does that make any sense at all? No, it's my memory, playing tricks again. That must be it.

Émilie lifts herself up on one elbow, smiles at me. With a sudden movement she pounces on top of me, kisses me passionately, then with cat-like grace leaps over me, out of the bed. She stands, stretches, steals my sunbeam for herself, but I don't mind because the glow highlights her form, shines through her hair, reminds me of an hour in her bed, that perfect body pressed against mine.

Émilie finds her clothes, quickly dresses. She is at the door, my languid form still barely able to raise its head from the pillow. She watches me, amused. Blows a kiss, smiles, nods her head to say, "Come along, follow me." Then she's gone.

I will follow. In just a minute.

* * *

I climb the stairs to my room, toss my purse on the bed, drop into the chair at my makeup table, exhausted. I automatically pick up an eyeliner pencil, begin the process of touching up my makeup. Mrs. Grange told me dinner would be in an hour, I should go and help her except I'm too tired after the long, hot walk back from the village. I'll go down in a few minutes, right now I need a few moments to myself.

After a few leisurely minutes in Émilie's bed I eventually got up, got dressed, followed her down the back stairs and into the café. She had reopened the doors, and a few customers were already seated at tables. I was standing behind the counter, watching her at one of the tables when a woman approached me, speaking rapidly in French, likely placing an order although I wouldn't know. I was slowly formulating a response in my limited vocabulary when Émilie rescued me.

"Sara, S'il vous plaît?" she said, miming that I should take the coffee pot around to the tables. Then she took the woman to a table, sat her down, and took her order.

And that's how I spent the rest of my afternoon. Making coffee, delivering to the tables, clearing tables, picking up phrases useful to a French waitress, occasionally speaking English with customers who wanted to practice their language skills. Working with Émilie, being useful, reminded me of working at the restaurant with Mr. and Mrs. Minns. It was fun. Plain and simple, there's no better word to describe it. It was fun.

The café closes at six, and I prepared to go home. Émilie tried to pay me, but I refused, accepting a slow, lingering kiss instead.

My hands fly through the makeup process as I remember my day. Eyeliner, eye-shadow, mascara, all find their proper places in the correct amounts. Pencils, brushes, sponges all work their magic, fulfill their purpose. Final step, lips are highlighted in – where is my lipstick?

Not at the table, of course, I took it with me today. Crossing the room, I find my purse on the bed where I dropped it, overturn it, dump out its contents on the bed. There is my lipstick, along with my bra, still where Émilie placed it. Smiling, I pick up both items, take them back to the makeup table.

As I finish my makeup, I look at the bra. My original bra, the only thing that remains from my old life. It's rather rumpled from its stay in my purse, maybe it needs to be ironed. Do you iron bras? You likely should, except looking at it, I'm not sure how it would be done. Maybe when they get to this state you just toss them. Maybe I should have better underwear if I'm going to see Émilie again. Émilie had great underwear.

Here's the tag, where I wrote my name, "Sara N." Even it's wrinkled. Worse, creased, making it difficult to even make out my name. I think about ironing the tag, pull it straight, eliminate the creases...

I can't believe this. I release the tag, and the creases spring back. There is my name, the only name I've ever known, Sara N. I pull it straight again, the creases gone, shifting the angles, and my name becomes...

"Sara Z." I say out loud.

Chapter 5

"Bristol, this stop. All passengers for Bristol, please detrain at this stop," says the automated message in a smug, self-satisfied voice as we pulled into the station. Feeling cranky after a long train ride, I want to complain about the use of such a horrid construct as "detrain," but Dr. Grange doesn't give me the opportunity. Jumping to his feet as soon as the announcement is read, he begins arranging our cases for departure.

It's a bit embarrassing to realize that a seventy-six year old man is better able to carry my luggage than I am. I take two small cases and my purse, staggering under their weight, while Dr. Grange takes the rest – two large cases, a heavy shoulder bag, his medical kit. Fortunately, once we're off the train and into the station he can finally set the large cases down on their rollers. This allows him to take one more of my bags.

It's been two weeks since my revelation. That one letter made all the difference in finding out who I was, where I came from. Dr. Grange contacted his lawyer the next day, who relayed the information to Mr. Stark, the private investigator. Within a couple of days he called us directly; my name was Sara Zeigler, I was born and raised in Bristol.

I wanted to leave immediately, but Mr. Stark requested we wait a few days while he cleared up some details. I was impatient, but Dr. Grange convinced me, it would take at least a few days to make arrangements for the trip. As it was, Mrs. Grange was unable to join us, much as she wanted to.

As we pass through the train station, I spot a man holding a sign that says "Grange." I point him out to Dr. Grange, and we steer our luggage toward him.

"Dr. Grange?" the man says to us, stretching out his hand.

Dr. Grange shakes the man's hand and says, "Yes, Mr. Stark I assume."

"James, please," says the man, and then he turns to me. "And you must be Sara Zeigler?"

"You tell me," I say, accepting his hand.

"Oh yes you are, no doubt about it," he tells us. He takes my one remaining bag, leaving me to carry nothing but my purse. "Follow me, I have a car around the corner." He leads us out of the station, across the road.

As we walk I have the opportunity to look at Mr. Stark. He is young, certainly no more than thirty. Dressed in blue jeans and a white cotton shirt, he looks no different than someone you might meet in a pub.

"Mr. Stark," I say as we walk. "Forgive me for saying so, but you don't look like what I would expect of a private investigator."

"Oh, I have a tweed cloak and deerstalker cap, but I only wear them in the rain," he tells me with a smile. "Seriously, it's a lot easier to investigate if you don't look like an investigator."

Mr. Stark leads us to a parking lot. He locates his car, places our luggage in the boot, and assists me into the back seat.

"Have you ever been to Bristol, Dr. Grange?" he asks as he pulls into the afternoon traffic.

"No, I've never had the pleasure," Dr. Grange responds. "I was hoping Sara would give me a tour. What do you think, Sara? Does anything look familiar?"

I look out the windows, at the train station slowly receding into the distance, around the street at the shops and businesses. It's as if I've never been her before.

"Nothing so far," I tell him.

"Not to worry," he assures me. "It will come. Maybe we should go to the University. I assume that's where you studied. James, do you know if Sara studied at Bristol University?"

Mr. Stark gives Dr. Grange a curious stare and says, "No. No, she didn't."

"Well, we'll need to find out where she studied," Dr. Grange continues. "She'll be wanting to continue her studies I'm sure, won't you Sara?"

I'm about to reply, but Mr. Stark speaks first. "I didn't come across anything in my investigation about post-secondary education."

"Not to worry," repeats Dr. Grange. "It shouldn't be too difficult to track that down at this stage."

Mr. Stark just gives him a strange look, then continues driving in silence.

For the rest of the afternoon we tour the city, seeing all that Bristol has to offer. The cathedrals, the museums, and the historic buildings. The waterways, the bridges, the gorge and the harbour. The shops and streets, and even the University. I remember precisely none of it.

"I really lived here?" I ask. We've stopped for a late dinner, the three of us sitting around a table in a small downtown pub. "You know for sure?" I continue, the frustration I feel making my voice shake as I hold back tears.

"There's no doubt, Sara," Mr. Stark tells me. "You were born here, grew up here, lived here for nineteen years."

"It's just, I thought it would come back to me. I thought, if I could just see something familiar, I would remember. But, I've never seen any of this. I've never been here before."

"Yes you have," Dr. Grange tells me. "Memory is a strange thing. You may wake tomorrow morning, your mind having had time to digest all you've seen, ready to reveal itself to you."

"Tomorrow I'll take you to your old neighborhood," Mr. Stark says. "You're bound to remember then. The streets you walked every day, your secondary school. You'll see."

"Nothing is familiar. If I'd ever been here, I would remember."

"Sara, do you remember our discussions?" Dr. Grange reminds me. "Part of you doesn't want to remember. You need to fight that part, remain positive. This is your home town, it will come back to you."

I order a sticky toffee pudding for dessert, in an attempt to remain positive.

* * *

"It is me, isn't it?" I say, looking at the photo Mr. Stark has handed to me. We've been taking a long stroll through what I'm told is my old neighbourhood, along the long, winding streets, past my old secondary school, touring the local shops. We stopped a few minutes ago to rest in a small park. As we sat on a bench, Mr. Stark opened the envelope he's been carrying. He handed me a photograph of a young girl, and surprised me by saying she was me.

"That was taken six years ago. You were only fifteen," he tells me.

"Look how long my hair was," I laugh. "I hope that's a school uniform, and I didn't dress like that on my own."

"So, it's not at all familiar to you?" asks Dr. Grange with disappointment.

I take another look at the pretty young girl in her jacket and long skirt. "No," I answer, handing the photo back to Mr. Stark.

Mr. Stark takes me through a few more photographs, a class photo, school activities. He has apparently been to my secondary school and copied these from old yearbooks. Here are the people I saw every day, talked with, laughed with, ate lunch with. A photo of me in a group of girls, smiling and laughing, obviously great friends. None of it means anything to me.

"Not to worry," Dr. Grange tells me, sounding rather worried. "It will come back, really, it must. Perhaps if you meet a few people from your past, talk to them. Hearing familiar voices, perhaps that's what you need to jog your memory."

"I'd like to see my family, if I could," I say.

Mr. Stark looks apprehensive, but opens his envelope once more, pulls out two more photographs. He hands me the first.

"This is your father," he tells me. The photograph is of a middle-aged man, perhaps fifty. Balding, gray moustache, working on the docks with a number of other men. It appears to have been taken from a distance, although enlarged with his face clearly visible. He is apparently completely unaware he is being photographed.

"This is your mother," Mr. Stark says, handing me the second picture. This one is of a middle-aged woman, a housewife going about her shopping, again completely unaware she is being photographed.

"I took these within the past few days," Mr. Stark tells me.

"Well, your parents, there you are," says Dr. Grange optimistically. "Surely you have some memory, some recollection of your parents. Birthdays, Christmases, seaside holidays?"

I look at the photos, stare at them, willing the memories to come. "I'm sorry Dr. Grange," I finally have to say. "I want to remember, believe me, I want so much to have my memories back, but neither of these people is the least bit familiar. Maybe if I could meet them?"

Mr. Stark gives me that same apprehensive look, takes back the photographs. He returns them to the envelope, thinking. Finally he tells me, "Meeting your parents ... may not be the happy reunion you have in mind. I met with your father a couple of times over the past week. I went to his pub, introduced myself, told him I was new in town, looking for work on the docks. I got him to open up a bit, tell me a bit about his family, your family.

"It seems you ran off two years ago with a boyfriend, against your father's wishes. Your mother was very upset at the time, and still hasn't gotten over it. You tried to ring them up a couple of times, but he wouldn't accept your calls. I don't think he'll be very receptive."

"But still, once they understand the circumstances, surely they'll want to help their own daughter?" suggests Dr. Grange.

"Yes, we have to try," I say. "Mr. Stark, could you please take me to my parents' home?"

Mr. Stark looks at me seriously. "You really don't know?"

"Know what?" I ask.

Mr. Stark stands, points a short distance down the road. "That's it," he tells me. "Number 43. That's your home."

* * *

Mr. Stark rings the doorbell. I stand on the front step with him, Dr. Grange stands behind us. We wait for a minute, nothing happening except for the butterflies agitating in my stomach. Eventually someone arrives, opens the door – my father.

"James! Whatever bring you..." he says, smiling as he recognizes Mr. Stark. Then he notices me standing beside him.

“What the devil is she doing here, with you?” he says, his tone turned distinctly cold.

“Henry, I’m afraid I may have deceived you. I’m a private investigator. Miss Zeigler has hired me to...” explains Mr. Stark, but he is interrupted as my mother arrives at the door.

“Who is it, Henry?” she asks, then stops still in her tracks when she sees me. Her face drops, her eyes begin to tear, she says my name. “Sara...”

“Get back in the house, woman. I’ll take care of this,” says my father. My mother takes one last look at me, but turns and leaves without a word. My father turns back to me.

“You hired someone to spy on me? As if you haven’t done enough to rip this family apart? And now you walk in here as if nothing’s happened, as if you haven’t put your poor mother through hell these past two years?”

“Please, you don’t understand...” I try to explain.

“I don’t want to understand. I have no interest in understanding anything about you. Your brainless boyfriend left you, you can’t pay the rent, you’re knocked up. I don’t care!”

“Perhaps if I explain,” Dr. Grange says, trying to calm the situation. “Sara has been under my care for two months. An extraordinary girl, highly talented. But what you don’t understand, she has completely forgotten her past.”

“She may have forgotten, but I haven’t,” my father says. “Much as I would like to. Now I’d appreciate it if you cleared off my property.” With that he slammed the door, leaving the three of us on the front step.

I turn from the house, walk down the road toward the park, barely aware of Mr. Stark and Dr. Grange behind me.

“Perhaps if I spoke to him alone,” Dr. Grange suggests. “If I had a chance to explain, I’m sure I could make him see.”

I turn around, look at the house one last time. “No, even if he listened to you it would make no difference,” I tell him. “This isn’t the past I’m looking for.” I turn from the house, enter the park. Mr. Stark has parked his car across on the other side.

“Perhaps if we find which university you’ve been attending,” suggests Dr. Grange.

“I don’t want to disappoint you Dr. Grange,” Mr. Stark says. “But, Sara has had no post-secondary education.”

“No, I don’t believe it,” Dr. Grange says, touching the scar on his throat. “That’s simply not possible.”

“If I wasn’t attending university, then where have I been for the past two years?” I ask.

“Glasgow,” Mr. Stark informs us.

Chapter 6

Lying in Daniel's bed, I want to get up, except the apartment is small and any noise I might make would wake him. So I lie here, trying not to move, trying not to wake him, and I think about how I came to be here.

Dr. Grange and Mr. Stark took me to Glasgow, but just like Bristol none of it meant anything to me. The streets, the shops, the neighbourhoods, they were familiar in so much as they looked like any other places in any other large city, but none of it connected with me personally. Even the apartment where I had lived, the department store where I had worked for almost two years, none of it was the least bit familiar. Then Mr. Stark told me about Daniel.

Until that moment I didn't even know of Daniel's existence. Now I was told, we were in love. We ran away together, ending up in Glasgow of all places, where we found jobs, shared an apartment. What was it like? Were we happy? Did we argue? Mr. Stark couldn't tell me. Daniel couldn't tell me either, because he was no longer in Glasgow. He had moved to Edinburgh, seven months earlier. So we followed the trail. I had to find Daniel, the last remaining link to my past.

We drove to Edinburgh, where I recognized – everything! Edinburgh Castle, sitting high above the city, creating an unmistakable skyline that I recognized immediately. And Calton Hill, with Nelson's Memorial Tower and the unfinished Parthenon, visible from anywhere in the city, stirred memories that brought tears to my eyes. Walking along the streets of the Old Town, and Princes Street in the New Town, was like coming home. This was the place I was looking for, this was where I belonged!

We spent the day touring Edinburgh, I had to show it all to Dr. Grange and Mr. Stark. The Scott Monument, the Palace of Holyroodhouse and the Queen's Gallery, the Royal Mile. I knew it all!

That night we went to see Daniel, the last piece of the puzzle. I was nervous, but so anxious to see him. He had to be the key to my memories. I had come so far today, remembered so much. Now I would meet the man I had loved, had shared my life with. Seeing him would bring it all back, it had to.

Mr. Stark knocked on the apartment door, as I didn't think I had the strength. I stood to his side and slightly behind him, Dr. Grange supporting my arm as I felt my knees might give out at any time. The door opened.

Daniel looked out at us, a virtual crowd of people in his narrow apartment hallway. He addressed Mr. Stark, but stopped short as his eyes scanned past him and landed on me. Then he simply stopped, mid-sentence, his mouth open, words he was in the process of forming forgotten, and stared at me.

"Sara?" he whispered after an extended moment of total silence. I couldn't speak, but simply nodded my reply. "Sara!" he yelled triumphantly, pushing past Mr. Stark, taking me from Dr. Grange, holding me in his arms as if he would never let me go. Tears spilled down his cheeks as he laughed, saying my name over and over.

Eventually we all entered his small apartment, the four of us crowded into the main room which served as living room, dining room, and kitchen. Dr. Grange explained how I had lost my memory, and had wandered ever since. Daniel explained how we had decided to move from Glasgow.

Apparently we were moving so that I could start a new job. I had found a position working as a sales clerk at a bookstore in Edinburgh. It didn't sound very glamorous, but it paid an extra 20 pounds a week, which was a fortune at our salaries. Daniel found a new job as well, but he had to finish up at his old job in Glasgow. Two weeks later, he would join me.

Except, he couldn't reach me. I was supposed to call, but never did. He worried, but assumed everything was all right. I must be busy, with a new job, new apartment, new city. He would see me in a few days at any rate.

He came up to see me the first weekend and I was gone, vanished. He stayed in Edinburgh, searching, but there was no clue as to what might have happened to me. He found a small apartment he could afford on his own, started his new job, and eventually ran out of places to look. Of all the terrible scenarios he imagined, he consoled himself by assuming I was all right, but I had run off, abandoned him.

Dr. Grange asked if I wanted to stay here, in Daniel's apartment. If I preferred he would put me up in a hotel for a few days, until I was sure, until I knew that this was the life I wanted to return to. I told him that wouldn't be necessary, I would stay with Daniel, I felt completely safe here. Daniel and I saw Dr. Grange and Mr. Stark to the door, said our goodbyes like an old married couple seeing their dinner guests out. Then we went back into Daniel's apartment, and went to bed.

Mr. Stark left Edinburgh the next day. There was nothing left for him to investigate, all mysteries were solved. Dr. Grange stayed on for a few days, just to make sure I was truly all right, but eventually left, convinced I would be fine.

I would need a job, so after Dr. Grange left I hit the streets. I was curious about the bookstore where I had worked and so returned. The owner was a friendly old man, who loved nothing more than a good story. I had a great story, and so in spite of my dereliction of duty he offered me the same job, at the same pay.

Lying in Daniel's bed, watching him sleep. It's been two weeks, my life is back where it was. I told Dr. Grange I felt safe here, and that's true. What I didn't tell him, what I haven't told anyone, is *I don't know this man*.

Daniel is a complete stranger to me. After recognizing Edinburgh, I was so excited to meet him, to have my memory returned to me. To fall in love all over again, a fairy tale ending. Except I knew as soon as he opened the door, as soon as I saw him, that I had never met this man in my life.

Oh, he's a very nice person, a good-looking man. And I know he is sincere when he tells me he loves me. It's just that I don't know him. I don't recognize him – someone I've loved and lived with for years – even as much as I recognize the Balmoral Hotel Clock.

I've known him for two weeks now. Do I love him? No, I don't think I do. Could I learn to love him? I don't know. I want to, everything would fit so nicely if I did. All I know is, I don't.

I have so many questions, and no one to help me. Why did I lose my memory? Something happened, something terrible. What was it? Am I really safe?

Everything I thought I knew about my life, everything I worked out over the past few months based on my thoughts and feelings, none of it fits this life. How could I have been so wrong, about everything?

Those last couple of days when Dr. Grange stayed in Edinburgh. Every time he looked at me he would touch the scar at his throat. I know he was wondering, what happened that day in the restaurant? How did this bookstore clerk know what to do, how to save his life?

And why do I recognize Edinburgh? It was the last place I lived, so that might account for it. Except I recognize everything in Edinburgh, every street, every building, inside and out, and I was only here for three days!

Three days. One day to move in. The second day I showed up at the bookstore for work. And the third day, I disappeared. What happened to me?

* * *

Michael Austin opened his cell phone, more to stop its incessant ringing than for any other reason. "Yes?" he said impatiently.

"Mr. Austin, sir, it's Janson."

"I know. What do you want Janson?"

"Sir, I've found her!"

"What? Are you sure? Where are you?"

"Quite positive, sir. I spotted her completely by chance, crossing Waverley Bridge."

"Did she recognize you?"

"I don't think she even noticed me. I stopped, and she walked right past me. I knew her immediately, sir, no mistake."



“Well follow her! We can’t afford to lose her again.”

“She’s gone into a book store, the same place we found her last winter! I think she may be working here again.”

“Don’t let her see you, but find out as much as you can. I want to know where she’s been, who knows her now? She was perfect when she had just arrived, and had no contacts. Now, anyone who knows her could be trouble. Still, it’s too late to use anyone else. It has to be her.”

“I know, sir. I’ll find out all I can.”

Austin closed his cell phone, deep in thought.

Chapter 7

Another week has passed, and things with Daniel are much the same. That is to say, not so good. Our lives are governed by double shifts, by bills and budgets, rent and groceries and bare essentials. We hardly have time for each other, which is just as well, as I’m still not sure how I feel toward him.

I know now that I am Sara Zeigler, born into humble beginnings. Sara Zeigler, who has no particular skills and so waits tables, or works as a sales clerk. Sara Zeigler, who has to work to build a life from scratch, no short cuts or ‘get out of jail free’ cards.

I can’t help thinking, though, that I was meant for so much more. That I have so much more to offer, and that somewhere out there is the answer to all my problems, the secret to my happiness. All of which is to say, I suppose that I’m no different than anyone else.

I’m no different than all the other working class women, struggling through life. The only thing that makes it bearable, as far as I can see, is you’re supposed to find that one special person to share it with. That one person who completely understands you, who always says the right thing to chase away the gloom, brighten your day, make you look forward to those brief moments you share each day. I have Daniel.

Daniel tries. He’s a nice person, and works hard. But the time we spend together, it’s like he expects me to be a very different person than I am. It’s like he has no idea who I truly am, what I like, what I don’t like, what I want from life. Was it always like this? I have no idea, I still haven’t remembered a thing about our past life. Have I changed that much? Or was I really just trying to run away from this life?

We’ve gone out to dinner tonight, a rare night out. Daniel must realize how unhappy I am, how bored and frustrated I am with the life we share. This evening is his way of letting me know, it won’t always be like this. We have to struggle now, but one day we’ll make it, with a home and a family, and beautiful evenings out. Except, it has only served to remind me of all the things I don’t have, all the things that should be mine. Is that shallow of me? It’s so confusing, I believe these things are rightfully mine, and yet I know that they are not.

I'm Sara Zeigler, and I have no nice things. I'm wearing a beautiful black dress this evening, one that Mrs. Grange gave me from her daughter's clothes before I left France. It looks so beautiful, the fabric so soft and smooth and cool to the touch, I almost cried when I put it on earlier because I knew I could never afford another dress like it. I pinned up my hair myself and did my own makeup because I have to save to afford my next hair appointment. I bought a new pair of stockings, and tomorrow will have to look at the budget to see what I can do without next week to pay for them.

It really was such a nice evening. I had intended to tell Daniel how I felt, that I can't stay with him any longer. Except I never did. I'm trying to convince myself that it just wasn't the right time, that I didn't want to spoil what really was a nice evening, that maybe things were getting better. The truth is, I'm just a coward. And so I said nothing. I think he knows.

"This was such a nice idea, Daniel. Thank you so much," I say, standing to leave.

"We can't go just yet," he tells me. "The waiter still needs to bring me my change."

I need to stand, to move. I need to get out. "I'm going to wait outside. I just need some fresh air. I'll see you out front in a few minutes."

I don't wait for his reply, but instead walk straight to the front of the restaurant. The Maitre D' opens the door for me, wishes me a good evening. I say something trivial and step out, into the warm, sticky summer air. The change from the air-conditioned restaurant is a welcome relief. The sudden appearance of sweat on my arms, a trail of loose hair suddenly sticking to the side of my face, makes me feel alive. I carefully navigate the stairs to street level in my heels, then slowly stroll up the road, enjoying the peace, the tranquility, the isolation.

"Sara?"

Someone calls my name, disturbing my reverie. I look up, across the road, a man is leaning out of the rear seat of a silver-gray Bentley. He's looking directly at me.

"Sara? It is you, isn't it? How fantastic to see you! Where on earth have you been keeping yourself?"

There is very little traffic on this road, and so I cross to the car, although I keep away to a safe distance. "I'm sorry, but have we met?" I ask.

The man laughs. "Have we met!" he says. "The he looks at me closely. "You're serious, aren't you?"

I'm slightly embarrassed now. "I'm sorry," I apologize. "The past few months I've been, well, you see..."

The man sees I don't know where to begin, and laughs again. "Quite all right. No need to explain anything to me. I'm sure you date so many billionaires, we must grow tiresome."

I didn't know what to say. "Date?" I ask. "We went on a date?"

"Well, perhaps I'm exaggerating to call it a date. But we did meet, and spent what I thought was a fantastic evening together. And I was hoping to see you again, except you

never returned my calls, and I couldn't find you. It really is just so fantastic to run into you this way!"

"Yes, it is. I'm sorry, it's just ... I wish I could explain, but it's such a long story."

"So, come with me, tell me the whole story from the beginning. The night is young!"

"Yes, but, maybe another time. I'm waiting for someone, and, I'm sorry again, but I don't know you..."

"Michael Austin. How do you do? Please, get in the car, Sara."

Something about this man makes me feel ... I don't know, uneasy. He's far too anxious to have me in the car with him. I back away from the car, someone grabs me! I've forgotten about the driver, he's circled around behind me, pinning my arms, covering my mouth as I try to scream. The rear door opens, I kick but the man grabs my legs, I'm forced into the seat beside him. He holds me down while the driver gets back in the front, speeds away. I look out the window, helpless, the restaurant speeds past. I see Daniel, running, confusion on his face, looking at me. Everything spins, goes dark.

* * *

"Now then, why don't you just tell me what happened, from the beginning," said Inspector Hill.

"Look, I've already told the patrolman," said Daniel. "I've told it all to the Desk Sergeant, and again to that squinty officer who wrote it all down! What do I have to do to get someone moving?"

Inspector Hill continued as if nothing had been said. He looked at the report. "So you claim that you saw a woman being kidnapped."

"Now you don't even believe me? Why would I invent a story like that?"

"No one disbelieves you. I just need to hear your story myself, from the beginning."

Daniel tried to calm himself, to stay focused. "I was out to dinner with my girlfriend."

"Sara Zeigler..." added the Inspector, reading from the report.

"Yes, Sara Zeigler. She left the restaurant ahead of me to get some air, while I settled the bill. When I left the restaurant I looked for her, saw her down the road a ways, talking to a man in a car. Another man came up behind her, grabbed her, forced her into the car. Then he jumped into the driver's seat and drove off. They drove right past me, I saw her, Sara, in the back, a man's hand across her mouth."

"How far down the road was this?" asked the Inspector.

"I ... I'm not sure. Perhaps 50, no, 75 yards?"

"That's a fair distance. Are you sure she was kidnapped? Isn't it possible the driver was helping her into the car?"

"What? No! No, he lifted her off the ground! Are you trying to convince me she got into that car of her own free will?"

"I'm just suggesting," said the Inspector, "that you may be mistaken, and there may be a perfectly innocent explanation. At that distance, you couldn't even be sure that it was Miss Zeigler."

"Of course I'm sure! They drove right past me, I looked straight at her!"

"With a hand obscuring her face, according to your testimony. Did you have an argument at dinner?"

"No! Well, not an argument. No, not an argument."

"So, something that wasn't an argument? I've been married twenty years, and I know exactly what you mean. So, the evening didn't go well. Was she upset? Maybe she's gone home. Maybe she went to a friend's house. Maybe that was someone else entirely you saw getting into that car."

"Well even if it wasn't her, someone was kidnapped! Now, can you please do something?"

The Inspector looked at Daniel for a moment, then back at the report. Changing his line of questioning he asked, "So, you saw the car?"

"Yes," said Daniel, his relief at the change of questions palpable. "A gray Bentley, four door."

"And a partial license..."

"KL53, it's all I saw. That should be enough to identify it though, isn't it? Don't you run these things through computers? Find out who owns that car, ask them!"

The Inspector pulled a sheet out of the folder he was carrying and looked at it. "We've already run it, and we've found a match, or at least very close. A silver-gray Bentley four door, in the Edinburgh area, license KL53 FA2."

"That's it!" shouted Daniel. "Find the owner of that car! Why are you bothering me with stupid questions?"

"Kidnapping is a very serious charge. I need you to be absolutely sure about what you saw. We can't go accusing someone of serious crimes without proof."

"You have proof! Sara is your proof! When you find her she'll tell you everything. Just arrest him!"

"The man who owns the car is Dr. William Comyn. Ever heard of him?"

"No, never."

"He's very wealthy, very powerful. Well connected, knighted by the Queen. Not the type you'd expect to kidnap young girls off the street."

"Are you saying you won't arrest him?"

The Inspector looked at Daniel. "If he's guilty, he will be arrested. But first I need you to answer, are you absolutely certain of what you saw?"

"Yes! Why would you even ask at this point?"

“Because,” said the Inspector, reviewing the page in his file folder one more time, “Sir William is not a match to your description of either of the two men you claim to have seen.”

Daniel threw his hands up in the air. “Is that all? They were a long way off! I didn’t really look at them, I was looking at Sara! I didn’t even notice what they looked like!”

“I would think you might have noticed, though,” said the Inspector, “if one of her assailants was 97 years old.”

* * *

I test the bindings again, for the hundredth time since I was dragged into this chamber and strapped down. I woke about half an hour ago, lying on a cot in an otherwise empty, locked room. Naked, except for a light cotton gown I found draped across me, the kind they give you in hospital waiting rooms. I immediately slipped on the gown, preferring its inadequacy to having to face my captors completely naked. They had mercifully left a bottle of water and some aspirin, which I used immediately. My head was throbbing from whatever they had used to knock me out.

Even though I made no noise, they seemed to know I was awake. Two large goons soon entered the room, and escorted me to this massive chamber. Here I was strapped down, arms and legs spread wide. I test the bindings again for the hundred and first time since they dragged me here. It’s no use, I’m pinned to this table like a bug.

I look around the chamber, and it’s like something out of a novel by H. G. Wells. The chamber itself is made of stone, large blocks creating huge walls up to an arched ceiling. Possibly decorated in another century, the walls are covered with old portraits and dusty tapestries. What’s truly bizarre, though, is how incongruous this setting is to the technical equipment filling every inch of floorspace. Wire racks filled with computers line one wall. Cables twist everywhere, making the floor appear to writhe with snakes. Three computer terminals are placed about where space permits, each with multiple flatscreen monitors, one behind a huge glass wall. And the strangest piece of equipment by far, directly beside me is a gurney, sitting in front of the opening to an enormous white ring. This bothers me considerably, because it looks very much like the gurney I’m strapped to, and if I try to see behind me I can just make out something large and white.

The large, wooden door at the top of the stairs opens and one of the goons enters, holds it open. If they really wanted to keep me here forever all they would have to do is shut that door – I doubt I could ever open it by myself. The second goon enters, carrying something, a bundle of sheets maybe. No, it’s a man, a very old man, in a hospital gown. He’s placed on the other gurney, unmoving. They strap his arms and legs down anyway. They check my straps without saying a word, then leave us here. What is this place?

After another five minutes of almost continuous, frantic strap testing, the door opens again. This time a different man enters, someone I haven’t seen before. Although, there’s something familiar about him. I don’t have time to think about it, as he quickly skips down the steps, checks one of the computer monitors, and says in a cheerful voice, “Hello, everything well down here, is it?”

This is too much. I'm expecting anything from Jack the Ripper to Dr. Frankenstein to the Marquis de Sade. This person looks like the tech support guy arriving to work on Monday morning.

"Let me go, please?" I plead.

He looks at me, says nothing. He looks at me, as if maybe he's considering it. As if, maybe, he wants to.

"No, I'm really sorry, I can't do that," he finally tells me, his voice saddened. But then he appears to cheer right up again.

"Nothing for you to worry about, though," he tells me in his singsong voice. "Nothing bad is going to happen to you. No one wants to hurt you, no one at all!"

He walks behind me, adjusts the gurney. Suddenly I swing upward, so I'm standing upright, still held in place by my bindings.

"Now please, I need you to stay perfectly still, all right? Don't move, try not to breathe..."

I feel a prick on the back of my neck. "Hey!" I say, struggling as hard as I can. "You said you wouldn't hurt me!"

"This? It's just a needle, you'll barely feel it. Now hold still, I need to inject this into your spinal fluid, and if I mess it up they won't be able to use you."

"Well, good!" I say as I continue to struggle.

"They won't be able to use you, because you'll be a quadriplegic," he explains. "Then, they will in all likelihood kill you, mercifully. Now please, hold still, this is very delicate work."

I have no desire to spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair and so stay very still, as I feel the needle slide between the bones of my neck. I feel a pressure as he injects me. Tears roll down my face as I try not to breathe. I almost don't notice as he removes the needle. Then he puts the gurney back into the horizontal position. I watch as he goes over to the other gurney, the one with the unconscious old man on it, tilts him up. I check my toes and fingers, they still appear to be working.

"Would you like to know where you are?" he asks cheerfully while he injects the old man in the back of the neck with a clear liquid.

"I know where I am," I say, and realize it's true. I try to wipe a tear off my cheek using my shoulder. "This is an estate, built partially from an old castle. There's an enormous stone wall all around, and a winding road to the front, through a narrow forest."

"That's right!" he says, as if I may have won a prize. "You were unconscious when they brought you in. Do you remember it from before?"

"Before?" I ask. "No, I don't remember it, I just know it. The entire estate, the buildings, the gardens. I just know it. How is that possible?"

"I don't know," he says, as if I've just asked him a difficult math problem. "But I have a theory! We can test it out later." He swings the old man back to the horizontal and latches the gurney in place. The old man stirs.

“What? What’s happening? I’m ... this is...” he says, then starts to scream. His scream trails off to nothing, and he is asleep once again.

“Don’t mind him,” says the tech guy. “That’s just the way he is. Wakes up for a while, asks what’s happening, screams a bit. He usually just loses interest and falls asleep. Can’t keep a thought in his head for more than a few seconds. You’re not like that. Not at all. That’s why I find you so fascinating.” I have no idea what this man means by half the things he says.

“Please, what is all this? What is it for?” I ask, indicating the equipment around the room as best I can with nothing but a finger and my nose.

“Do you really want to know?” he asks. As if maybe I’m just flattering him, asking about his work! When he doesn’t continue, I say, “Yes!”

He looks at me as if maybe I’m still just having him on, but then decides I really am serious and pulls up a chair. “It really is the most fascinating research,” he begins.

“Imagine you’re back at school. You’ve got a really big test tomorrow, but you haven’t studied. Haven’t even paid attention in class all semester! In fact, you suddenly realize you know absolutely nothing about the subject. So, what are you going to do?”

He looks at me for an answer. “Fail?” I suggest.

“Ha!” he laughs. “Good one. You would think so, right? But what if you could strap on your thinking cap, literally, and download all the lessons straight to your brain? What if you could copy all the knowledge of the world’s greatest experts on the subject, directly into your own mind, as easily as copying files to a computer hard drive?”

“Or, what if you’re going on a trip to Japan, and want to learn Japanese? You would have to spend months taking lessons, memorizing phrases, trying to understand totally different written symbols. What if you could just download it all, learning to speak the language as well as any native in an instant!

“Or, what if you could just download someone else’s memories of *their* trip to Japan. You wouldn’t even have to go, saving yourself all the time and expense!”

I stare at him, trying to take this in, trying to determine if *he* is, in fact, having *me* on. “You can’t be serious,” I say. “That’s just, really bad science fiction. There’s no such thing as a ‘thinking cap’. It’s not possible.”

“Oh, it’s entirely possible. Well, the thinking cap is actually a renovated medieval castle filled with several tons of computers and other electronic equipment, but you never know, with advances in miniaturization. I mean, who ever would have imagined the iPod ten years ago?”

I look around the room, at the mess of cables and equipment. “And this will do all those things you just said? Teach Japanese, and give instant revisions?”

The tech guy actually blushes, then tells me, “Ah, well, not really. I mean, eventually, that’s the goal. The Holy Grail of mind manipulation. And we’re getting closer, all the time. We just don’t know enough about how memories are stored. It’s not really so neat and clean as, say, snipping a film of your life, then splicing in a trip to Japan. It’s more like, trying to pick all the onions out of a stew. Even if you could get all the onions out, without

having them covered in bits of stew you wanted to keep, you would likely find that the stew still tasted like onions.”

“So, what *can* you do?” I ask, not sure I want to hear the answer.

“Ah, well, these machines,” he says as he indicates the white rings, “can read the entire contents of your brain! Right now we don’t know how to understand those contents, so don’t worry, it’s not like we’ll be reading your diary! Maybe eventually. But just to see the contents of a mind, even if we don’t understand it in terms of thoughts or memories or feelings, is a huge accomplishment.”

I look more closely at the ring I can see, the one behind the old man. “That’s an MRI. Magnetic Resonance Imaging – it takes pictures of your brain, it doesn’t read it.”

“Aha! Very clever of you. You’re absolutely right. Every cell in your brain is a little part of your mind, holding one tiny piece of information. An MRI can see the cell, take a picture of it, but it can’t read the information it contains. Not like you can read a computer hard drive. A hard drive is made up of billions of tiny magnets, each of which can be read by another magnet. If only your brain cells were magnetic, an MRI could read them.”

Suddenly I understand what he’s done to me. “The injection, into my spine! What was it?”

“You really are clever! I am so glad to be working with you again. Yes, the injection. Metallic ions, mixed with your spinal fluid, circulating through your brain, attaching themselves to every cell. Making each and every cell in your brain a tiny magnet, prepared to be read by a properly modified MRI!”

I look at the wall of computers, more computer power than I’ve ever seen in one place. But still, “The amount of information stored in a human brain is massive. You don’t have enough computer storage to contain it all.”

“That’s true,” he agrees. “In fact, there’s only one storage device known that has the capacity to store all the information in a human brain, and that is another human brain. That’s why we have two MRIs, one to read, and the other to write!”

“You read one brain, and write it to another? That’s horrible!”

“Oh no, we can do better than that,” he declares proudly. “We can section off some parts of the brain, leave them alone. For example, you don’t want to copy over the part of the brain that controls the body. One heart isn’t necessarily wired the same as another, and death occurs rather quickly if you overwrite the proper signals. And language – we can leave the language centres fully intact! But memories, yes, it’s still basically all or nothing. So you see, we’re making great progress.”

“But please,” I plead, “I don’t understand! What does any of this have to do with me?”

“It has everything to do with you!” a voice yells from the top of the stairs. I look up and see him, the man from the car, the man who kidnapped me. Michael, something.

Chapter 8

"Comyn Estate," said the small speaker box beside the front gate. Inspector Hill had driven to the estate, taking Daniel with him. A massive, twelve-foot, stone wall surrounded the entire grounds, and an iron gate barred them from entering.

"This is Inspector Hill, Scotland Yard," Inspector Hill informed the man. "To whom am I speaking?" as he spoke, a police patrol car pulled up behind him, parking across the drive entry. The two patrolmen got out, joining Inspector Hill, leaving the red and blue lights flashing on top of the car.

"Simmons, majordomo for the estate," said the box. "Inspector, it is quite late."

"I'm aware of the hour, Mr. Simmons. Is Sir William Comyn on the estate at the moment? We'd like to speak with him."

"Sir William is on the estate. However, he is not in the habit of accepting visitors in the middle of the night."

"I apologize for the hour. There was an incident in the city earlier this evening. Is it possible to speak with him? We'd just like to ask him a few questions, to see if he can shed some light on what happened."

"I find it highly unlikely that Sir William would have anything to say on the matter. He was not in town this evening. He never leaves the estate. He has, in fact, been bedridden for the past several months. So no, Inspector, it is not possible for you to speak with him."

Inspector Hill thought a moment before pressing the button to speak again. "Mr. Simmons, Sir William's car was seen downtown earlier, and is alleged to have been involved in a serious crime. Perhaps it wasn't Sir William, perhaps someone else from the estate was driving."

There was no response from the box for some time. Then Simmons said, "All of our vehicles are accounted for. None has left the estate this evening."

"He's lying!" yelled Daniel.

Inspector Hill took his finger off the button and turned to Daniel. "Would it be possible for you not to say such things when he can hear you?" He turned back to the box and spoke, "Mr. Simmons, the car we're interested in is a silver-gray Bentley. If we could come in and take a look at it, I'm sure the matter could quickly be resolved."

Again, there was a considerable lag before Simmons responded. "The Bentley has not left the estate. It has, in fact, been in the garage awaiting repairs all week. The... starter motor, is to be replaced. So if that is all Inspector."

Daniel waited to see if the Inspector planned to push the talk button again. Then, "He's lying! There was someone with him, telling him what to say. They made it all up!"

"For what it's worth," replied the Inspector, "I think you're right. But without his permission, or a warrant, we can't get onto the estate."

"So get a warrant!" said Daniel.

“It’s already happening, but it takes time. You need a judge, for one thing. One who’s not asleep in bed, and also one who’s willing to issue a warrant against a prominent citizen.”

“But then we can search for Sara?”

“We’re asking for a warrant to search the estate, but it’s unlikely we’ll get it. What we’re hoping for is a warrant to search the car, and maybe the garage. If we find something to tie it to Miss Zeigler, then we’ll search the estate.”

“That’s a lot of ifs! What are you doing now?”

“We’re watching the estate. There are two roads in, we have patrol cars blocking both. For now, though, we wait.”

* * *

“It’s all about you! It’s always, all, about, you!” yells Michael Austin. He walks down the steps, slowly, carefully.

I blink in surprise – tied down as I am, I have very few other options. When you are kidnapped, and confined against your will, you have certain – expectations. Being yelled at in a catty manner and accused of selfishness is not among them.

“What have I ever done to you?” I manage to work up the nerve to say.

“What have you ever done to me?” he asks, picking his way through the cables on the floor, approaching me on the gurney.

“Where do I start?” he says, arriving at my side, staring down at me. “You don’t remember, any of it, you really don’t!” He seems to calm down and says, “Well, maybe I should tell you a story.

“This is the story of a beautiful young girl. She was born into a prominent family, so she was invited to all the right functions and met all the most eligible bachelors. She could have her pick; the world was hers for the taking. Except she didn’t want to choose, didn’t want to be tied down to any one man, become nothing more than ‘Lord So-and-so’s wife. So instead she traveled, and went to parties, and bought fabulous clothes.

“Then one day, she realized, she was no longer being invited to parties. And even when she was, the young men had no interest in her. She looked in the mirror and no longer saw a beautiful young girl, but instead she saw a woman in her forties. Still very attractive, but alone. Then her parents died, but instead of inheriting an estate worth a fortune she found a mountain of debt. She had nothing, her funds were cut off.

“But then, just when she felt she had hit the bottom of her despair, she met a man. Very wealthy, very prominent, he could afford to give her anything she wanted. He was rather elderly, over seventy in fact, but perhaps that was a good thing. She would marry him, make him happy, see that he was cared for in the final years of his life. Then she would inherit his fortune, and live out her life in comfort. She may even have loved him. It was ideal, and everyone would live happily ever after.”

At this point in his story, Michael became inexplicably vexed. “Except, *he* never married her! He kept an apartment for her in the early years, and eventually *allowed* her to move onto his estate. But he never married her! He would make jokes about it! He would

say he just wasn't ready to make a life-commitment! And all his friends would laugh, and their wives would smirk, and gossip, and laugh at her behind her back.

"Do you know what it means, not to be married? It means nothing is really yours. It means 'the Master' can take it all away, on a whim, send you back into the streets with nothing! Can you imagine living like that?"

"And worse, he went on living forever! Twenty-six years later, I was almost as old as he had been when we first met. And he still showed no signs of slowing! He had his projects that kept him busy – the fortune he would spend on computers and electronics! But if she wanted so much as a new pair of shoes she had to crawl to him begging! After twenty-six years, is that any way to treat someone?"

"Then finally, the last straw, she learned that in all that time, he had never updated his will to mention what would happen to her! Even if he had died at some point, in all that time, she would have had no more rights to his fortune than the maid!"

He stops venting, stares at me, waiting for a response? "That's, um, shameful?" I say.

"Yes, shameful!" he curses at me. "A shameful way to treat a woman who has stood by you, put up with you, waited..."

"Then one day he went to her, and asked, what if they could start all over? What if we could be young again, start our lives all over again? Be young together, like we never had the chance to be. Would she want that?"

"He showed her his research, told her he could use it to switch minds. He showed her how he could switch the minds of two terriers, each trained to respond to different commands. After, they each responded to the other's commands! He truly was able to do what he said.

"Then he told me that he was desperate to finish his work, but was afraid he wouldn't live long enough. If it weren't for that, he would never consider it. But, what if he found someone, a young man, new to the city, someone no one would miss? What if he switched minds with him?"

"And what if we found a suitable young woman as well? Then I could come with him. We would be able to start all over again, have our 'happily ever after'. He would have his research, and I would be there, at his side as always.

"Well, how could she say no? Everything was arranged in advance, since we would have to move quickly once the bodies were chosen. Our wills were rewritten, his specifying a young man to be named later, mine specifying a young woman. Then we looked, and soon found the perfect bodies. A handsome young man named Mark Austin, new to the city, no family ties, no one would ever miss him. And a beautiful young girl named Sara Zeigler.

"The day after we found the two of you, we went to the lawyers and added your names to the wills. Then we had you kidnapped, dragged back here, and prepared for the transfer. Except, I had no intention of being the doting, loving, supportive, expendable member of this alliance! This time, I would be the one in charge, the one making all the decisions! I would let *him* be the silly little girl, the pretty little thing on *my* arm. Let him feel

what it's like to be penniless, powerless, having to smile and be a good girl or else you won't get your allowance this week!"

He has been leaning over me, shouting. But now he backs up, stops to catch his breath. I ask, rather unnecessarily, "The woman in your story, that's you, isn't it?"

"Oh yes, I went through with the procedure, and now I'm young, and that poor, old, woman died of heart failure. And now you..." He doesn't finish the sentence, but instead looks over at the sleeping old man.

"Please, no," I say, tears blurring my view. "You can't turn me into that old man!"

Michael looks at me, then suddenly laughs. "You're supposed to be so brilliant, and yet you still haven't figured it out? You already are that old man!"

* * *

"Get on the radio," Inspector Hill instructed the patrolman. "See if you can get an update on our warrant."

"Yes sir," replied the patrolman. Turning to his car he surveyed the area, part of his basic training. He realized something was amiss.

"Sir, the civilian who was here with you, where has he gone?"

"He's..." said the Inspector, stopping short when he too found that Daniel was missing. "Wandered off in the dark. Brilliant. You two, go along the road, see if you can find him and bring him back here. I should never have brought him."

"Sir..." said the second patrolman, pointing through the gate. The Inspector followed his gaze and saw Daniel, running down the drive and out-of-sight behind some trees.

"What the...?" said Inspector Hill, looking up at the 12-foot wall. "How did he get in there?"

"He might have used that tree," suggested the first patrolman. Inspector Hill looked along the wall, and there was in fact a thin young tree, that a desperate person might just be able to climb and use to reach the top of the wall.

"Just great." The Inspector pressed the call button at the side of the gate and waited. Almost a minute later, a voice responded.

"Comyn Estate."

"Mr. Simmons, this is Inspector Hill. I need to inform you that there is a trespasser on the estate. If you could allow us to come in, we will retrieve him for you. Then you can decide if you wish to press charges."

Simmons said nothing for a while. Then, "No thank you, Inspector. We have our own armed security patrolling the estate. They will deal with him."

Inspector Hill punched the talk button again. "Simmons, the trespasser is unarmed! Your security is to bring him back here to me, is that understood? If I hear shots fired, I will enter the estate and arrests will be made! Is that clear?"

"Perfectly clear, Inspector. Security will be informed."

* * *

Michael is standing by the gurney, pulling me out of the MRI.

“Stop your blubbering,” he tells me. “Honestly, I had no idea you would be such a whiny little girl. Like Janson told you, this wasn’t the transfer, you’re still you. We just needed to do a quick scan of your brain.”

“Why didn’t you just kill the old man, if you’re named in his will? Then you could have just left me alone!”

“Because after you disappeared, I couldn’t find the will! It’s not with the lawyers, not in your files, nowhere! So I need you, to retrieve one memory and find that paper!” He turns from me, redirects his anger at the tech guy. “So Janson, did you get what you needed?”

The tech guy steps out from behind the glass wall, goes over to another terminal with several screens showing MRI brain scans.

“This is amazing. Before we do a transfer, we put in a block, a narrow path of brain tissue that we turn off, so the subject can’t access their memories during transfer. After the transfer is complete the block is removed, except in this case it wasn’t.”

“You told me the same thing about him,” Michael says, indicating the old man, “months ago. You told me that’s why he can’t think, can’t keep a thought in his head for more than a minute. He has no access to his memory, so can’t remember, can’t form any new memories. So why is she different?”

“Her block wasn’t put in precisely the right place, possibly because you switched programs. So, she had just enough



memory available to her to begin the formation of memories. Once the process started, her brain began using the block itself as brain tissue for storing even more memories. The block is very thin now, about to break down, allowing her partial access to her old memories."

Tech guy sits down at the terminal, begins typing. "This is fascinating," he says. "Tell me, what is your thinking process like? Is it difficult for you to think of the past? To imagine the future? You must be constantly living in the moment, thinking in the present tense."

I don't know how to respond. I'm about to tell him so when Michael interrupts, "That doesn't matter. What I want to know is, can you fix her? The police are outside, looking for her. When they get here she had better be my husband so she can tell them everything is fine and they should piss off."

"But this may be the breakthrough we're looking for! Remember how I said that memory isn't like a film that can be cut and spliced back together? Well, their brains are! Everything that happened to her before the transfer is in his brain, and everything that happened to her since is partitioned by the block in her brain! We can simply splice them back together, one coherent whole! If this works it could advance the project by years."

Michael looks exasperated. "If you want to keep his memories of being a cheerleader or whatever he's been doing these past few months, fine. It might make him less arrogant, easier to deal with. Certainly easier than if he's given his memories of being a drooling, incontinent old fossil. So, fine, but make it quick."

"The program is in place, and ready to go," the tech guy says. He comes over to me. "Put the old man into the MRI, I'll get her."

"Please, help me," I say to him as he bends down, about to shove me back into the ring.

He stops and smiles. "I told you, no one here will hurt you. You're going to be fine. Now just hold on for a bit longer, this won't take long to run."

"Run."

That word! That voice, those eyes, staring straight into mine, I've never forgotten!

"It was you!" I say. "You, you told me to run! You pulled me out of the ring, and helped me to get away!"

He looks as if he might say something, as if he intends to answer me, but he never gets the chance. A shot rings out, his chest explodes with red, and suddenly he's gone. I hear him, moaning on the floor, but I can't see him, strapped to the gurney as I am. Michael has a gun, he walks past me.

"I thought it might be something like that!" I see Michael kick at the floor, the tech guy howls in pain. "Idiot! What were you doing, playing the hero? Save the girl, maybe she'll kiss you?"

The tech guy is still alive, he can barely speak. "Didn't... know, you'd run the program. Thought we were waiting... for Austin."

“Of course, you didn’t know of my plan to transfer William to the girl. Poor fool, you thought you were saving the girl, instead you were setting the old man loose, causing me months of trouble in finding him!”

Michael takes one more kick. The tech guy doesn’t howl, he barely responds. Michael grabs the gurney. “You really are such a sweet girl,” he says to me. “See you in a few minutes, dear husband.”

He kisses me, then shoves me into the ring. I scream in protest, to no avail. The ring begins to hum, I hear the giant motors begin to spin, Michael has started the program the tech guy put in place. Everything goes dark...

* * *

“Simmons, damn, you!” Inspector Hill yelled into the box. “Simmons, I know you’re there, answer me!”

“Comyn Estate,” Simmons finally replied, slightly out of breath.

“Simmons, why weren’t you answering?” asked the Inspector. “We heard a shot. I want you to open this gate Simmons, we’re coming in.”

“Everything is under control, Inspector. I’ve sent security to determine the source of the commotion.”

“The source very likely *is* your security. This is official police business now.”

“I assure you, everything is fine, Inspector.”

“Simmons, that determination is no longer yours to make. Now you open this gate immediately, or I am authorizing my men to ram it, and my first arrest will be you for obstructing an officer in the performance of his duty! Is that clear?”

It appeared that Simmons took a moment to decide, but then the gates slid open accompanied by the sound of electrical motors. The Inspector turned to the two patrolmen.

“You, come with me. You, get on the radio, call for backup then wait here. Tell the patrolmen at the other gate to stay where they are. No one gets in or out of this estate until we know exactly what’s happening in there, clear?”

The patrolman nodded, and returned swiftly to his car. Inspector Hill stepped through the slowly widening gates, the second patrolman following closely behind.

The drive wound through a narrow strip of forest, eventually leading to a wide expanse of lawn. This sat in front of what at one time must have been a formidable castle, but now was more mansion than fortress. Still, the prospect of searching the entire property with just two men was rather daunting. Fortunately as they approached the mansion, the sounds of a scuffle drew them around to the side of the building. Here the Inspector finally caught up with Daniel, held by one goon while being pummeled by the other.

“Police!” called the Inspector, drawing his weapon from its holster. “Hands on your heads, all of you!”

The two goons just looked at him. One of them finally said, "We're security here. We caught him."

The Inspector looked at Daniel, doubled over, blood dripping from a cut over his eye. "And then you assaulted him. Hands on your head, you're under arrest."

The goons did as they were told. Daniel slowly stood, and stepped towards the Inspector. "Thanks, I was..."

"You too, hands on your head. You're under arrest until this is sorted out. So, which one of you was doing the shooting?"

The two goons looked at each other, then back at the Inspector. "Not us," one of them said.

"It's true, Inspector," said Daniel. "The shot came from inside."

The Inspector turned to the patrolman. "You wait here for backup, and hold the prisoners. I'm going to find out who's shooting."

The patrolman looked dubious. "Uh, by myself? I mean, three violent prisoners?"

"Let me come with you, Inspector!" Daniel said.

Inspector Hill did a quick assessment of the situation. He didn't like it, but it was the only solution.

"All right, you come with me," he said to Daniel.

The Inspector led the way to the closest entry, Daniel following close behind.

"Do I get to have a gun?" Daniel asked.

"No, but I'm tempted to give you a bullet."

* * *

Michael waited until the program had finished running before stepping out from behind the glass barrier, then approached the body of Sara Zeigler. Grasping the gurney firmly, he pulled her from the MRI machine. She looked as if she might have been asleep.

"Congratulations, it's a girl," he said.

Sara's eyes slowly opened, blinked, then she took in her surroundings. "You!"

"We don't have much time," Michael told her. "Quickly tell me, how much do you remember?"

"I remember..." she said, then stopped, deep in thought. "I remember... everything! Everything!"

"Good. So here's the story. Janson over there," and here he indicated the body of the tech guy, "kidnapped you and brought you here. I discovered you, things got rough, and I had to shoot him. Think you can remember that?"

"Screw you, bitch!"

“Well,” said Michael. “If I had any doubts that you are now my husband, that satisfied them. Just remember this; once the old man’s dead, I inherit everything, and you get nothing. I’ve thought about marrying you, but I don’t know, maybe I’ll just let you wait twenty or thirty years!”

Michael turned from her, and faced the other MRI. Grabbing the gurney, he pulled out the old man. “Wakey, wakey, princess,” he said to him.

The old man’s eyes flew open. “What? What is this? You! What have you done?”

“Gee, I’d love to play twenty questions, but unfortunately you’re a senile old man who’s about to die from a heart attack.” Michael shoved the gurney back into the machine, ignoring the old man’s pleas.

Michael returned to the workstation behind the glass panel. Here he lined up the mouse over the button that would run the procedure he had pre-programmed – the one to target the area of the old man’s brain which controlled his heart muscles, the one to set the entire area to ‘off’ ...

“Freeze!” cried Inspector Hill from the top of the steps.

“Stop him! Stop him!” came the muffled cries of the old man from within the ring.

Michael stabbed the button, then raised his hands in surrender. Electricity pulsed through the MRI, spinning the motors briefly, running Michael’s program. The old man’s yells ceased.

“Come out from behind there!” yelled the Inspector. “Keep your hands where I can see them!”

Michael emerged from behind the glass. “Everything is under control, officer. I just had to shut down these machines. They give off low levels of radiation. It’s not safe to be here when they’re running.”

“It’s Inspector! And I said, keep your hands where I can see them.”

“Apologies, Inspector. But I’m sure Miss Zeigler will confirm that I am an innocent party to all this. There is your criminal.” Michael pointed to the body of the tech guy.

“Sara?” Daniel called from the top of the steps, running breathlessly into the room. “Sara!” he cried as he spotted her, then raced down the steps to her side. He released the straps from her ankles, then her wrists. Sara sat up, and threw her arms around him.

“Daniel! Daniel, I remember everything! Absolutely everything!”

Michael suddenly looked worried. “What do you remember?” he asked.

“Yes,” said the Inspector to Sara, his gun still trained on Michael. “How about you tell us what happened here?”

“Still holding tight to Daniel, Sara turned to face Michael. “That man kidnapped me, held me here. I saw him shoot that tech guy. And something he did over there, killed the old man in that machine!”

The tech guy stirred slightly on the floor and smiled. “It worked,” he managed to say. Then he died.

Chapter 9

“Please, have a seat. Mr. Billmore will be right with you,” the receptionist told me. I sat in my usual chair – I’d been in and out of this office so many times these past few months, I felt as if I lived here. I crossed my legs and smoothed my skirt, and prepared to wait. I know that Mr. Billmore is never ‘right with you’.

There have been so many changes in my life, I hardly know where to begin. When Daniel rescued me, I told him that I remembered everything. I told him that I remembered loving him, but I also remembered outgrowing him. With all the changes I had experienced since losing my memory, I just couldn’t go back. And so I left him. I was sad, and he was devastated, but he recovered. I saw him at the courthouse, the day he testified, and there was another girl waiting for him when he finished.

The courthouse! The trial of Michael Austin on charges of kidnapping, forcible confinement, multiple homicides, and a string of related charges. As chief witness for the prosecution, I’ve spent six to ten hours a day either in a courthouse, a lawyer’s office, or a legal boardroom for months.

They originally charged Austin with two murders, Rick Janson, the tech guy, and Sir William Comyn, the old man in the other MRI. When I told them he had talked about killing a woman, they charged him with the murder of Sir William’s long-time companion, Patricia Ellsmere, who had died unexpectedly a few months earlier. Autopsy evidence showed that both she and Sir William had died in identical fashion, due to parts of their brains simply turning off and refusing to control their heart muscles. One such death might have been passed off as an unusual form of heart attack, but two convinced the jury. Austin was found guilty on all charges, and was given three consecutive life sentences. At his age, that’s going to be a very long time.

My testimony was key to the guilty verdict. I told the lawyers early on about the ability of the machines on the Estate, how they could be used to trade minds. They told me never to mention it again, and I didn’t. They didn’t want to confuse the jury, or give them reason to doubt me. Austin’s lawyers never brought it up, or questioned me on it – it seemed everyone wanted to avoid that topic. There was motive enough to spare anyway, what with Austin attempting to gain control of the Comyn fortune.

Being involved full-time in the court case, I had to leave my job at the bookstore, again! The owner didn’t mind, though. He was fascinated by my story, and asked me to come back and tell him how it ends. He even said I could have my job back when I was ready! I may have to take him up on that. With the court case over, I am once again officially poor and unemployed.

So how have I supported myself all this time? The lawyers for the Comyn Estate represented the late Sir William Comyn throughout the trial. Michael Austin thought they would represent him, as heir to the Comyn fortune, but the will never surfaced and the estate was left in the hands of the lawyers until the trial ended! Being their chief witness, they put me up in an apartment and covered all my expenses. So I’ve been living like a princess ever since!

Which is likely the reason why I'm here today. The trial has been over for a week, and yet I'm still living in the estate's apartment, spending the estate's money. I suspect my free ride may have just ended.

"Miss Zeigler!" A voice disturbed me from my reverie. "Thank you for coming down. Always a pleasure to see you!"

"Mr. Billmore, it's my pleasure, I'm sure," I replied. He extended his hand down to me, partially as a handshake, but also to assist me from my chair. I uncrossed my legs and stood, then followed him to his office. He closed the door behind us and we sat at the side table, which we both always prefer to his desk.

Mr. Billmore opened a file on the table, and sorted through its contents. Finding the page he was looking for, he pulled it out and handed it to me.

"Miss Zeigler, were you aware that Patricia Ellsmere had a will? And that you are named in that will as her sole beneficiary?"

I took the page from him and scanned it quickly. It was not difficult to follow, and basically said exactly what Mr. Billmore had just told me.

"I had no idea," I told him in surprise. "I didn't know her at all. I only ever saw her once, that first time they kidnapped me. Was she wealthy?" I felt bad immediately for asking so bluntly, but wanted to hear his answer.

"You may be disappointed, I'm afraid. She had very little property of her own; even her jewelry belonged to the Comyn Estate. Her clothing was her own, but most of it was disposed of at the time of her death. I'm afraid the only item of any value is therefore a bank account, containing a little over two thousand pounds."

Mr. Billmore handed me a cheque. I read the amount, and tried to hide my disappointment. "Two thousand pounds, I've never had a bank account with two thousand pounds before," I said, feigning enthusiasm.

Mr. Billmore opened his folder once again, and pulled out a large stack of pages. "And this," he told me, "is the will of the late Sir William Comyn."

"I thought that was lost!" I exclaimed.

"Oh no. We knew where it was all along. Sir William placed the only copy in his safe deposit box at the Bank of Scotland, the day we drew it up for him."

"But why didn't you tell anyone?" I asked.

"Well, it wasn't anyone's business, was it? We are here to protect Sir William's legal interests, and don't go around showing his private papers to just anyone who comes along and asks. And if they ask, 'Do you have his will?' we will answer, 'No, we don't,' because that is the truth."

I smiled at him, then looked through the stapled pages. I quickly became lost in the legalese, and gave up. "So, who did he leave his estate to?"

"His entire estate, including all property, investments, vested legal rights, etcetera, etcetera, was left to..." Mr. Billmore leafed through the pages, quickly finding the one he wanted, "Mr. Michael Austin. Again, someone he barely knew. I would have said that Mr.

Austin had forced him to sign this document, except I was here at the time, and Austin was not. I also recall Sir William being quite happy and excited about it.

"The only other item mentioned in the will is this." Mr. Billmore reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, velvet box. He opened it, and showed me the contents – a beautiful diamond ring.

"It's beautiful," I said. Who did he leave this to?"

"He left it to you, oddly enough. Do you have any idea why a 97-year old man would buy an engagement ring, then leave it in his will to a young woman he doesn't know, who wouldn't receive it until after he had died?"

Because he wanted to marry her, I think to myself, but don't say aloud. Instead I tell him, "I don't know. May I try it on?"

"Of course. It's yours now."

I put the ring on the third finger of my left hand, and gazed at it wistfully. "So, Michael Austin gets all the money after all. Well, it won't do him much good now I suppose." Then a terrible thought occurred to me, "Oh no, he can't get a new trial, and use his fortune to buy his way out, can he?"

"No worries on that account. Michael Austin is ineligible to receive as much as 1p from the Comyn Estate. It is a well established rule of law that a man cannot benefit from his crimes, and so murdering Sir William means his claim to the Estate is void."

"But then, who gets the money?"

"That has been the subject of some debate. We've been in court all week discussing exactly that. The government was the primary contender, claiming all rights to the Estate. However, if they took over then I'd lose a major client and an enormous retainer, and I couldn't allow that! So I persuaded a judge to see it my way, and he awarded the entire Estate to my client."

"And who is that?"

"That would be..." he returned to his folder, and pulled out the court decision. Leafing through it he found the page he wanted. "Miss Sara Zeigler. Michael Austin's portion of the proceeds is to be distributed proportionately among the other beneficiaries. As the only other beneficiary named in the will, you therefore receive the entire Estate, estimated net worth approximately 775 million pounds."

I left Mr. Billmore's offices with a profound sense of relief. It hadn't been easy for me these past few months, looking forward to this day, the day when I just as easily could have ended up on the street, homeless, penniless, unemployed. Instead, I was the legal owner of the Comyn fortune, again.

I flagged down a cab, and got in the back. "Comyn Estate," I told the driver. Time to get back to work.

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