



SUMMARY: Two lives worlds apart share the stage....

## WISHFUL THINKING

by Valerie Hope

MY PINK BLACKBERRY PEARL MERRILY blasted me with Lady GaGa's "Just Dance," muffled from its residence in my cute pink plaid Dooney & Bourke purse. I'd been dreaming, and I couldn't really remember what about, but it didn't matter. I didn't have bad dreams, not really, just ones that left me feeling puzzled and

ones that left my panties all wet. I stretched luxuriously on satin sheets, pillowing my face into the silky curtain of my soft platinum-blond curls, and let out with a soft, baby-like moan as I shut my long-lashed eyes a little tighter against the sunlight streaming in through the lacy curtains on my bedroom window. A glowing sense of hope was rising in my belly, of what the day would bring, who I

would meet and talk to, what fun I'd have.

*THE BLARING OF THE ALARM clock in my left ear shocked me out of a sound but rather troubled sleep, the last little wisps of dream floating around my head like the little yellow head-injury birds of cartoon fame. My mind grabbed at them feebly, wanting to be back in the world of my own choosing so much more than in the world of my reality, with its attendant aches and pains from old football knees and a not-that-long-ago back surgery and its multitude of worries, where the money was going to come from, the bills and the stress of the job. With grainy, bleary eyes I squinted balefully and without hope at the green-glowing numerals of the hated alarm clock, stark against the pre-dawn blackness.*

My clock said eleven fifteen. I sighed heavily and rolled over, going back to sleep.

*Five a.m.*

Stretching languidly, I slid my smooth legs off the edge of the bed and took a moment to massage the arches of my delicate little feet, soothing away the ache of wearing seven-inch platform heels all night last night at work. It took a second after I stood up to put my heels down on the ground as my calves stretched out last night's tension.

*With a triumph of will, I levered myself out of the bed and stumbled with heavy, thumping steps to the shower. The heel I'd bruised jumping out of the back of the ambulance onto a loose piece of concrete ached and sent little hot needles of pain up my calf against the cold hardwood floor as I walked with heavy steps to the bathroom.*

I turned on the taps to let the water heat and sat on the cold ring of the toilet seat, feeling the heavy flow of urine fall out of me, running long French-manicured nails through my matted little tuft of pubic curls and applying just the barest thrilling tease to the little head of my clit, buried deep in its pierced hood in the moist heavy folds of my pussy lips. There was usually a thin coating of lubricant left over from a night's work, remnants of my lingering arousal, which was starting to get sticky by the time I woke up. I couldn't wait to get back to work. Nightfall

couldn't come quickly enough for me. I hopped into the shower and let it perk me up, lathering my trim, tight body with a moisturizing body wash that smelled like jasmine and then washing and conditioning my long, soft hair with apple-scented shampoo and conditioner. I stayed under the water for a long time – admittedly playing happily with my shower massager until I got that familiar, happy little shiver up and down my body – and stepped out only with reluctance into the chilly bathroom.

*I unscrewed the squeaky taps and let the water heat up as I took a quick leak, scratching my balls and lower belly with a groan of pleasure as the stream escaped my overstretched bladder with the pent-up force of having held it in all last night. Done, I stepped into the shower and sagged against the cold tile wall as the hot water flowed over my shoulders and neck, wishing that I didn't have to go to work that day, wishing that I never had to go to work again, for that matter. I lathered my hairy, somewhat pudgy form – far from its athletic tightness of my youth – with a harsh, astringent soap and ran the bar over my shiny bald head – another casualty of age – in a numb, zombie-like haze, just looking forward to being able to step out of the hot water and steam at just the right time for the last few drips of the coffee maker to fill the pot with the steaming witches' brew which I knew was my only real hope for consciousness.*

\* \* \*

Letting the fragrant steam of my body wash flow around me, I sat on the edge of the tub and lathered my legs with a moisturizing foam and make quick work of the downy hairs coming up on my shins with a pink razor. I gave my armpits and bikini line – I preferred a little feathery 'landing strip' – a quick going over and then brushed my teeth and applied my contact lenses, difficult with my long French-manicured nails, admiring the way the colored lenses transformed my eyes from a pale blue to a brilliant, traffic-stopping green.

*Stepping out into the clinging steam of the bathroom, I lathered my face quickly and dragged a razor over it roughly, scraping away the last of yesterday's blue-black stubble, now liberally shot through with grey. I brushed my teeth with similar disinterest, then wiped down my glasses and perched them back on my nose, bringing the world back into sharp focus from the dull blur it had been before.*

I patted my soft, smooth skin dry with a fluffy pink Egyptian cotton towel and rubbed myself down with moisturizing lotion to keep my skin soft and glowing. With a bounce in my step that set my breasts jiggling deliciously, I almost skipped into my bedroom and opened the closet, gazing longingly at the huge array of colors and fabrics hanging there for me to choose from. What would it be today? Something cute and adorable, or something slinky and sexy, or something just outright slutty? I spent a happy half-hour just going through random combinations before deciding on a fuck-me red lacy bra and thong under a pair of low-rise 'skinny' jeans and a pink baby tee that hugged my slender curves deliciously and showed off the glittering rhinestone lizard in my bellybutton piercing. I transferred keys, wallet, phone, makeup, hairbrush and a few tampons – just in case – into a white Coach purse and slung it over my shoulder on the way out the door, pushing pink wraparound sunglasses onto my nose and a pink mesh baseball cap – tilted at a stylish ghetto angle – over my still-damp hair.

*Rubbing myself roughly dry with a towel, I thumped across the weathered hardwood floors to my closet, not even needing to look as I pulled down the white cotton shirt with the service patches on either shoulder and the blue polyester cargo pants with the snapping loops for extrication implements. A pair of tightie-whitely underwear and a pair of socks, a strange-smelling short-sleeved Under Armour tee, and that was my day's ensemble. I pulled them all*

*on robotically, never really even looking at them, then stumped back in to check that I didn't look too much like hammered death in my bathroom mirror before stuffing my wallet, keys and cellphone into a capacious pocket and heading out the door for work. My regulation on-duty belt, hung with flashlight, Leatherman tool, zippered pouch containing various emergency implements and medications and my radio holster slung over one shoulder and the huge red gear-bag, containing my Nomex bunker gear, steel-toed boots and helmet went over the other. I clapped my regulation navy-blue uniform ball cap over a still-damp head and rushed out the door.*

I only hoped no one saw me without makeup between here and my destination. I would just die.

*I only hoped no one saw me at all today. A quiet ambulance was a happy ambulance, and I didn't particularly want to deal with another human being today, I was in a foul mood.*

I plopped down into my red convertible Volkswagen 'Beetle' with the Mardi Gras beads strung around the rearview and cranked it, my stereo popping on to the R&B station loudly until I could dig my pink iPod from my purse and hook it up, thundering the new Beyoncé from my speakers. I took a moment to brush on some mascara – I couldn't go completely without makeup, I decided – and strung huge silver hoops through the lowermost piercings in my ears which dangled against my shoulders. Then I threw my adorable little car into gear and backed out of my driveway, looking forward to starting my day.

*I pitched my heavy work gear unceremoniously into the back of my pickup and climbed in with a groan, fumbling my key into the ignition and just sitting there for a minute listening to the Uncle Tupelo CD that had been in my player for the last two months. I rubbed crust from the inner corners of my eyes and let loose a jaw-splitting yawn, broke wind, and slipped my black Toyota pickup into reverse, backing out of my driveway in the pre-dawn gloom. I only hoped that traffic was light and I could just get to work without incident. All I wanted was to just get the day over with and return home, bury myself under the covers and forget all about it.*

I pulled my car into a nearby convenience store for just a quick second, just to restock my purse for the day ahead. I grabbed the latest *Allure* and *Elle*, I already had the latest *Vogue* and *Glamour* in my car. I grabbed a mocha frappuccino from the cooler and grabbed a pack of gum, too, and asked perkily for two purse-packs of the Virginia Slims Superslims, the sexy skinny girly cigarettes I was smoking now. The guy behind the counter grabbed them extra-quick for me and totaled me up, staring at my tits the whole time. I dug for the money in my purse, under the huge pile of makeup and hairbrushes and Kleenex. It

turned out that I was a dollar short, but this really sweet guy in the line behind me dug into his pocket and paid the difference. I rewarded him with a flirty squeeze on the upper arm and a dazzling smile, which made him blush a little bit. Wiggling my ass a little bit extra, just so the boys would stare, I pushed out the door to the parking lot and got back in my cute little car.

*I pulled into the nearby 7-Eleven for the day's supplies. I slipped a copy of*

*Newsweek out of the rack, grabbing a pack of Eclipse gum and a giant liter bottle of Dr. Pepper, sliding them across the counter while I gruntingly asked for a hard pack of Marlboro Reds, since the pack in my pocket barely had enough to get me to the station for my shift, let alone for the next twenty-four hours I'd be working. I got a raised eyebrow, a man in a paramedic's uniform buying cigarettes, but I paid it no mind. Most of the healthcare workers I knew smoked*

*or used snuff, an unfortunate by-product of having to deal with other people's problems all day. I passed him the money from a pocket crammed with syringe caps and IV tourniquets, the backs off of adhesive EKG electrodes and nitrile gloves. It turned out that I was short a dollar. Everyone else in the store just gave me level, exasperated looks, and I slipped the magazine back into the rack, gathered my purchases and went back to my car.*

It wasn't far from the convenience store to my gym, which was also next door to my tanning salon. I was already dressed to work out so I just walked straight in and started my cardio after a quick stretch, starting on the elliptical trainer at a quick pace to get my heart rate up. I stuck in my iPod ear-buds and lost myself in the music and the rhythm of my pumping arms and legs, wondering what I was going to do with the rest of my day after I worked out and got my spray tan. I had my whole afternoon to kill before work, maybe I could shop for something cute to wear, maybe catch a movie or get my nails done. I returned the smiles I was getting from the other people working out, wondering which of them was going to

come over and try to flirt with me after I finished my circuit. I couldn't really go anywhere without somebody hitting on me, trying to get digits. Sometimes I let it work, sometimes I didn't, but I never minded. I liked people. They were interesting and cute and funny and they were always trying to impress me and make me like them. It made life fun, it made me look forward to whatever I was doing, even if it was something hard or boring, because usually I met somebody who was into me because of the way I looked and they would at least help me pass the time. I knew a lot of people had trouble doing that, connecting with their world, but that wasn't me. I just did what I did, and didn't care what anybody thought about it, and I never had to worry about it. I wasn't always that way – at least not when I was a little girl – but I figured it all out two years ago, right after I turned twenty-three. Just go with it. That was my philosophy, and it worked great.

*Driving the long commute to work, I tried not to look at all the places I'd rather be going, like the movie theaters and the restaurants, the electronics stores and the parks, hell, even the grocery store looked better to me than getting back on the fucking ambulance again. I'd been taking tons of overtime, just trying to get a little money saved up, and it seemed more and more like I lived at the EMS stations. I was on the quick train to burning out and I knew it. I was hardly even connecting with my patients any more, much more concerned with getting them to the ER and getting my paperwork finished than I was with their actual health and well-being. I didn't like what I was becoming, but I didn't know a good way to stop it or reverse it. All I could do, it seemed, was just keep doing what I was doing already and hope that it self-corrected. It was easy to start feeling like I wasn't in control of my own life any more. I knew I probably needed to see a professional, talk out some of my problems such as my crumbling relationship with my wife, my fears for my infant son, the unceasing stress of my high-demand job, sleep deprivation and the rapid onset of forty in just two short years, the constant shortage of available money, all of it. But I also had the lingering feeling that I couldn't just pay someone to take an interest or care about what I was going through. I wished I could just let it all go, just be one of those people who walked blindly through life with no concern about anything about what they were going to do later that day, didn't have to plan anything or worry about anything or be responsible for anything. But that wasn't the way things worked for me.*

I did wind up getting my nails done, just a quick fix of the long acrylic extensions I wore to get them nice and shiny, buffed smooth. I wore solar nails, which looked like a French manicure but weren't polished – instead they used some thick stinky gel that dried really hard and didn't chip or fade like polish did. I even got a super-cute little rhinestone heart on each index

finger. The long nails – like, seriously long, maybe an inch and a half – made my hands look incredibly sexy, whether I was texting on my phone or playing with my blonde hair or smoking a cigarette. They made boys think about what those fingers would look like wrapped around a thick, hard cock or playing with my nipples or pouty pussy. Hell, they made me think of those things, too, which got me wet and all squirmy inside. By the time I got done at the nail salon and the tanning booth, it was almost four o'clock. I boogied home and checked my email and MySpace real quick, gave my skin a quick rubdown with after-tan moisturizer to get it soft and smooth and smelling pretty and started the hour-long process of doing my hair and make-up for work. Separating the platinum blonde tresses into sections, curling them, spraying them, moussing the roots with lifting mousse and then back-combing the roots to get lift and volume, then finger-combing it all out to give me a big, soft, fluffy “just-been-fucked” tousle. I did really dramatic eyes – black liquid liner and about three coats of mascara on my super-long fake eyelashes. I saved the bubblegum-pink frosted lipstick and gloss for after I opened my fridge and had a glass of Chandonnay and the last of the huge garden salad I'd made two days ago. My phone rang while I was eating, and I chatted gaily about nothing with my BFF Amber while I munched and smoked a cigarette, then I threw my eight-inch clear platform heels and three or four cute little stretchy outfits into my pink Adidas gym bag and got ready to head into work. I pulled into the parking lot half-bouncing, so ready to party at *Platinum X*, the club where I danced. I signed in, got changed and hit the floor as soon as I

was physically able.

*I got to the station about fifteen minutes before my shift started, just long enough to pour myself a cup of industrial-waste coffee and clock in. I pitched my Nomex bunker gear, the protective clothing that I wore crawling around inside wrecked cars, in the back compartment of the ambulance and got on with the business of checking out the truck – making sure we had all the supplies we needed to run any kind of emergency call, such as IV's, oxygen delivery, EKG supplies and all our medications. I ran a quick eye over the expiration dates on the meds – sometimes the offgoing crew overlooked little things like that – and signed the logbook which stated I took over stewardship of the controlled medications we kept in the ambulance under lock and key, like morphine and valium. Everything was in order - the bulbs in the laryngoscope we used to intubate people were all working, all the 'little things' were checked and double-checked before we hit the streets. I grunted to my partner – a grizzled thirtysomething as burned-out and sick of the whole thing as I was – and we hopped in the unit. I was “up,” meaning I'd run the first call of the day, and logged us into the portable computer we used to keep patient records, while he fired up the tired old diesel engine and steered the unit to the nearest place that sold breakfast tacos, the food that we paramedics subsisted on, much like cops and donuts. I got my usual – chorizo sausage, potato, egg and cheese, certified artery-hardeners which would contribute heavily to my future heart attack – and refilled my coffee, enjoying a tired and numb silence with my partner Keith. At least we'd been together on the streets long enough to where we no longer needed things like small talk to pass the time. We could frequently go an entire 24-hour shift without saying three words to one another, just spent in a comfortable silence where we both just did our own thing – he dicked around with his fantasy football picks for the week while I read the BBC News and tried to think up reasons not to go home sick.*

I'd just ordered my very first Crown-and-Coke when I got called up: “Now turn your attention to the main stage, we're gonna heat it up now with the lovely Britanee, here at Platinum X, where the party never stops!”

*The loud blaring of the alert pager jarred us out of our silence: “MedComm, Medic 22, respond to the address of 107 E. Whitestone Drive, Apartment B, on a seizure call, 26 year old male, time out 07:49.”*

The bass thump of XTC's *Around the World* – my trademark opener – started up and I walked out into the blinding lights and twirled around the pole with one hand, still clothed for the first song in my two-song set. I was wearing a skin-tight pink sequined tube dress with big round cutouts up both sides, showing lots of side-boob that I knew got the boys in the seats drooling over me. I knew from instinct and three years of doing this what angles and what moves made me look the best, and I struck all the right poses, tossing my white-blond hair all around and giving them my sexiest, flirtiest looks, sucking on my fingernail, until I had a long line of guys with dollar bills in their hands lined up at the main

stage rail. And I didn't even have my top off yet!

*Keith slammed the truck into gear again and hit the sirens while I put in the run information and got ready for the call in my head – if it was a genuine seizure and not someone faking it (which happened all too often), I'd have to stop the seizure with Valium and midazolam and provide high-flow concentrated oxygen to overcome the pronounced oxygen starvation that happened during real generalized seizures. I tried to ignore the persistent ache in my back – after seizures, people became what medicine referred to as “postictal,” an extreme state of lethargy that made them, essentially, dead weight that Keith and I would have to lift off the floor onto a stretcher. I really hoped our 26-year-old male wasn't a porker.*

I came off stage where my friend Amber, a perky-titted brunette with a cute little teddy-bear tattoo on her butt, was smoking a cigarette and told me she'd hooked into a table of big spenders. I went over with her, hand-in-hand (the boys always paid out more when we acted like lesbians) and plopped in the lap of a grey-haired businessman in an Armani suit who was slamming Scotch. I asked the usual stuff – what's your name, what are you in town for, are you married. I barely listened to the answers, I was so ready to give this guy a lap-dance. Amber was already giving the guy next to us a cock massage with her firm butt and playing with his hair, so I decided to get busy myself, sipping my drink and 'accidentally' letting my tits rest against the side of his face as I bent over to set my glass on the table.

*We made entry into the house, where a very distraught girlfriend was wiping away tears beside a (thankfully) skinny young man with pimples and greasy hair in a textbook postictal state. The girlfriend told me he had a history of seizures but had been sick for two days, throwing up and unable to keep his Dilantin down to keep him from having active seizures. While Keith busied himself getting name, social security number, date of birth, medical history, medications and allergies from the girlfriend, I knelt beside the moaning young man, took a quick pulse and blood pressure, applied high-flow oxygen through a mask which he repeatedly tried to bat away (another hallmark of post-seizure activity) and started an IV in case he seized again and I needed to administer medications in a hurry.*

He didn't blink when I asked him if he wanted me to dance for him, he just scooted his chair back and spread his legs for me. I took a second to get into the beat – AC/DC's *Hell's Bells*, a strip club classic – and peeled myself seductively out of my dress, letting my big silicone DD tits spring free and bounce in front of his hungry eyes.

*“What hospital do you want us to take him to, ma'am?” I asked the girlfriend, and she didn't hesitate before naming the big downtown trauma center and County hospital. I took a moment*

*to set my feet and hauled the limp form of the boy onto the waiting stretcher with a loud grunt and the requisite lancing pain in my lower back.*

“You like, baby?” I purred, already having forgotten the name he'd given me, and not expecting an answer.

*“You okay, Kenny?” I asked, using the name I'd gotten from the girlfriend, and not expecting an answer.*

He slid his hands onto my firm ass and squeezed, making me squeal with pleasure and wiggle my ass teasingly just in front of his face.

*He gagged and vomited on my boots through the oxygen mask, making me step back quickly and bite back profanity.*

I finished the dance by feeding him a nipple where the floor managers couldn't see and kissing him on the cheek, wiping away the lipstick trace with a thumb afterwards. Amber was smiling at me – she dug watching me dance, she was a little bit of a dyke – and I sat back in his lap, trying to ignore the cold air conditioning of the club. I could tell how cold it was by how hard my nipples got – I could etch glass.

*I changed out his oxygen mask and got him secured onto the stretcher, wheeling him out of the cramped house with my partner and into the cold outside. A bitter wind had kicked up that cut right through my linen uniform shirt, and I could always tell how cold it was by how much my knees ached. I was moving like a seventy-year-old man down the driveway towards the idling ambulance.*

The night became just like I hoped, a long parade of horny men showering me with compliments and drinks and money, staring at me like a wet dream come to life. When I'd started as a stripper, I'd been nervous and wondered if I was demeaning myself by taking my clothes off for money. After a while, though, I came to realize that I was the one in control, that I could play these guys for every dollar they had and they'd give them to me gladly, if I just played into whatever fantasies they brought into my club with them. I couldn't imagine doing anything else, even though someday the tits would start to sag and my looks would go. But I wasn't going to rock the boat in the meantime, and enjoy every second.

*The day became just like all the others, one long blur of sick and bleeding people looking to me to make it better. When I'd first started as a medic in the field, I'd grooved on that feeling, that I was the one being called on to fix it. But years of not being able to fix a goddamned thing had given me a numbness and callousness that I couldn't shake any more. I was sure there was something else out there I could be doing, but I believed in “a bird in the hand” and didn't want to be bothered with finding another job. Sure, I teased myself by saying I'd get my nursing degree and give all this up, taking a high-paying job in a cozy little clinic someplace, but it was always just over the horizon.*

Sometimes, if I danced for a particularly cute guy, I even let them touch me a little more than they were allowed. It was the special little present I gave myself every night I worked, that little something that made me want to come back next time and do it again.

*Every once in a while, I'd get a patient who was genuinely grateful for my help, but they were few and far between. Most bitched at me for not doing my job well enough to suit them at that*

*particular moment. It was a chore to find the motivation to come to work when my name came up.*

Eventually, last call rolled around and I fought disappointment. I always hated when the party ended. I was usually sitting in the lap of somebody who was paying out, so I kept dancing until someone came by and told me to quit. By the time the house lights came up and I changed back into my normal clothes, I was ready to keep partying. The night was still young to me.

*By the time the shift ended, I felt exhausted and sore, hungry and altogether defeated. Still, I held on to the feeling that I was out there doing something important, something crucial, helping people who couldn't help themselves. But it didn't help the crushing fatigue and hopelessness brought about by running ambulance calls all day and all through the cold night.*

I did have to stop drinking, though, if I didn't want a D.U.I. on the way home. The boys had bought me a lot of drinks during the course of the night, and I was well-lubed by the time it was over.

*I decided, when I finally got relieved of my duty by the next shift, to buy some beer at the grocery store on the way home. It was time for me to start drinking.*

As the club cleared out, I fished around in my purse for a lighter or matches. While I was dancing, I never had to light my own cigarettes, but once the boys left I never had a light.

*I fumbled in my pocket for a pen to sign over the narcotics. During the shift, they were in every nook and cranny of the ambulance, but once I was done, I could never seem to find one.*

As I dumped my stuff reluctantly in the back seat of my car, lingering to talk with the other girls in the parking lot, I thought about stopping someplace for food. But it was too hard to find take-out at this time of night when you're a vegetarian. Instead, I headed for Amber's house through empty streets.

*I slogged through the morning drizzle to my car and took off as soon as I could, heading home to try and relax. I stopped briefly at a hole-in-the-wall Mexican place, to get my breakfast taco fix, stuffing spicy sausage down my mouth as I steered my way through thickening morning traffic.*

I pulled up next to a jacked-up dually pickup at one of the only lights not blinking red, driven by a really cute cowboy wannabe who was on his way home from some party somewhere. He ran his eyes all over me and I let him, stretching languidly to give him a better view, and favoring him with a dazzling smile. Just as the light changed, I pulled down the cups of my tank, flashing my tits at him and giggling madly as I watched him swerve and almost go off the road.

*I pulled up next to a convertible Mustang populated by a stunning twentysomething redhead who looked like a centerfold. I attempted a smile, but she looked right past me. I never seemed to draw the attention of women like her. As she drove away when the light changed, I waved at the place she'd been, pretending she'd been interested. It didn't help much. It left me to concentrate on not popping an aneurysm at the sluggish traffic.*

Amber's place was jumping by the time I pulled up. The after-party tended to float around, and I was A-list so I always got told where it was, and partying with a bunch of wild, drunk strippers and their significant others was so preferable to going to an empty house. I hugged and danced with no less than six different people and did three shots of Patrón tequila – one from between Jennifer's gorgeous fake tits – before I finally found Amber, who was smoking weed on

her back porch with her boyfriend Mike. I wondered how I'd do, having a boyfriend like him, or a girlfriend like her.

*Instead of heading directly home, as I'd intended, I wound up sitting at a local coffee shop, still in uniform so I got a half-price discount. I sat and read the paper in silence, sipping coffee, not wanting to be alone, necessarily, but also not wanting to have to interact with anyone. I faded into the wallpaper, just eavesdropping on various conversations here and there around the diner, listening to the other people laugh and joke and complain and subconsciously comparing their lives to my own, wondering how long I'd last in their lives and wondering just as much how long they'd last in mine. I had my doubts on either count. Better to stay in my own world.*

*I wasn't sure how long I just sat there, listening to the world go on around me, not wanting to stay particularly but not wanting to leave, watching the tired waitresses go around the tables like it was some bizarre ballet. One of them was kind of pretty, and smiled at me occasionally. It had been a very long while since anyone had looked at me with any kind of attraction in their eyes, and I liked to flatter myself that she was into me and, even though my marriage was disintegrating around my ears, that maybe she liked me so much that she would put on some makeup and high heels and go out and do something stupid with me sometime.*

I didn't think I could hack it. I liked playing the field way too much.

*I shook my head. Probably not. But still, it would be cool to make out with her, nonetheless. Too bad it wasn't up to me. She probably wouldn't give me the time of day if I asked.*

I flitted from room to room, taking a shot of tequila here and a bump of cocaine there, fueling my buzz perfectly, and talking and dancing and being crazy with everyone like the party had never ended. I liked watching people at parties, who hooked up with whom and who was looking to get into who's pants. It all served to fuel the gossip mill at work, anyway, and was a great way to pass the time. A lot of the guys there were way into me, and I let a couple dance close and traded digits two of them, one really biker-cute Latino and a big blond Viking guy. I didn't really date much, but I liked it when they tried to impress me.

I probably wouldn't return their calls, but if one of them played their cards right, he'd end the night with my mouth full of his cum. I was in that kind of mood tonight.

I did wind up sucking the Viking's cock in Amber's garage, as well as having an extended make-out session and fingerfuck with Crystal, a petite blonde stripper who'd started a few weeks ago and had been giving me the once-over ever since she'd met me. I finally passed out on Amber's couch a little after dawn, Crystal curled up on my flat belly and her short blonde hair tickling the undersides of my big fake tits. I woke easily – kind of a nasty hangover, but nothing a bunch of water and some 5-HTP couldn't fix – and stroked her hair for a while, pretending for a second I was actually in a relationship and waking up like this every day. But I liked my life much better on my own, so I slid out from under her without waking her and headed to my car, not even wanting to see the state of my hair.

*Finally, the traffic had thinned to the point where I no longer had any excuse to stay, so I folded the paper I'd borrowed and left an extravagant tip for the cute waitress and went back to my car. I ran a few errands – the drugstore, the grocery store for cat food, stopped and got gasoline – and finally stumbled through my back door, searching desperately for something to say to my*

*estranged wife who treated me like absolute shit but still seemed bound and determined to fix a marriage that was so hopelessly broken, or at least keep me in it with her so she didn't have to suffer alone. She was on the couch, watching Law & Order. She did that a lot. She much preferred Jerry Orbach and Benjamin Bratt to me and my stinky feet and emotional problems.*

I got home and undressed right in the middle of the living room – one of the benefits of living alone – and dropped all my dirty clothes neatly in the little pink wicker hamper in the bathroom. I stepped into a hot shower and then slipped into a tank-top with spaghetti straps and some pink yoga pants with “Sexy Bitch” stitched on the ass and then racked out my couch for a little while, getting a little

more much-needed sleep. I decided to ignore things like laundry and dirty dishes and shit like that for a morning of just watching *Ellen* and taking a couple bong hits, sometimes wondering if maybe I shouldn't try to do more with my day instead of just flop around, vegetating. I giggled. No, thanks. I was a

lazy bitch, that was for damn sure, and I liked it that way.

*I grunted a hello to her and took off my dirty uniform, dropping it in the middle of the bedroom floor just because I knew how much it pissed her off. I slipped into a t-shirt and jeans and tried to find some busy work, something to keep me from having to talk to her until she left for work and I could lie down and take a much-needed nap. I found my solace in washing the enormous pile of dirty dishes in the sink, mindless and not requiring a single decision on my part, which was absolutely delicious considering the life-and-death decisions I had to make so regularly in my job, decisions that could kill a person or save them with a fingernails' margin in between. It was nice to have the only huge decision hanging over my head be whether or not to use Jet Dry in the dishwasher.*

After a while, I opened my purse and pulled out my wad from last night, sorting out the singles that had been tucked into my g-string at the rail and the twenties and c-notes that I'd gotten in the dark corners of the club from lap-dances. There was another pile of just business cards and phone numbers, which I just tossed into the trash. I put the numbers of the people I was actually interested in straight into my phone, but I didn't want to appear rude to any of the other customers by just tossing their digits out where they could see it. So I kept them and cleaned out my purse once I got home.

*Finished, I pawed through my dirty uniform pants for my wallet and keys, to replace them in their 'special spot' I'd staked out so that I wouldn't lose them. I only had about three dollars, after filling my car with gas and the breakfast I'd wolfed down and the tip for the waitress. It's not like I ever carried cash, anyway, doing most of my transactions with my debit card. The wife didn't distribute any cash to me as a general rule, since she liked the feeling of control it gave her to keep me on an allowance even though I was the one who made the damned money in the first place.*

A neat little stack totalling about four hundred dollars lay in front of me, which I smoothed out and replaced in my purse. I was a little shy of rent, still, but I had six more days I could work before I had to have it and could make that easily. I bit my pouty bottom lip, trying to remember if there were any other bills I needed to pay right away, but I couldn't think of any. Besides, they'd be written on the white-board in the kitchen anyway, in my rounded bubble-writing in pink dry-erase, the *i*'s dotted with little hearts in the cutest little way.

*I did a mental totting-up in my head, trying to do quick math to determine how much money would be left out of my check once I'd paid all the bills for the month. It seemed unfair to me that after all the people I helped out there, I still had to scrape by at the end of every month. I thought I was square, maybe didn't pay the cable bill, which could be disastrous: no Law & Order, and my wife might have to talk to me (gasp). Anything outstanding would be on the pad on the fridge, scrawled in my cramped, spidery hand.*

I closed my eyes dreamily and thought back to the fun I'd had last night, dancing naked around a chrome pole and being the center of attention and desire by every man I passed. Even the downtime was spent among beautiful, giggling naked girls who compared notes about the cocks they'd ground against while

dancing and traded lame pick-up lines they'd heard like baseball cards. I did kinda wish there was someone there I could share it all with, someone I could lend my bright, sunny outlook on the world and maybe help them see life through my eyes. My home life was a little lonesome – not that I really wanted to change it, but sometimes I just wished that there was someone I could come home to, someone who loved me and wanted to hear about my night.

*I shut my eyes and tried to shake off my last shift, the bloody wrecks and the sick, miserable people looking to me to make everything all right, and the downtime spent in a station full of loud, burping, farting firemen trying so desperately to convince one another of the size of their dicks, and put myself back in 'at home' mode. My son, the light of my life, would be home from school soon, and then things would brighten up. He would tell me about his day, and about all the things his young eyes had viewed with wonder that day, and I would force myself out of the numb, punch-drunk mood I stayed in, because I took my task very seriously, to protect his young, wonder-filled eyes from becoming like my old, burnt-out ones that viewed the world with disdain and mild disgust.*

Maybe if they heard what a good time I had, they'd feel good like I did.

*Anything to keep him from ever feeling like I felt every day.*

I napped for a while, then got back up and got out of the house for a while, just because I didn't like being alone. I was just counting minutes until I could go back to work, back to the party again. I laid out by the pool in my apartment complex in one of my tiniest barely-there bikinis, catching the attention of the UPS guy and some unemployed guys who did nothing but hang around the apartment complex all day smoking weed and working on their cars. It was boring as shit, actually. I still found myself wishing for someone to share this limbo-time with, someone to help make the hours pass.

*Once he got home, everything seemed to turn around for me. I fixed him a snack, talked about his day, celebrated with him in his triumphs and commiserated with him in his setbacks. My stock answer remained to his question of how my day was: "fine." I didn't ever want him to know just how much pain, blood, fear and ugliness was out there in the world. I had no illusions that he'd find out on his own, eventually, but damned if it was gonna be Dad bringing that shit into his life. No, I wanted Dad Time to be happy time, and the last thing I wanted either of us thinking about was trauma.*

Unable to stand it any more, I went to a salad bar I frequented and ate in the crowd, striking up conversations with total strangers – even though they invariably talked to my tits, at least it was company – and then went back to the gym for more cardio and some lower-body work. If I

couldn't be with anybody, then at least I'd have a rock-hard ass to show for it. Still, just being around people, being flirted with and stared at, brightened me up and made me feel better almost immediately. By the time I finished, I was myself again.

*I sat across from him at the kitchen table and helped him with his homework – thank goodness it was still homework I could help with, which wouldn't last much longer – and for those times we were actually a family; Mom and Dad talked to one another, interacted, and seemed to genuinely like one another instead of just tolerance. She brightened up around that little boy the same way I did, and forced herself out of wherever dark place she dwelt for his benefit the same way I did.*

I spent the last few hours before work doing my hair and makeup again, picking out the clothes I wanted to wear and amusing myself by thinking of what name I was going to give to the customers – I could be anyone I wanted, after all – I danced for, where I would be from, and what I planned to do with my life. I could be Olga, the Russian immigrant who dreamed only of a house and kids, or Peggy Ann, the fresh-faced country girl, blinded into stripping by the lights of the big city. Or, as was usual, I could just be myself.

*Homework done, it was outside before it got dark to kick the soccer ball around, Dad ignoring his sore knees and rapidly-deteriorating back for those precious few minutes so that we could win the World Cup together against near-insurmountable odds, my little boy always tapping in the winning goal from outside the penalty box in stoppage time, his expertly-spun rocket just brushing the tips of the opposing keeper's fingertips while the crowd roared its approval of my son, the world's greatest footballer.*

That's how it went for me – filling the days as best I could, just trying to waste time till I could get back to the never-ending party, dressed and made up as sexy as only I could be, every eye on me as I twirled around the pole, never having to buy my own drink or light my own cigarettes, living half-drunk in heels no shorter than seven inches and skirts that barely covered my perfect ass. I let myself get groped in dark corners and told outrageous lies to total strangers about who and what I was, and got showered with free drinks, praise for my goddess beauty and twenty-dollar bills shoved in my underwear.

*That's the way my life went – slogging through the interminable days and going through the motions until my son came home and I could be what I wanted to be most – a father. And when I was at work, as I was now, my uniform losing its pressed creases and starting to smell like sick old lady, filling out reams of paperwork and just hoping that I could get some sleep, all I could think about was getting back home, getting back to that World Cup Final in the backyard and that high-pitched giggle that made every single thing I hated about this job and this life worth every second.*

*I was sitting heavily in the ambulance, filling out paperwork from the last call and watching as the people rushed home from their jobs back to their lives in such a hurry that they hurt themselves. Almost on cue, the alert pager trilled.*

*“MedComm, Medic 22, respond to the corner of University and West Nineteenth on a motor vehicle accident, 2 cars. Time out 18:47.”*

I was on my way to work, turning right onto University Drive to get on the freeway, when a blue pickup ran a red light and plowed into my cute red Beetle, spinning me around. I checked to see I was all right – nothing broken or bleeding, and most importantly nothing that was going to

leave a scar on my flawless skin, and started to dig in my purse for my cellphone, wanting to call Amber and let her know what happened, hoping I could persuade her to come and get me and take me to work, because even with a wrecked car and possible injuries, my only thoughts were revolving around getting back to the party and the glamour, to being the center of attention, to being loved and desired and adored by everyone. I was still looking for my phone – my purse was crammed with shit, and for all I knew it was either in my dance bag in the back seat or still at home on the phone charger – when I heard the wailing of the sirens and saw the fire engine, two cop cars and a white ambulance pull up behind me. Next thing I knew, a tired-looking paramedic with a five-o'clock shadow and a basset-hound face leaned through my window and took my pulse at my wrist.

*I shrugged into my safety vest and dove out to the two-car fender-bender, taking in the scene by eye. Everyone appeared to be conscious and in one piece. I signaled to Keith that I'd take the red Volkswage Beetle drop-top and he could take the blue Dodge Dakota. He nodded and we split up. I leaned through the window and my breath caught in my throat – a busty blonde bombshell with Anna Nicole curves and one of the prettiest faces I'd ever seen, dressed to the nines and made up like the cover of Cosmo was behind the wheel, digging in her purse for a cellphone.*

\* \* \*

“Hi, there, I'm Nick. I'm a paramedic. What's your name? Are you hurt?” he asked in a gravelly voice.

“Nikki,” she replied in a husky, sexy soprano. “No, baby, I'm not hurt. I'm fine.”

“You were wearing your seatbelt?” he asked, wrapping a blood-pressure cuff around her upper arm, keeping his eyes firmly on hers, for a change, and not staring at her magnificent tits.

“Yeah, I always do,” she replied.

“Do you want us to take you to the hospital, get yourself looked at?”

“No,” she said. “No, I just want to call my friend, get a ride. I can't miss work.”

“Okay. I'm gonna have some questions to ask you, and I'm gonna need a signature if you don't want to go to the hospital with us, okay?”

“Sure, no problem,” she told him.

“Is there anything else I can do?” he asked. “To help, I mean?”

She looked at him appraisingly. “No,” she said, chewing on her plump bottom lip in a calculatedly sexy way that made his heart skip several beats. “But if there is, I promise I'll let you know.”