

A Novella

BUTTERFLIES



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ISBN:

To my wife Shirley who inspires me everyday to be better

1

The rain fell down heavy from dark clouds and struck his body like a thousand pebbles all at once. Each drop seemed to pass right through him before landing softly on the pavement. He didn't feel the wetness of the rain, only the pain of it. He was a tall, slender man, except for the slight bulge about his mid-section. His hair was dark brown and thick and short but wet it looked black and thin pressed down on his receding hairline. He had a boyish face except for the puffiness under his brown eyes that gave away his late 30's age. His arms dangled at his sides with his keys clutched in his right hand and a closed tall golf umbrella in his left. Absently, with his soft-sided faux leather briefcase shoved under his left arm, he just stood there next to his jet black Lexus, eyes cast down, absorbing the pain. The light from the open garage in front of him did

not seem to penetrate the outside making it appear as if there was a glass wall between him in the cold rain and the dry warmth inside.

A slow squeak caught his attention and he lifted his head. In the doorway between the garage and the house he could see four eyes staring at him. He squinted through the rain and the pain and saw the flowing auburn hair of his oldest daughter and the light golden ponytail sticking straight up in the middle of the head of his youngest daughter. They blinked. He looked down. The rain fell harder.

How was he going to tell her? She would do what needed to be done, he knew that, but it didn't make it hurt any less. There would be fewer smiles from her for some time or maybe no smiles ever again. Oh how he lived for her smiles! They were enormous and lit up her face brighter than the sun. He could get blinded by just one of those smiles. He lived a lifetime in each moment she smiled. Now they would be gone. Their future changed. Their everything unknown.

"DADDY!!!" screeched his oldest, jumping up and down.
"DADAAAAA!!!" mimicked her sister.

He slogged forward out of the cold heavy rain into the warmth and light of the garage but the stinging pain from the rain did not stop. Or was it the pain of dread in his heart? His feet squished as he maneuvered between their nautical blue Sienna minivan and the maze of tricycles, balls, his old tennis racket, an aluminum bat, small pink ball gloves, bubbles, chalk, some rocket that went WHOOSH in the air when you stomped on a big button attached to it by a rubber hose, his mower, lawn chairs, three open umbrellas, one like his with his former employer's logo on it, one small with rainbow polka-dots and one that looked like a tabby cat, ears sticking up and everything. As he shuffled forward, he heard the sweet stern voice of his wife call out, "Girls! Go upstairs in my bathroom and grab a towel from under my sink for Daddy."

The door fell shut as his daughters scurried to get him the towel. He made his way to the steps that led to his home and leaned his closed, wet umbrella against the wall. The smell of lasagna, brownies and play dough came toward him as he opened the door, briefcase still shoved under his arm, keys still clutched in his hand. On cue, his daughters returned, beaming. He gave one his briefcase, slid his keys into his pocket and took the towel from the other.

"Raining out there, huh?" his wife giggled from the kitchen.

"Uh... yeah," he mumbled.

He pulled off his scuffed black leather oxfords and soaked socks, leaving them haphazardly by the door. When he put the towel over his head to dry his hair, his daughters attacked. His oldest, Mary, hit first, her head just below where it will really hurt when she grew a bit taller. Stumbling back in surprise as she wrapped her arms around his legs, his younger daughter, Erin, ran into the back of her sister and tried to stretch her arms out to get to her dad but she couldn't reach. She slid to the side, jumping up and down like a jackrabbit on his left leg. Leaning into the wall prevented him from getting tackled to the floor. He put his arms out and patted the backs of each of them as they both now started hopping up and down in excitement.

"Girls!" his wife said sharply. "Give daddy a chance to get in the door. Please finish putting your play dough away."

They ran to the table, younger following the older. He wiped his wet feet on the rug in front of the door to the garage and then slinked toward his wife who was busily finishing dinner in the kitchen, the towel draped across his shoulders. Instead of putting the play dough away, his girls brought their masterpieces to the kitchen to show their daddy.

"This one's a ta-ra-na sauce rex," Mary explained.

"I, uh, I see..."

"SAUCE! SAUCE! EX!" her sister sputtered excitedly.

"Yes. Yes."

"Okay girls. Now put them away so Daddy can set the table."

He reached his wife and leaned down for a quick kiss on the lips.

"Mmmm... so good to see you," she said as she touched her free hand to the back of his head and gently held it close to hers. Smiling at him, centimeters from his face, she whispered, "You give me butterflies!" She was nearly a foot shorter than him with long toffee wavy hair with blonde highlights, hazel eyes, perfectly oval face and soft lips. An apron made of an old navy bath towel, a large sunflower on a white piece of cloth stitched on front, was over her red and black plaid thermal long sleeve shirt and black yoga pants. His left hand unconsciously landed on her outstretched belly. He gave it a few circular passes and a pat before he reached into the cupboard for the plates.

“Maybe I’ll have to help you out of those wet clothes later,” she whispered into his ear, flashing him a twinkling smile with her eyes.

The girls chatted about their day as they smushed their creations into the play dough containers. He didn’t understand a word but then he wasn’t really listening. They ran back and forth between the hall closet and the table putting away one item at a time. Since Erin was always a few steps behind Mary, it was inevitable that Mary would knock her down when she turned away from the closet to get the next thing and Erin was right there.

They both tumbled to the floor. Mary bounced up but Erin stayed down and howled. He put the plates down on the table and went to her. Tears were flowing as he knelt beside Erin. Mary ignored her sister and kept to her task.

“You’re okay, you’re okay,” he reassured her as he stood her up and hugged her. She buried her face into his shoulder. He scooped her up and took her to the high chair, her crying turned to sniffles. Right behind him his wife appeared with a handful of small pieces of apple and put them on the high chair tray. She slid her hand casually down his back. As she returned toward the kitchen, she

wiped her now wet hand on the apron covering her bulging belly.

The table was set. The food was put on the table. They each cut up some food into smaller pieces and distributed them to their girls, then filled their plates as conversation broke out in spurts between the girls and their mom. He remained silent, sitting on the towel, nodding his head every so often.

Dinner finished. Baths were taken. Brownies and ice cream devoured. Bedtime stories were read.

After kissing both girls (and then coming back to give each a drink of water and then back to say goodnight to each of their favorite stuffed animals and then to read another goodnight story and a final goodnight kiss), they checked to make sure the baby monitors were working and pulled their bedroom door closed.

"Now," his wife said with a sly look in her eyes, "let me help you out of these wet clothes."

"Well, they're mostly dry..." he trailed off.

"So?" She pulled him to her, hands sliding down his back.

He gently pulled her arms down.

"What is it Jim?" she asked, concern overtaking her flushed face.

"Uh..."

"You've been acting like you're somewhere else. Is something going on?"

Jim dropped his head and her arms.

He sighed deeply. He paused. He sighed again. She cocked her head and crossed her arms.

"Uh...Kate...well, I gotta tell ya something," he stammered.

Silence filled the space between. Time seemed to stop.

"I lost my job..."

"Oh Jim! I'm so sorry!" she reached out to hold him but he caught her, stretching his arms out to keep her a slight distance away.

"... nineteen months ago," he finished with a heavy breath.

Kate froze. She stared at his eyelids, all that she could see of his hanging face.

"What?!" she whispered.

He sighed. He whispered back, "They're foreclosing on the house. We have two weeks."

"How?" Her body stiffened, arms now squeezed tightly across her stomach.

"I... uh..."

"How?!" she demanded.

"I, uh, well, I thought I could get another job soon after I was let go. Then the economy started tanking and it got harder to find a job. When my severance ran out, I found a telemarketing sales job, but got laid off from there a few months later. I started using our savings, then our 401k which lost value faster than I could withdraw it. I didn't know what to do. Everyday I went to the library and worked on those novels I've been telling you about for years. I constantly checked for new job postings but jobs had disappeared."

Tears welled up in Jim's eyes. "Kate," he whispered. "The savings are gone, our 401k is gone and our house is worth less than we owe. Nothing is left, Kate... It's gone... It's all gone..."

Kate jammed both hands hard into Jim's chest. "You son of a bitch!"

Jim fell back a half step and Kate headed toward the bedroom door. He tried to grab her arm but she was quick. She reached the door, opened it and turned. He lifted his head just in time to see her stare directly through him and turn his heart to ice. Then she was gone.

He heard the garage door open. The red taillights of his car could be seen through the window of their walk-in closet which was over the garage. Then the headlights shined through the window, turned down the road and all was silent.

Slowly Jim took off his clothes and put on dry underwear, blue gym shorts and a white Addias t-shirt. He pulled the covers of the bed back, laid down and pulled the covers over his head. The bed was cold. He shivered as he sobbed.

2

Two black cars pulled up. Two people, one man, one woman, got out of the first car. No one got out of the second car. The man and woman approached the house. They were both wearing black short sleeve shirts and black pants. The man, who was tall, bald and a bit overweight, was visibly sweating in the unusual spring heat. A nautical blue Toyota Sienna and a white and orange U-Haul were parked in the driveway. Zipping around in circles in the empty garage were a chatty four-year-old on her scooter and her younger sister on a Dora the Explorer cruiser trike.

The woman, her honey blonde hair pulled back in a tight pony tail, squatted down in the garage, smiled, her cobalt eyes watching the gleeful girls. The older one stopped her scooter in front of the woman, cocked her head, her helmet partially sliding off her head and asked, "Are you a peace officer?"

"Yes, I am. My name is Officer Diane, and that is Officer Don. What's your name?"

"Mary."

Mary's younger sister got off her trike and toddled over to Officer Diane and gave her hug, knocking her back on her heels. Mary hugged her too.

"Who's this?" Officer Diane asked as she righted herself.

"I Erin!" the younger sister yelled.

Bending down, Officer Don smiled and asked, "Where are your mommy and daddy?"

"In there," Mary pointed to the open door between the house and the garage.

Jim appeared in the doorway just then carrying a gold-colored floor lamp with a creme shade. He paused for a moment when he saw the police officers. Officer Don straightened up while Officer Diane remained squatting by the girls.

"Honey, did you get the..." a voice yelled from inside the house as Kate appeared in the doorway.

"Officers?" Jim asked, setting down the lamp.

"Mr. and Mrs. Richman?" Officer Don asked.

"Yes..." Jim stuttered.

"Sir, we're here to ensure there's no trouble with the, uh," Officer Dan paused, glancing at the girls, "move."

"There's no problem. We're running late, is all." Picking up the lamp and walking toward the U-Haul Jim, without looking at either officer mumbled, "Hard to pack up one's life in this short of time."

Kate walked toward the officers and smiled, her hazel eyes friendly. "Do you officers need a drink of water? It's awfully steamy this morning."

"No... uh, no thanks ma'am," Officer Don said, unconsciously wiping sweat off his forehead.

"Officer Diane! Officer Diane! Come see. Come see!" Mary squealed.

She and Erin lead her over to a chalk drawing on the driveway. "There's the sun and that's a rainbow and that's me and mommy and daddy and Erin and our new house!"

"Wow... that looks beautiful," Officer Diane marveled. "Did you help too?" she asked Erin.

"Uh huh," Erin nodded, her helmet slipping off her head, revealing the one ponytail, slightly smushed, coming out the top of her head.

Officer Diane held her hand to her mouth to stifle a giggle, bent down and helped Erin get her helmet back on. "I'm so glad to see you both wearing helmets. It's very important to be safe while you're riding your bikes."

"Scooter," Mary corrected.

The girls rushed back to their scooter and trike and pleaded with Officer Diane to watch them. As she did, Jim and Kate continued to take the rest of their belongings out of the house and packed them into the U-Haul.

In the second black car, nothing stirred.

It took about an hour for the packing to finish. From inside the house, the officers heard Kate, "Jim, really, you don't

need to do that. We're not selling. We're leaving. Let them deal with it."

Kate came out with a sand-colored plaid diaper bag slung over her shoulder. Jim followed with a broom and dust pan which he put in the U-Haul.

"C'mon girls!" Kate yelled. "Time to go!"

They flung off their helmets, gave Officer Diane a hug, and ran to the van. Officer Diane offered to help get Erin strapped into her car seat. Kate helped Mary get into hers, put the diaper bag at Mary's feet and got into the driver's seat.

Jim gathered up the helmets, the trike and the scooter and put them in the U-Haul. He pulled the door of it shut with a solemn thud and latched it. He climbed into the driver's seat, turned the ignition and crept forward out of the driveway into the cul-de-sac.

Kate sighed softly, shifted into reverse and held in the tears as she twisted her head back to see out the crammed van. Once out of the driveway, she shifted into drive, turned the van and, staring straight ahead through watery eyes, left the cul-de-sac, Jim following in the U-Haul.

Officer Don let out a relieved sigh and wiped his sweaty forehead with the back of his hand. Two men got out of the second black car. The younger one in a suit and tie headed to the house, the other with a polo and khaki pants, to the trunk of the car. Out of the trunk, he pulled out a sign, walked to the middle of the front yard, stuck it in the grass and pushed it down with his foot.

"FORECLOSED! PRICE REDUCED!"

3

There was a knock at the door.

A flash of light rose taffeta sprinted to the door, a white short sleeve ice cream cone print dress whizzed close at its hem.

“Wait, Cupcake! Don’t open the door until I...”

The door was flung open and rose taffeta and purple floral lace began jumping and screaming. “Come see my new room!” squealed Taffeta and the three dresses swished to the back of the apartment.

“So great to see you!” exclaimed the navy bath towel apron weaving through the dresses. It reached out and hugged the simple but chic sunflower dress and beige suede wedges.

“Wow, you’re about to pop!” the sunflower dress said.

“Well,” sighed the apron, “I feel like it but I’ve got at least six weeks to go. I’m sweating bullets all day and night,” she laughed.

As they began to chit chat, a knock came to the door again, but this time the navy apron was at the door first and opened it.

An indigo gingham dress burst through the opening into the collage of pink taffeta, purple lace and white ice cream. Taffeta grabbed Gingham by the hand and the four raced to Taffeta’s room.

The apron hugged the royal blue University of Kansas Jayhawks t-shirt with white capris and blue and white floral flip flops.

“Come in! Come in!” exclaimed Apron, ushering Jayhawk and Sunflower to the kitchen.

“This is... quaint,” Sunflower said, looking around.

“Very cute! I love the color of your countertops,” remarked Jayhawk.

"Thank you. That's what sold me on this place. It's different but not wild."

Shaking her head, Jayhawk said, "I can't believe they'll be in kindergarten next year."

"I know! It's going to be a lot quieter around here," Apron said.

"Until that one pops out," Sunflower said, pointing at the bulge beneath the apron.

He came into the kitchen from the hallway the dresses had flowed through wearing grey cotton shorts and a white Han Solo t-shirt. Apron went to the oven, opened it and tapped the yellow cake with her middle finger. "Hey Jen," Han Solo said to Jayhawk giving her a quick hug. "Cindy," he nodded at Sunflower.

"Jim, honey, can you get the coffee mugs down for me?" asked his wife, wiping her hands on her navy bath towel apron.

Before he reached the cabinet, Kate slid over, placing herself between him and the counter. She looked up at him, eyes radiant. He leaned down and kissed her quickly on the lips. "Thank you," she spoke softly. He glanced down

at her with a quick smile that caused her to swoon unnoticeably, reached above her and pulled down eight mugs that were white on the outside and red brick-colored on the inside.

"I'll check on the girls," he told Kate.

"Chewie's coming girls!!!" Jim bellowed down the hallway. Screeching filled the apartment.

"So, how have you girls been?" Kate asked.

"Good," remarked Jen. "Paul thinks he's going to run a marathon this fall. I don't know though. After he was gone for a couple hours this morning, the first thing he did when he got home was crack open a beer. Doesn't seem like 'training' to me, but he says he's replacing carbs."

Cindy and Kate laughed. Jen was always exacerbated by her husband.

Kate began filling a teapot with water. "How about you Cin?"

"Oh fine," she sighed. She and her husband lived in an enormous house on several acres, had a BMW SUV and a Porsche, but never seemed happy.

Cindy set her oversized chestnut leather handbag on the kitchen counter. "We're taking the kids to Sanibel this summer. I still have to get them swimsuits."

"Sanibel, that's wonderful!" Kate said cheerfully. "That's the island in Florida with all the shells?"

"Yeah. We're going to come back with a suitcase full of 'em," complained Cindy.

"How was the move?" Jen interjected.

"Fine! Fine. I mean, it was hard but we're making it work," Kate said as she checked the cake again. Satisfied it was done, she grabbed a couple of pot holders, pulled the cake out and set it on the stove to cool.

They were quiet for a moment and then Cindy spoke up with a slight tone of righteous indignation. "I don't know. The way he treated you? Not telling you he lost his job and then blowing all your money? I wouldn't have put up with it. I would have left him to deal with his own damn mess."

"He's my husband," Kate turned, her hand moving to her hip, "the father of my children. I couldn't do that."

"People do it all the time," Cindy snapped.

"Well, I'm glad we got the girls together today," said Jen, changing the subject. "Molly's been on me every day to see Mary."

Removing her hand from her hip, Kate turned to the cabinet for cocoa mix. "Mary's been looking forward to this 'tea party' for a long time. We couldn't do it on her birthday last month, with the move and everything. I guess that's why so many of the other girls couldn't come, summer vacations and all."

Jen avoided Kate's eyes.

"Is that what they told you?" Cindy huffed. "They didn't want to come to this neighborhood. It's, it's..."

The teapot started whistling.

Kate stared intently at Cindy. "What do you mean?"

"I... Come on Kate. Ya aren't living in the Ritz Carlton."

"So our zip code changed. We haven't changed. Mary still loves Molly and Andrea and all the other girls from pre-

school. I'm sure they still love Mary. They don't care about where we live."

"It's not necessarily as safe here as..."

"What kind of cake is that? Smells delish!" Jen interrupted.

Her eyebrows scrunched together, Kate forced out, "It's safe! Irish tea cake." She turned back to the stove, hiding the tears welling up in her eyes because she knew Cindy was right, picked up a knife, ran it along the edge of the rectangular cake pan between the cake and pan and sprinkled some powdered sugar on it.

Jim appeared from around the corner with Erin in his arms, a sad look and dried tears on her face.

"Chewie may have accidentally knocked this Ewok here off the bed."

Kate went toward him, her face changing from cold to warm. "You okay, baby? Come here."

Jim handed Erin to Kate. "You alright?" Jim whispered to Kate.

"Yeah, mm hmm," but he could tell she wasn't.

Jim pulled a blanket out of the closet in the hallway and spread it out on the floor of the family room. Holding Erin, Kate scooped two heaping spoonfuls of cocoa into each mug. She then kissed her on the forehead, put her down and told her to go get the other girls.

Mary, Molly and Andrea, all decked out in their party dresses, bounded into the family room, followed by Erin, and sat in a circle on the blanket. Kate poured hot water into each mug. She cut the cake into perfect one inch square pieces. With a spatula, she carefully lifted a piece out of the pan, onto a six inch round clear plastic plate and handed it to Jen. She handed another plate of cake to Cindy, filled two more plates and walked into the family room. They handed the plates of cake to the girls.

"Thank you," each of the girls said sweetly, except Erin who just started eating.

Kate returned to the kitchen and grabbed four mugs of hot chocolate, two in each hand, and brought them to the girls.

"Okay," Kate said, "She would sing 'Happy Birthday'?"

"Haaaa..." Jim started.

"No!" Mary jumped up. "This is a 'tea party' not a 'birthday party'."

"But the presents..." Kate started.

"YES! It's a 'tea party' with presents, not a 'birthday party'."

"Alrighty. Ladies, can I interest you in some 'tea' and cake?"
Kate asked.

Later that night, Jim came into their bedroom after giving one last drink of water to Erin. Kate was lying on her left side, away from the door. He sat on the bed and asked to her back, "Everything alright? It seemed like you were having a tense conversation in the kitchen there earlier."

"It's fine," she sniffled.

He knew it was not fine.

"What is it Baby?" he asked softly, rubbing her back.

She rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. Stillness filled the room. Jim waited.

Kate carefully sat up, gripped Jim's hand, clenched her teeth, her eyes reddening. She looked into those chocolate

eyes of his that always made her melt and spit, "Don't ever lie to me again!"

"I thought we..."

A tear falling out of her left eye, "DON'T!" she emphasized.

4

There was no sound coming from the television. Across the bottom of the screen, white letters and numbers inside a black banner zipped by right to left. In front of some of the numbers was a green triangle pointing up but most had a red arrow pointing down. On top of the black banner was a white banner with black letters and numbers that each second flipped upward to the next set of letters and numbers with about the same ratio of green and red arrows next to the numbers. On the right bottom half of the screen was a red box labeled "Dow" with numbers changing with each blink of the eye. On the left bottom half of the screen was a white box with words "Fox Business" and, alternating about every second below that, was the word "Live" or the current east coast time. Above all of this were alternating headlines, presumably related to what the various talking heads in the remaining space on the screen were talking about. Occasionally, graphics were squeezed in to the right or left of their heads.

He sat there in the opulent lobby of onyx and ivory marble, white leather chairs, the silent enormous television above a fish tank of exotic fish embedded in the wall and a mahogany receptionist desk behind which sat an alluring blonde with ruby lipstick, headset lightly resting on her head, cheerfully answering and directing calls. While he was quite close to her, he could not make out her words because of the towering ceiling carrying her voice away. The quiet serenity of the lobby contrasted the bold colors of the fish and the television. It made him feel relaxed and on edge at the same time.

He looked down at his tie and wondered to himself if cabernet with silver mini-polka dots was the right color. Sure, a red is a power color, and he wanted to appear strong and in control, but red was also the color of doom. Financial markets had tanked, bottoming out a year ago, losing over half their value. While markets had improved, there was probably still a lot of red ink covering every financial report in this office. Maybe he should have wore the navy tie with thin burgundy and ivory angled stripes. He liked it better with his dark grey suit anyway.

His left foot danced up and down rapidly. It betrayed his nervousness, his anxiety, his desperation. This was his 27th interview in two and a half years of consistent disappointment. The marketing job he held for seven years

was eliminated a few months before Bear Stearns collapsed and the economy began a free fall. The stock markets had started to recover but companies were still shedding employees. Candidates were plentiful for the few jobs available and he had yet to be offered anything.

Maybe this would be the opportunity he needed. The job wasn't posted anywhere. His former boss had called him recently and told him about it. It was in finance, not marketing, but his former boss was friends with the hiring manager. He knew it's more about who you know than what you know for landing a job. And he needed a job urgently.

Everything he had worked for since college had been washed away. House, gone. Retirement money, gone. Car, gone. Vacations, gone. All he had left was his faithful and adoring wife, their three children and a couple manuscripts he wrote in between frantically searching for a job. After losing his house, they had moved to a three bedroom apartment nearby, hoping to remain in the same school district. When his son was born and he still didn't have a job, they had to move to a smaller apartment near a bus stop that accepted section 8. Unconsciously he shook his head at the thought of needing government assistance to afford a place for his family to live. He had a college degree, worked hard, saved well, everything one is

supposed to do for the American dream. Now he was living a nightmare.

He did now have a job. A loading dock job but it was over an hour northeast from where they used to live in the suburbs. It paid enough, along with the government assistance, to survive. It didn't pay enough to get out of the enormous debt hole he created by trying to live a lifestyle his family could not afford after he was laid off. But how was he to know it would take this long to get back to his career?! They gave him severance and he was confident he would be hired before it ran out. Then Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers collapsed. AIG was bailed out. Millions were laid off. Hiring came to a halt. Investments tanked. Then investments tanked even more.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed President Obama moving his lips. The headline below him read "Pres Obama to Sign Health Care Law. Many to Lose Their Doc."

He watched for a few minutes until the frustration of not being able to hear what the president was saying and the ever-moving numbers, letters and triangles began to make him nauseous. A lot of people didn't like Washington forcing people to buy health care. He was grateful for the housing assistance and Medicaid that kept them from having to crawl back to either of their aging parents but it

didn't alleviate the debt they accumulated. Only a good-paying, stable job could fix that. Maybe this would be the one, finally.

Forcing his foot to stop bouncing up and down, he tried to relax. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly. If he looked as desperate as he was, the interviewer would know and this opportunity might slip away. He thought of his three beautiful and funny children who were oblivious to the cares of the adult world. He thought of his unbelievably supportive wife. She forgave him for putting them in this situation and just pushed forward, accepting whatever needed to be done so they could take care of their children. Incredibly, she never complained. Her only demands were that she manage the family finances and that he not lie to her again. They were in this together, she had said, and together they were going to make it work. God he loved her.

The blonde suddenly stood up.

"Mr. Richman? Mr. Valente will see you now."

5

"KING COIN LA_NDRY," the sign loomed over the old brick building. Inside was a u-shape of front-load washers, most sloshing with soap and water, on top of dryers tumbling like kaleidoscopes. In the middle, there were two rows, back to back, of top loading washers alternating with dryers. To the right of the double glass doors that were not capable of closing completely, was two large white wobbly rectangular tables and about a dozen aqua plastic chairs. Several women were sitting or standing in front of piles of clothes at the tables. A couple were folding. All were chatting loudly to be heard over the rumbling machines. A few children were scattered about.

One of the glass doors swung open. A brunette with silver creeping along the part in her hair walked through with a little girl tugging on her jeans, a sandy-colored plaid diaper bag slung over her shoulder and a baby carrier set inside a

plastic laundry basket of clothes in her arms. The woman walked over to the tables and smiled at the other women.

“Well hello der liddle one,” the eldest woman said in a loud high pitched voice. The girl left her mom, ran to the lady and gave her a hug. The brunette with the creeping silver hair took the baby carrier out of the basket, placed it on the table and carried the laundry basket to an open washer. She stuffed it full, closed it, fished a plastic bag of snow white powder and blue flecks out of her left pocket and poured some into the washer’s detergent holder. Out of her right pocket, she pulled out several silver coins and put them, one by one, into the slots of the coin tray and shoved it closed. Water began to fill the washer. She went back outside to get another laundry basket full of clothes and put them in another washer along with detergent and quarters. Returning to the table, she uncovered the baby carrier, stared down at her son and couldn’t help but admire how incredibly beautiful he was.

Shedding her coat, she began listening to the conversation over the thundering machines.

“Girl! You know that’s right,” said the elder woman as she bounced the brunette’s daughter on her knee.

"Yeah, I toles him he gots a treat me like a queen!" agreed the youngest woman with long deep purple nails.

"Ya gonna has it?" asked the woman hastily folding clothes, her eyes fixed on three children dashing about the laundromat.

The brunette pulled a unicorn coloring book out of her bag and a plastic bag of crayons and laid them on the table next to her. The baby stayed sleeping.

"Wha cha mean, 'ya gonna has it?' A course I gonna has it! He's my lil angel," the young woman said glowingly.

"Ya know he's gots tree udders with two udders, right?"

"So? He says he loves me!"

"Right..." the elder woman sighed. "How's you getting long, Kate?" she asked, turning to the brunette.

"Me? Oh, fine, Ceilia," Kate grinned.

"An how's bout u liddle Erin, dear?" Ceilia said squeezing Kate's nearly three-year-old.

"Hungry!"

"Ooooo... Aunt Ceilia get u sumpin good! Come wis me chil'!" Ceilia got up, took Erin by the hand and walked over to the vending machine. She bent down to hear what the girl wanted, put four quarters into the machine and pushed some buttons. Erin shoved her little hand through the black flap on the machine and pulled out a small package of Famous Amos chocolate chip cookies.

Erin ran back to the table, sat on one of the plastic aqua chairs and tore open the package.

"They's good huh?" Ceilia asked when she got back to the table.

"Mmm hmm," Erin muttered through her mouth full of cookie.

"I hear you got a job?" asked another young woman, very pregnant with a waist-length warm autumn ponytail.

"I'm interviewing next week," Kate said as she brushed crumbs off Erin.

"Oh! What kinda job?" asked Ceilia.

"Teacher," said Kate. "It's what I did before the kids. Plus, it's about the only job people don't want."

The women laughed.

"It wouldn't start until August though. Jim's working two jobs now but I can't believe that it's still barely enough." The baby yawned. Everyone went still. The baby went on sleeping.

"I'd be happy if my man jus has A job," snickered the woman with the cadre of kids zig-zagging around the washers and dryers.

"WOO!" laughed Ceilia who then covered her mouth so she wouldn't wake the baby.

"My Freddy's gots THREE jobs," bragged the young woman with long dark purple nails.

"Tha's right Trina. One for each a his women," jabbed the woman with all the kids.

"You... you... shut up Keisha!" Trina shouted.

The baby woke up.

"Now look what ya done!" Keisha shot back.

"It's alright ladies. He needs to eat anyway." Kate unbuckled her son and carefully lifted him out of the carrier. Holding him upright in her left arm as he began to fuss, she put her right hand under her sweatshirt, unhooked the front of her maternity bra over her left breast and sat down. He was wiggling now, searching for his meal. With her right hand, she cradled his head and put him inside her sweatshirt, expertly positioning his head over her nipple.

This was Erin's cue. She knew her mom was going to be sitting for awhile and she had her chance to be free to run around the laundromat with Keisha's kids. She dashed off.

"Be careful, Munchkin!" Kate yelled after her.

"We all been 'er, Kate," long autumn said.

Kate sighed. "First world problems, I guess."

"We ladies is lucky, tho," Trina said. "We's got sumpin we can use for money."

"Trina!" Ceilia scolded.

"What are you talking about, Trina?" Kate asked.

"Dees!!!" Trina squealed, shaking her upper torso.

They all laughed.

"Get off a 'er Jerome!!!" yelled Keisha at one of her sons who had somehow climbed on top of one of the washers in the middle of the laundromat.

"Serious! We's all done it. If not for money for all kin's a things. I gots me my man whose gonna treat me like a queen 'cause a dees," Trina said pointing at her very full chest.

"That's just... that's not me," said Kate.

"You's can make good dough too. You classy. Sure you's gots nice clowes. One a 'em escort services'd take you, proolly pay five hundred a pop," remarked Trina.

"Are ya tryin' a pimp her out now?!" accused Keisha as she started to stuff her semi-folded clothes into a large white cloth bag.

"Nah Nah. I jus 'splaining what da girls gots to work wiff."

"I got nice clothes" remarked the very pregnant woman as she folded a cream turtleneck sweater.

"But you sho ain't classy!" said Keisha. "Look, I gots to get dees hoodlums sumpin ta eat 'fore dey tear dis place a part." Keisha drew her laundry bag closed, slung it over her shoulder and chased her three children out the door.

Erin returned to the table, sat on her knees on one of the chairs, pulled a crayon out of the bag, and began scribbling on the first clean page she found.

"Well, thanks, I guess, Trina. I think I can I'll be fine." Kate unhooked the other side of her bra and expertly switched her son to her other breast under her sweatshirt. She then stood up quietly, still holding her suckling son, and walked over to the washers with her clothes. She opened a nearby dryer and, one-handedly, grabbed the wet clothes from the washer and slung them into the dryer. She closed the dryer door, lifted several silver coins from her pocket and placed them in the coin tray and shut it. Moving over to the other washer with her clothes, she repeated the process but this time did not shut the coin tray. For a few moments she just stared. With a heaviness upon her, she walked back to the table.

"Ceilia... I, uh..." she paused, embarrassed.

"I gots you!" Cecilia said as she rose from the table, walked over to the dryer, added another silver coin to the tray and shoved it shut. The dryer roared to life.

Later that night, after her kids were asleep and her husband had left for his second job on the overnight shift, Kate laid in bed, staring at the ceiling. The past year had been like a series of free falls on a roller coaster, the kind that shoot butterflies from your stomach to your throat. She had thought losing their house would be the low point. It wasn't. They ended up not being able to afford the first apartment they rented. After Luke was born, they had to move to where they were now, a two bed, one bath apartment in a rundown neighborhood. Even with Jim's two jobs, they still needed government assistance to cover the rent. Nearly all their money went to doctors for Luke, surgery to put tubes in Erin's ears and gluten-free food for Mary. She cut her long wavy hair and sold it to cover the downpayment on Erin's surgery. She managed their budget now and squeezed out all but the bare necessities. She sold some of her clothes. All of her kids' clothes she bought at Goodwill. Her nails and hair had not been done in a year. Still, they fell further and further behind on their bills and their debts with no end in sight.

She had started out hopeful, much like Jim when he first lost his job. This was temporary and they would get through it. A year later, it felt permanent. The unemployment rate continued to rise. So-called experts on the news she only got to watch at the doctor's office said this was the longest recession since the Great Depression but none of them could predict when the jobs would come back. She was confident she would get that inner-city teaching job but it wouldn't start for nearly six months and the health insurance might not cover doctor's visits for Mary's celiac disease since it was a pre-existing condition. They may not make it six months. Even if they did, her teaching job and Jim's night job would barely be better than what Jim was earning with his two jobs now.

She got out of bed, wrapped her arms around herself and quietly paced the tiny room. She was scared. Soon, they may have to move to an even worse place or give up altogether and move in with one of their parents. Kate was a strong independent woman who did not give up. She would not give up! She would figure something out.

Without realizing it, she had wandered out to the kitchen. Their laptop, which Jim had insisted on keeping so he could keep writing, was sitting on the table. She sat down and stared at it a long time. Slowly she opened it and typed

in the screen password. She directed the arrow over the large lower-case 'e' symbol and clicked.

Nervously she typed in the search box "Escort services."

6

The sun was blinding. He opened the tinted glass door and stepped inside. Light was swallowed. Motley Crew's "Dr. Feelgood" was blaring. The floor felt tacky beneath his scuffed black leather oxfords. Mildew faintly drifted through the air.

His irises grew and he could faintly see a bar about one hundred feet in front of him. To the right was a stage lit in muted colors of red, blue, green and yellow flashing on and off. Squinting to be sure, he saw a woman on the stage wearing clear platform heels, a thong and nothing else. She gyrated around a pole on the stage in front of two men in button down shirts and jackets, slowly sipping beers without taking their eyes off her. At a table near the back, another man, in a t-shirt and a baseball cap pulled down over his eyes, sat at table with a shot glass half-full of honey-colored liquid in front of him.

The bartender motioned to him and he stepped forward awkwardly on the tacky floor. As he approached the bar, he noticed another woman leaning on the bar at the far end. She was dressed in a white tank, short jean shorts and hot pink heels.

With a faint nod, the man knew the bartender was asking him what he wanted. "Oh, uh... is Ray here?" The bartender nodded to the back near the man in the baseball cap then walked toward the woman in hot pink heels, wiping the bar as he went.

Holding his breath, he walked toward the back wondering how he got here. The bulge of cash inside the pocket of his navy blazer suddenly felt heavy, reminding him. He had to be here. They were out of money, down a job with three hungry young children and he just went in hock a grand he didn't have to fix their van. No other options seemed available.

When he reached the man in the ball cap, he saw there was a hallway leading further to the back of the building. He turned back toward the bar. As if he could read his mind, the bartender nodded toward the hallway. The music switched to Kiss "Rock and Roll All Nite." He turned back and walked down the hallway passed the restrooms to the door at the end and knocked.

"Yeah?!" came from behind the door.

Carefully, he turned the knob on the door and opened it.

"Yeah... I... Mr. Valente sent me?" he stammered.

"Valley! Ah, come in! How is ol' Valley?"

He stepped into the room that was swirling with smoke. At a desk opposite the door sat a woman about his age with straight shoulder length dirty blonde hair under a straw fedora with a charcoal butterfly imprinted on one side, cigarette resting between the index and middle fingers of her right hand. In one chair to the left of the desk sat a large man in a black t-shirt and black jeans, tattoos covering both his arms. She motioned him to sit in the other chair to the right of her desk.

"What's ya name?" she asked.

"Uh, Jim. Jim Richman."

"Rich man?!" Ray snorted. "I guess ya look like a 'rich man' but beings as ya working for Valley, I'm guessing not Richey. So, what's Valley want?"

Jim handed her the manilla envelope. She put the cigarette to her lips, reached across the desk and took it. After thumbing through its contents, she set the envelope on the table and nodded at the large man. He got up and left the room.

"I'm guessing Valley's having you do his deliveries now."

"I... I don't know. He told me to give you that and take what you give to me to a few of his friends."

She took a drag on her cigarette and laughed.

"Yeah, you're his errand boy alright! What's he paying ya?"

"Paying me? I don't know if I can..."

"Come on now. We're friends here. I ain't going to bite."

"One hundred a delivery," Jim said flatly.

"One hundred! I had Brock there," she motioned to the recently vacated seat, "doin' it for free! Whatever the bastard wants. He's so damn paranoid 'bout gettin' caught. Looking at you, I expect he thinks you'll blend in better with his prick 'friends'."

Jim looked confused.

“Ah, don’t worry honey,” Ray took another slow drag on her cigarette. The room seemed to be shrinking.

Brock returned with three package of varying size in brown wrapping and handed them to Ray. She put her cigarette in her mouth and pulled a Sharpie from a drawer in her desk. On each one she wrote a number.

“Now, seeing as Valley is so damned secretive ‘bout his business, I’m writing a one, two and three on the packages like he wants,” she motioned to Jim to come closer and see. “Ya know where each one goes?”

Jim nodded. In his pocket he had addresses numbered one, two and three.

She handed them to him. “Alright, here ya go. Now don’t go and get busted. And if you do, you don’t know me. Hate to see that innocent handsome face of yours get rearranged Richey,” she warned, glancing at Brock who was staring at Jim, emotionless.

7

They sat at the far end of the bar, one with a pilsner glass filled with a bubbling light gold liquid, the other with a rocks glass filled with ice and a chestnut-colored liquid. They were wearing long pants and polo shirts. Several other men, dressed similarly, and a few women wearing skirts and polos were seated at the bar or the few tables nearby. Large TVs were broadcasting a golf tournament. It was loud in the bar, on the edge of raucous.

A slender man in a black polo, khaki pants and tired tennis shoes walked in, making his way to the men at the far end of the bar.

“Jimmy, my man!” yelled the man with the rocks glass.

“Hey,” Jim replied.

He slapped Jim on the back as he settled into the open bar stool next to the man.

"Ricky!" he bellowed. "Get my man here a drink! What da ya have?"

"Just a Coke."

"Coke?! Ah, hell! Ricky, throw some Captain in there."

He turned back to pilsner glass. "Hey Mark, this is my man Jimmy." Mark shook Jim's hand. "Gimme a minute with my man here, will ya Mark."

"Sure, Bob. Hey Jimmy, don't let him talk you into paying for any rounds. The son of bitch took all my money on the course this morning, so he's loaded."

"In more ways than one!" roared Bob picking up his glass, gulping the chestnut liquid and slamming it back on the bar. Ricky took the glass, filled it with ice and whiskey and set it back in front of Bob.

"I have your..." Jim started but Bob cut him off when he saw Jim pulling a manilla envelope out of his back pocket.

"Here," Bob breathed. He stuck out his left hand under the bar's counter. Jim placed the envelope in his hand. Bob quickly slid it into his left pants pocket. He then dug into his right pocket, pulled out some folded emerald paper and held it out under the bar counter. Jim took it quickly and shoved it into his right pant pocket.

"Come on now, have a drink!" Bob exclaimed. He picked up his glass and took a swallow. Jim took a sip of his.

"Did you fucking deliver shit in your minivan?" Bob asked incredulously.

"Well, yeah," Jim said. "It's all I got."

Bob burst out laughing.

"You're gonna have to do better than that," he said finally. "Look, I got a guy at Enterprise downtown who likes white powder." He reached into his right pocket again and pulled out a small plastic bag with snow white powder and handed it to Jim under the bar counter. "Look, give him some of this whenever you need a car."

Jim hesitated.

"Just make sure it isn't a fucking minivan!" Bob bellowed.

Jim started to get off the bar stool but Bob grabbed his arm.

"Leaving already?"

"Yeah, I... I got to get the groceries home before my wife starts wondering where I am."

Looking deep into his eyes with a sly grin, Bob said, "You haven't finished paying off the repairs on that piece of shit, have you?"

"Well, actually, no..." Jim stammered, fear creeping into his mind.

"Look, come by my office Tuesday, round one o'clock. I have some other friends you can visit. I'll give you their addresses. Same deal as last time."

"I... I don't know. It's not my thing..."

"What? Money? Cash money? It's not your 'thing'?" Bob asked, flabbergasted.

"No... I mean yes, but not..."

“Come on my man! You need the money. You’re less than broke. You help me. I’ll help you,” Bob grinned, extending his hand holding the powder.

Jim paused. He did need the money. Gluten-free food for Mary was expensive. Erin just broke her arm and since his wife had to take her to the ER an enormous bill was looming. Luke was on soy formula now because he had terrible diarrhea with the regular formula. The three hundred Bob just gave him still left him significantly short on the van repair payments. A couple weeks ago he was laid off from his loading dock job so he only had the customer service job and that was not going to be enough. In fact, that was why he finally called Bob back in the first place. It would be another three months before Kate could start her teaching job. He was desperate.

“I need you,” Bob laid it on thick. “You look like you could be one of my friends. You dress the part, act the part. You fit in. It’s perfect cover. Everybody wins!” Bob took a pull on his whiskey, doing his best to appear sincere.

Jim was frozen. His stomach dropped. He knew he was being asked to be a ‘mule,’ he thought it was called. He was paid well. It wasn’t too bad except going to the strip club. And Brock. Otherwise, it had been easy. He had to keep it from Kate, though. She would not approve no

matter how bad off they were. But they were in a nightmare spiral he created. He had to get them out.

"Tuesday?" Bob pleaded. He had spent four months reeling in this guy. He knew Jimmy would make his customers more comfortable buying from him and would be the one to take the fall if something went wrong.

"Yeah," said Jim reluctantly, taking the small bag from Bob and slipping it in to his right pocket. Bob then shook his hand vigorously.

"My man!" he smiled. "Come on, sit, have a drink."

"Thanks but I need to get going."

"Sure, sure. More for me!" Bob smirked.

As Jim was leaving, he heard Ricky the bartender come over.

"Your afternoon foursome is ready Mr. Valente."

8

The voices were everywhere. A couple were laughing. One was screaming. The bell rang. The voices quieted a few decibels.

“Children!” the teacher yelled.

A few looked at her. A couple even stopped talking.

“Take your seats everybody,” the teacher spoke loudly but calmly.

Chairs and desks creaked. Shoes squeaked on the vinyl floor. After a few minutes, the voices lowered to whispers.

“Welcome! So good to see all you learners out there. Today we’re going to...”

The bell rang again, interrupting her.

All the chairs scrapped against the vinyl in near unison as the children stood. "I pledge allegiance to the flag..." they began.

After her husband left for work later that evening, the teacher got a call.

"Hi mom," she said.

"So, how was your first day of school?" her mom asked.

"It was like riding a bike with only one training wheel but I think I'll get there."

Her mom giggled. "I know you will, honey. How's Jim?"

"He's fine. He just left for work. I almost never get to see him since he takes care of the kids during the day and when I get home, he goes to work and I take the kids. Staying home with them was a demanding full time job and now I feel like I have two demanding full time jobs," Kate sighed.

"Well, that's how it is sometimes. I remember."

"Oh, I know. I just miss him. Since he works nights, he doesn't sleep next to me anymore. That's been hard."

"I know dear. It's what you have to do for your family right now. It won't be forever."

"Feels like forever," Kate mused. "He was laid off nearly three years ago and still doesn't have his career back. This wasn't how we planned it."

"Life is what happens..." started her mom.

"While you're busy making plans, I know mom."

"How are my angels?"

"Good, good. Luke is teething of course. Erin hates to sleep. Mary was exhausted after her first day of first grade today. I didn't even have to tell her to go to bed," said Kate.

"Give 'em kisses from Grammy!"

"I will mom," and she hung up the phone.

"MOMMMMMMMYYYYYY!!!! DRIIIIIIIINNNNKKKKK!!!!!!" Erin yelled from the girls' bedroom.

“SSSHHHHHH! Don’t wake your sister!” she loudly whispered back.

As she filled the cup of water, she thought of Jim. He was her everything. Long ago she forgot about his failure to tell her sooner about their dire financial situation. She never could stay mad at him. All she cared about was being with him.

Maybe several months ago they finally hit bottom when she could barely scrounge up enough quarters to do the laundry. Her desperation then nearly eclipsed her better judgement. If Luke hadn’t cried before she hit the return key on the laptop... She shuddered. She would have lost herself. She would have lost Jim. Nothing was worth that.

Both of them were now working full time. She felt confident, for the first time since all this started, they were going to make it. Jim had worked so hard, often working two jobs, to make ends almost meet. Apparently he had also negotiated some settlements with bill collectors because they stopped calling a few months ago. It made her heart swell with joy.

Walking to the girls' room where Erin was anxiously awaiting her umpteenth drink before she would settle down to sleep, Kate suddenly stopped. She forgot to pay

the ER bill! They were on a payment plan of just \$10 per month, which would take forever to pay off, but the payment had to be on time or they would demand full payment. She shuffled frantically through some papers on the tiny kitchen counter but didn't find it. Maybe Jim had paid it. He had been doing more of that lately with her focus being drawn more toward her new job. When they lost the house, she took over their finances. They'd probably share those responsibilities now.

She gave Erin her drink and tucked her back in bed with her baby doll. When she returned to the kitchen, she realized a few of the papers she had been sifting through had fallen to the floor. She bent down to pick them up. Suddenly she stood stiffly, puzzled by a number on a thin yellow quarter-sheet receipt. It was for their rent which was not due for another week. Next to the word 'Balance' was the number zero. Under that was the word 'Cash'.

9

Smoke curled up from a fat cigar. It's earthy sent found the air it began to inhabit friendly. Several other puffs were there, dancing about. There was cedar, nutmeg, cocoa and clover. Also, somewhere was the faintest scent of jasmine. The smoke mixed with the others as they rose to the ceiling and hung like Spanish moss.

A woman, clad in a bright crimson lace cocktail dress, probably the jasmine, sat at a tan cloth and black iron low back bar chair at the middle of the bar, her right leg crossed over her left, her matching pump dangling from her toes. Clover sat next to her, a half-drunk bottle of whiskey and two empty old fashion bar glasses between them.

Along the ebony-stained wood wall decorated with cigar logo signs sat three men in chairs that matched the bar

stools, two in polo shirts and dress pants, Nutmeg and Cedar, the other in a bronze blazer and dark jeans, Cocoa.

Across from them, alone, in a black leather chair was Earthy, reclining casually. He had on a black suit, bleached white dress shirt, top two buttons undone, loosened gold silk tie with black pin dots and coal black wingtips. On the small table at his left was an old fashion bar glass filled with ice. Next to it was a bottle of Johnny Walker, nearly empty, an onyx-colored ceramic ash tray and a few copies of "Cigar Snob" magazine.

Earthy sucked his cigar, allowed the smoke to permeate his lungs, then gradually exhaled the pleasing scent. He seemed content and blissfully unaware of the others and their voices.

The tobacconist's door screeched open, letting in the busy Friday evening sounds. It closed with a soft thud. Earthy didn't seem to notice as another swirl of smoke departed his lips. Shoes clacked on the mocha swirled tile until they reached Earthy.

"Bob?" asked the lanky man with receding dark brown hair and tired chocolate-colored eyes.

"Yap," Bob said, not bothering to look at the lanky man.

The man sat down in the black leather chair on the other side of the small table. From his navy blazer he pulled out a fat manilla envelope and set it atop the “Cigar Snob” magazines.

Bob sat up. He rested his cigar on the ashtray and poured out the rest of the Johnny Walker into his glass.

“You want some?” he asked. Before the man could answer, Bob shouted across the room “Can we get another glass with ice? My man here is thirsty.”

“No, I can’t...”

“Why are you such a damned prude?” Bob asked as he leaned over to the right side of his chair and brought up a full bottle of Johnny Walker. A server appeared with a glass full of ice and set it next to the lanky man. Bob screwed the top off the bottle and made a generous pour over the fresh ice.

“Drink!”

The man took a sip.

Reaching into his suit jacket pocket, Bob pulled out a roll of cash with a rubber band around it. He set it on the opposite side of the table, picked up the fat envelope and stuffed in his left inside pocket.

"Want a cigar?" Bob asked, picking up his own again.

"No. No thank you."

"Jimmy my man," Bob said as he leaned back in his chair, "you are one hard man to corrupt."

Jim looked at him curiously.

"I been sending you to meet all my friends and not once have you stiffed me. That's a goddamn miracle! I guess that's why I like you, my man. You got a conscious or something which is pretty fucking hilarious, considering," Bob began. "In this business, everybody fucks everybody. That's just part of the game. You expect it so you don't get too pissed when it happens but you never let it go. No, no. You just take care of business. You fuck 'em right back! But you," Bob said, turning toward him in his chair, "you, I don't get. You don't drink. You don't smoke. You don't fuck around, so far as I know. You don't steal my powder. You don't steal my money. You deliver and get paid and go home to your beautiful wife and four..."

"Three," Jim corrected.

"...three kids and your shitty apartment and get up the next day, go to a crap job that pays shit and repeat. I'm about to doze off just talking about it!"

"I'm sorry?"

"Sorry? Hell! It's your life you're wasting. What do I care?"
Bob emptied his glass then turned back in his chair.

"Well, at least I don't have a crap job anymore," Jim said with slight smile.

"What?" Bob turned back toward him.

"Yeah, I finally got a real job in a real office working with real clients. It took three years, but I can start digging us out of the hole I made."

"YOU made?!" Bob picked up the bottle and poured himself another drink. "Fuck. Those clowns at those big firms made that hole. You're just one of the unlucky bastards who fell in."

"Aren't you at one of those big firms?"

"Fuck yeah!" Bob said slamming the bottle on the table. He took another drag on the cigar, leaned back in his chair and casually exhaled.

"Anyway," Jim straightened himself, "I don't need to meet any of your friends anymore."

Bob sucked hard on the cigar.

"No."

"No?"

"No. You do still need to meet my friends," Bob stated flatly.

"I'm back on my feet. I'm making good money. I don't need to do this anymore," Jim said haltingly.

"You don't need?!" Bob turned to face Jim, a fire rising in his eyes. "You're my bitch! You do what I say, when I say," he said, gritting his teeth.

Blood rushed to Jim's face. His body stiffened. The Spanish moss air closed in on him.

"I'm sorry..." he stammered as he started to get out of the chair.

"You're going to be fucking sorry if you don't sit the fuck back down!"

Jim didn't sit back down. He turned and clacked back to the door, opened it and went out into the Friday evening bustle. Turning left, he began walking toward the bus stop at the end of the next block. He only got a few steps before he was yanked by the collar from behind, and thrown into the black painted brick wall on the side of the cigar bar. Bob grabbed his arms, hard, and pinned him against the bricks.

"You don't walk away from me!" he snarled. "You think you can fuck with me?!" Bob shoved Jim back against the bricks, the back of Jim's head crashing against them. Something wet slowly ran down the back of his neck.

"You don't just leave me! Uh-uh, that's not how it works my man. No," Bob slapped Jim across the face, "you are going to keep my friends happy." He slapped Jim again, cutting his lip. "I got packages that need delivered and you are going to deliver or that," he released Jim's right arm, grabbed Jim's jaw and tried to force his head through the bricks, "beautiful wife of yours, I'm going to ride 'til she's

raw," with his right hand free, Jim grabbed Bob's left and tried to release his grip, "those kids, I'm going to send to that fucking Jesus of yours," Bob rubbed Jim's head back and forth across the bricks, shredding his scalp. "Am I clear mother-fucker!" Bob screamed.

Suddenly Bob released Jim's other arm, reached behind his back and pulled out a 9mm. Jim had both his hands on the hand Bob was pinning him but couldn't release his grip. Bob put the 9mm to Jim's forehead yelling, "Am I clear!!!"

A bright stream of light struck Jim in the face. From behind it, he heard a stern voice command, "Drop it!"

Bob, keeping his left hand on Jim's jaw, twisted toward the light, the gun sliding off Jim's forehead in the same direction his torso moved.

"Drop it! Now!"

Bob released Jim.

POP! POP! POP!

A woman screamed.

Jim crumpled to the ground. Footsteps raced down the alley. The stream of light bounced away.

Darkness.

10

Someone's fist was trying to come through her door. She glanced at the clock, 11:23pm.

"Police!" an angry voice yelled on the other side of the door. "Open up!"

Kate hurried to the door and unlocked it.

"Police ma'am! We have a search warrant," the angry voice in a dark suit commanded.

He handed her a piece of paper and pushed passed her, almost knocking her to the floor. Several more in uniform followed, immediately rifling through everything in the tiny apartment. Luke started crying. Mary and Erin shrieked.

She pushed through the army of flesh crowding her apartment and grabbed her son out of the crib in her room

and then went to her daughter's room to lead the girls out into the kitchen. All were crying hysterically.

She saw the angry suit and shouted, "Sir! What... what's going on?"

He came over to her. "Ma'am, do have any guns in the house?"

"No."

"Drugs?"

"No!"

"I found this in one of the books in the nightstand, detective," one of the officers said to the angry suit.

"Can you explain this?" he asked her, opening the book that had a rectangle cut out of the pages with a fist full of Benjamins stuffed in the rectangle.

"What? No. I don't know... I... what's going on?" she demanded.

"Zipped up in the couch cushion," an officer said from the family room, holding up a small plastic bag of snow white powder.

"Ma'am, you're going to need to come with us."

After several hours of questioning Kate, the angry suit determined she knew nothing. He then told her about the drugs her husband had been delivering, the cash he was being paid and the shooting downtown.

"Where is he?" she asked through fierce tears.

"Truman Medical Center. ICU."

She gathered up her exhausted children and hailed a cab outside the station.

"I can't take children in my cab!" the cabbie protest.

Kate shuttled the girls into the cab and got in holding a slumbering Luke on her shoulder. "Drive!" she spat.

They entered his room quietly. It was dim but she could see him lying on the hospital bed, eyes closed.

"Daddy?" asked Mary who started to cry.

Jim opened his eyes. He was groggy from the anesthesia but recognized his family immediately.

"Jim..." Kate pursed her lips.

"Daddy, why you got bracelet on?" a curious Erin asked matter-of-factly.

"It's okay, it's okay," Jim whispered, his eyes filled up.

"Daddy hurt his leg. I'll be okay in a few days." His chin quivered.

Kate took a step forward and he now saw her soft oval face framed by her straight, but a bit frizzy, short toffee hair with a touch of silver. Her hazel eyes had turned jade, telling him all he needed to know.

"Give your father a hug," she managed. The girls did. Luke remained asleep in Kate's stiff arms.

"Baby..." he pleaded. "I know..." he paused to gather himself. "Um, just read my story. Please? I printed it a couple months ago. It's in my nightstand. Please?"

They left.

11

The applause was generous. He appreciated it. It never got old.

He stepped away from the podium and, with a slight limp, walked over to a table stacked with books. He got out a black Sharpie. One by one, they came to the table, chatted briefly with him and left with a signed copy of his book.

It was his fourth novel. He had always wanted to be a writer, always thought he had conjured great stories in his head but never thought he would have the chance to write them, much less publish them. Fate created the opportunity. So did his stupidity.

His life had been perfect seven years ago. Wife. Kids. Job. House. Car. Vacations every summer. Then it crumbled. He lost it all. Circumstances beyond his control started it but he made things worse, much worse. Butterflies would rise to his throat at each terrorizing fall. Each time he thought

he might climb back up, he would fall further. After three years, there was no where lower to fall. Hell was licking his feet.

Ironically, those impending flames of hell became the spark that brought salvation. His worst betrayal became a Showtime series. The trust he squandered became a best-selling romantic tragedy. The dreams he never thought could be realized, were. The mistakes he made were the twists of fate guiding him toward contentment. Well, nearly.

One thing still alluded him: love. That's what he hoped he might retrieve by publishing this novel. It was the first one he wrote, the first one he shared, if she read it. He had passionately bared of his soul, describing an unconditional love for a fierce and gorgeous woman far beyond his reach. Yet, somehow, he did reach her. She became his, he became hers. He described her every detail, his every feeling from the moment he saw her. It was true, every word of it except the ending which had been true but now was a humble plea. Only they knew. To everyone else, it was a fantastical romance.

He hadn't noticed her before. She was short, wavy caramel armpit length hair with honey blonde highlights, wearing a pearl-colored long sleeved blouse, black skirt and black

knee-high boots. When she arrived at the front of the line, he smiled sheepishly. She was captivating.

"Hi," she said softly. "I've recently become a fan of your work. This book, in particular, is very special."

He looked up and was mesmerized by her stunning eyes beneath thick, dark lashes. "That's... thank you. I'm glad you liked it."

"I loved it," she whispered with a smile that lit up her face brighter than the sun.

She held his gaze for several moments. As if breaking a spell, he forced his eyes down to the open book in front of him. He thought for a moment, wrote a few words, signed the inside cover, closed it and handed it to her.

"Would you... could you, meet me at the coffee shop around the corner when this is over?" she asked eagerly.

His heart leapt. He tried to contain the blush forming on his face.

"Uh, sure. Love to. I'll be there."

"Great!" she smiled again, invigorating him, then turned and walked toward the door of the bookstore. His gaze followed her until the next book was opened in front of him.

Before she got to the door she stopped. Carefully opening the book, she read what he wrote to her: "You give me butterflies."

She closed the book slowly, held it tight to her chest and smiled to herself.

The End