

# The Devil's Au Pair



**Jay Rose**

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# **PART ONE**

## **The Crime**

# ONE

If I had to label myself, I guess I'd say I'm the *anti-Gump*. After all, unlike the fictitious Forrest, I often find my very real self in the *wrong place at the wrong time...* and not knowing until it's too late. Sadly, the day my life changed forever would be no exception. Like most weekdays, September 23<sup>rd</sup> began innocently enough: at exactly 6:19, the garage door chinked open, I startled awake, and my wife Susan streaked away in her black BMW. Because the HOV restrictions don't start until 6:30, leaving at 6:19 allows Susan to use I-66, beat the D.C. rush hour, find parking, and reach her desk at the American Forest and Paper Association at 7 a.m. sharp. And thus Susan wins the first of many daily battles. In my book, if Susan wasn't such a hyper, Type-A Metro snob, she could have left home at a reasonable hour, like I do. And if she had, I might not have been at the wrong place at the wrong time. [I may be the anti-Gump, but I'm not stupid...].

Forty-five minutes after Susan's departure, I was showered, shaved, and dressed in crisp

Navy whites, ready for my relaxing thirty-five minute Metro ride to the Pentagon. Not only am I not a Metro snob, but Metro's one of the few things I actually like about our nation's capital. I can leave home at the height of rush hour, ease back and read about my beloved Washington Nat's latest blunder, and still make my eight o'clock staff meeting. Although Jack, my 8 year-old, and Jenn, who's five, are usually still asleep when I leave, I always make sure Krista, their Au Pair, is awake before I trek down the block to the West Falls Church Metro station. In this regard, the day was as innocent as any other. Briefcase in one hand, Navy cover in the other, I lumbered down the basement steps oblivious to the fact that I was an unwitting pig being led to slaughter.

Two months before this fateful day, when Susan had decided that we should hire an Au Pair for child care, I'd secretly taken a day off work to frame, dry-wall, and paint a ten-by-ten foot corner of the basement rec room: wallah... an instant bedroom! Unfortunately, I should have remembered that Susan doesn't like surprises... especially mine.

"There's no window," she shrieked after seeing the Bob Villa-creation I excitedly unveiled that evening. "It's like a cave in here."

"What are you talking about?" I shot back, defending my handyman efforts. "It's perfect. This way she'll have her own space and we'll have ours. There's already a bathroom down there, and after the kids go to bed she can use the t.v. and Playstation. She'll love it."

"Plus, it's against the law to have a bedroom without a window," Susan added, as if my words weren't audible to her highly-trained judicial ears.

"What?"

"There has to be a window in case of a fire," the lawyer explained.

"Who told you that?"

"Me. I checked the Virginia Code. Last year I thought about putting a bedroom down here."

*Of course. Silly me. I should have known that Susan and the rest of the friggin' lawyers had embedded the requirements for a bedroom, along with seemingly every other societal norm, in some law, regulation, or code... too many lawyers with too much time and too few battles.*

Susan continued, "You know, you really should have consulted with me before you did this. This is my house, too. I don't know why you always think you can... *blah, blah, blah...*"

I tuned the Counselor out as her cadence and volume picked up. Of course I should have known she'd disagree. That is, after all, what lawyers do. Dispute resolution, they call it. Mental masturbation, I call it. If I like something, Susan hates it. If I say 'yes,' she says 'no'. If I plead for sex 'today,' she says 'tomorrow' [And tomorrow never comes because, according to Susan (and *Black's Legal Dictionary*, I'm told), 'tomorrow is the day after today'... which obviously means there can be no sex *today*. Bizarre, huh?]. Bottom line: nothing I, the non-lawyer, do, want, think, or say is ever good enough for Susan.

Although I'm not generally one to generalize-- except when it comes to my marriage, Susan, and lawyers-- many of my marital problems stem from the fact that Susan's a lawyer and I'm not. [The fact that I'm a pig farmer's son doesn't help my cause, either.]. In Susan's superior mind, being both a lawyer and the *offspring of two lawyers*, makes her more qualified to make any and all decisions that affect us, such as whether to hire an Au Pair, whether a windowless room qualifies as a bedroom, and whether we have sex today or the elusive tomorrow. Having a law degree also gives her the Constitutional right to look at me with deep-felt contempt, as if to say,

*'how could you, a mere pig farmer's son, possibly understand?'* [While I've never found that right specifically enumerated in the Constitution, I'm sure Susan would tell me it's somewhere in the legislative history or within the framer's intent. Bitter? Me? Okay, maybe just a wee bit...].

Like any good lawyer [I know... an oxymoron], Susan likes conflicts and arguments. And while I guess those are a lawyer's best traits [I know... another oxymoron], they're terrible traits for a spouse. Things have gotten so bad I've even considered getting a law degree just to shut her up and stop the contemptuous looks. Unfortunately, I'm sure the Great Counselor would counter with something like this: *'you don't have as much experience as I do... I scored higher on the Bar exam than you... your dad's a pig farmer... blah, blah, blah.'* Bottom line: we'd both be happier if she had married a Georgetown classmate and I had married a grocery check-out girl. [Too bad for me all those lawyers never passed a law mandating that lawyers marry lawyers. Truly, a tragic oversight...].

Susan's voice finally trailed off.

"So we'll call it a den, then," I said in response, searching for an angle, a distinction in the particular facts. [Even a non-lawyer like me knows that's what lawyers really do.]. "I'm sure she won't care."

"It's still against the law," Susan replied in exacting legal tone.

"So's oral sex," I shot back without really thinking. "I guess that's why you don't do that, right?"

Susan flashed a look of bone-deep disgust. "Eww, no. I don't do that because I think it's disgusting."

*Being married to you is disgusting, Counselor.* I bit my tongue. And on that unhappy note, Susan shot me a final contemptuous look and stormed upstairs. Needless to say there was no sex that night or the elusive next...

No less than a week later, after picking Krista up at the Au Pair agency, Susan had done a complete one-eighty on the downstairs "bedroom." Of course, she never admitted that I was right and she was wrong [impossible]; rather, she couched her changed legal reasoning as follows: "it's probably better than the bedroom she has back in Sweden." What Susan really meant was this: a bedroom downstairs would keep the hired help out of the main living areas of *her* Colonial.

And thus, on August 25<sup>th</sup>, Krista moved into our illegal, windowless bedroom in the basement rec room, and in just a month had become as much a part of the family as me [whatever that was worth.]. Of course, the kids loved her. She was the proverbial big sister who played board games and cards with them, taught them about Sweden, and took them to McDonalds and the mall. As for me, I liked Krista because Jack and Jenn loved her. Maybe it comes from my simple upbringing on that Indiana pig farm, but my motto's simple: make my kids happy and you'll make me happy. Of course, that's not to say I wasn't attracted to the Swede's model-like looks and teasing personality. As hard as I tried not to, my extended stares must have given that away. But there's no harm in looking, right?

Predictably, Susan hated Krista. In her eyes, the Swede was irresponsible, lazy, and perhaps most importantly, a non-lawyer. [Because that's pretty much how Susan felt about me, I stand by my previous statement that Krista, in a mere month, had become as much a part of the family as me.].

As I reached the bottom of the stairs on this fateful morning, I was happy to hear the shower



running. For once, I wouldn't need to rouse the sleeping beauty out of bed. "Krista?" I called out as I knocked on the bathroom door.

"Ja," she answered from under the water.

"Krista, I'm about to leave for work."

I heard the water stop abruptly and the shower curtain slid open, and through the closed door, I pictured the 18 year-old stepping onto the bath mat. "I'm coming," she said, her voice now clearer and closer. "One minute, Jeff. Wait. Please."

I heard a towel moving across skin and sooner than expected, the bathroom door opened and Krista stood before me, hurriedly wrapped in a white towel bearing the image of Winnie the Pooh. Her blonde hair dripped onto the bath mat, her blue eyes apologized, and Winnie never looked so curvy. "I'm sorry, Jeff. I'm late again, right?" she said, flashing a sultry, sulking look.

With the residual steam dancing in the air behind her, I stared at her bright blue eyes and those plump, passionate lips. The Swede was too beautiful if that was possible, her lips and mouth just too damn seductive. "No, you're fine," I responded, refocusing on her question. "I'm a few minutes early."

Framed by the doorway like some heavenly 3-D poster, she smiled at me, her eyes twinkling like blue stars. "Off to sell ice cream?" she asked playfully.

I chuckled. While Navy whites make anyone look like the Good Humor Man, I'd never heard the joke from an 18 year-old Swede draped in a Winnie the Pooh towel. No matter, I like wearing whites. With a summer tan, my lean build, and the shiny gold Submarine insignia atop three rows of colorful medals, I think the whites make me look kind of sexy. Not surprisingly,

Susan never thinks so. But then again, she hates anything to do with the Navy. The Navy wasn't making her rich and famous, wasn't adding another wing to her Colonial, nor buying her a beach house or new formal living room couches. *That* was supposed to be the purpose of my work. As for thanks for service to my country: forget about it. As for a little bedroom action on Veteran's Day: forget about it. "Technically, you're not a veteran yet," she had said with legal exactness the previous November when I had nuzzled up to her in bed and asked for a little V-Day treat. Then she shoed me away like a pesky fly without a law degree.

I answered the Swede. "Hey, what can I say... it's what they make us wear in the summer."

"I like you in your uniform. You look like Tom Cruise in that Navy movie..."

Watching her trying to remember the title caused me to smile. "Top Gun," I supplied finally.

She smiled back and nodded. "Un-huh. That one."

Although I'm a far cry from Tom Cruise [except at 6'2", I tower above the little actor], I'm not a bad looking guy-- a rectangular face with a rugged, taut jaw line; a slightly off-center nose from one too many rugby games at the Naval Academy; large green eyes flecked with yellow, giving them a bluish hue; thick, close-cropped, standard Navy-issue light brown hair; a dimple on my right cheek; and a manly half-inch horizontal scar just below my left eye from a high-flying baseball cleat back in high school. All in all I like to think of myself as an outdoors-looking type, the kind of guy you'd see in a hunting or fishing catalogue. One thing's certain: I don't look like a nerdy dweeb-lawyer.

I sensed something different about Krista's stare, as if she was flirting, but said nothing. Like most men, I often see things-- especially flirting girls-- that aren't really there. "Okay," I said

finally, "well, I just wanted to make sure you were up and about. I guess I better get going."

"I thought you said you were early."

Now, I could have sworn she sounded disappointed. [But then again, I often hear things that aren't really there, either. Truth be told, I'm a bit quirkier than the average bear. Indeed, anyone who volunteers to spend three months in a 30-foot diameter steel tube, hundreds of feet under water, with a 150 other guys and 24 multiple-warhead nuclear missiles, has to be a little off-center.]. "I've got a few minutes," I answered curiously.

"Can you wait then?"

Certain she wanted me to wait until she was dressed, I nodded innocently. [Give a nuclear submariner a 50-50 guess at something and he'll get it wrong 90 percent of the time. In the nuclear Navy, we call that the "50-50-90 rule." As one might imagine, this can be very problematic. Consequently, we do everything by-the-book-- by-the numbers-- in mind-numbing, procedural detail. In fact, we even have procedures for situations where *there are no procedures*. If it sounds anal, consider the alternative: a fleet of multi-billion dollar submarines and dead American sailors scattered on the ocean floor... all because sailors turned valves in the wrong direction... or shimmed control rods 'out' instead of 'in'... all because of the dreaded 50-50-90 rule.].

True to form I was wrong this time, and before I could blink, Krista raised her eyebrows, flashed a naughty secretive smile, and pulled the tucked end of the towel free. Gravity took over, Winnie wafted to the floor, and I froze like a deer mesmerized by a set of headlights [or, perhaps more appropriately, a pig mesmerized by a set of Swedish ta-tas!]. Whoa! Obviously, the Swede had wanted me to wait until she was *undressed*. My heart skipped a beat as my eyes took in the

naked Au Pair: Ba-bye Winnie-the-Pooh; Helloooo Krista's Boobs!

For once, it seemed, *I was in the right place at the right time...* a new man in a new world. And with the exception of Krista's naughty smile, there was nothing naughty about this world... or this 18 year-old inhabitant. Of course I'd seen similar bodies in magazines and occasionally on stage at gentleman's clubs, but never with such an inviting look, and never beckoning me in my own house. Susan had small breasts, twenty-five extra pounds packed onto pear-shaped hips, and thin, pursed lips that said one unmistakable thing: back off, buddy. She couldn't have been more different from this chiseled teenager with the glistening, golden body and eager-to-please grin.

As I continued to take in the foreigner, I concluded that Krista was the exception to the rule that people actually look better with clothing than without. Quickly I envisioned her in a Playboy spread. I even had the perfect title: *Au Pairs in America... For Childish Men Who Expect the Very Best in Child Care!* The spread would be organized in country-by-country layouts, with Krista and the other Au Pairs sprawled out in rec rooms or jungle gyms, surrounded by a variety of children's and adult's toys.

Because energy to talk took away from energy to ogle, I was understandably speechless.

"You think I'm pretty, don't you, Jeff?" she asked hopefully.

*Duh. No. I hate blonde, blue-eyed, 18 year-old goddesses with killer bodies... hated 'em when I was 18 back on my daddy's pig farm, hate 'em today in my bitchy wife's \$600,000 Colonial.* Sensing a defining moment in my life, I swallowed hard, my eyes still devouring her. What was I supposed to say? The poor girl was 8,000 miles from home. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt her feelings or destroy her obvious low self-esteem. I swallowed hard and nodded.

As the bronze beauty stepped toward me, I felt my heart pounding against three rows of

colorful medals, as if speaking to me: Boom Boom Boom... *Be Brave Jeff*... Boom Boom Boom. Although four inches shorter than me, her long legs put her pink, half-dollar-sized nipples against those medals. “I really like you, Jeff,” she said, close enough that I could taste the eagerness of her youthful, fresh breath. “You’re nice to me. I want to be nice to you.”

*Obviously.* And while clearly excited, I was also clearly scared. I felt myself shaking all over. *What would Forrest do?* I thought helplessly...

*...Run, Jeff, Run* came to mind, yet I continued to make like an aroused shaky statue.

A split second later, I felt her arms around my neck, drawing me into her mouth and capturing me like easy prey. This wasn’t really happening, I told myself.

Of course, I didn’t intend to kiss back those wet, wondrous lips. After all, I was married and had a staff meeting awaiting. But the fact is, I was very *unhappily* married and I could cancel or postpone *my own* staff meeting. My lips listened to the stiffening, one-eyed blind monster in my pants and I kissed back. In that split-second, *that* was the only staff that really mattered.

When her flickering tongue explored my mouth, my tongue imitated obediently. Indeed, I’ve since learned it’s scientifically impossible-- perhaps even a diplomatic affront in this new Gumpian-world-- for an American Naval Officer to kiss a drop-dead gorgeous Swede without returning tongue. At the same time, I wanted to throw my hands up and say ‘stop.’ Unfortunately, they were too busy fondling her breasts, verifying their firmness, making sure those babies didn’t mess up my medals. As we twisted tongues, she quickly unbuttoned my shirt, wrestled it off, and tossed it down on top of Winnie. [Glancing down, I was glad to see it covering Winnie’s eyes, for this was not the kind of thing a honey bear should witness!].

Our kiss was wet and sloppy, deep and long-- something Susan and I never did-- and when she pulled back and our mouths finally parted, the pause gave me time to think. Susan, morality, and the eternal fires of hell scorched my mind, searing my senses, leaving me dazed. I was shaking even worse.

“This isn’t right,” I managed to say, but without conviction. I backed two steps away and tried to collect myself as I continued to stare at her beauty. In the brief moment that followed, a sense of deep morality and purity engulfed me. If I could resist this temptress, I reasoned, my ticket to eternal life in heaven was assured. Unfortunately, the feeling *was* brief, and quickly overridden by the testosterone pulsing through my body into my brain.

Mesmerized and unable to look away, I continued studying the naked Swede as counter-thoughts bubbled inside my weakening mind: perhaps there was no heaven and no eternal life... perhaps life on earth was it? Could I be passing up this sweet, warm Swede for dark, cold death? [While normally I like to hedge bets, this was all or nothing... a classical 50-50 decision that every submariner dreads. Not surprisingly, I hesitated, knowing no matter what choice I made, I was damned by the 50-50-90 rule.].

The philosophical dilemma provided a window of opportunity for another opinion and I heard my one-eyed monster chime in with his squeaky voice: *What the hell’s wrong with you Commander? This sweet little piece of ass wants me... ME! Not you. When the hell am I ever going to get an opportunity like this again? Look at her... those perfect tits and that firm ass. Ummmm. That body was built for sex... built for pleasure... built for me. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m wasting away down here with that bitchy legal beagle you picked out. You should have listened to me eight years ago and ran away from the bitch. But noooo. You had to marry*

*her, had to do the “right” thing... the honorable thing. So what if I knocked her up? That didn't mean you had to marry the Freon queen. And now? What the hell are you thinking? Are you crazy? Save all that high and mighty talk for the troops, okay? After all, if it feels good, it must be moral... right? If God didn't want us to do it, He would have made it feel bad. Now wise up and let me do this sweet, heavenly Swede. Please. I'll never ask for anything ever again. I swear.*

I tallied Commander Squeaky's vote in favor of pleasure and instant gratification. He was consistent, if nothing else. Unfortunately, he was the also culprit who'd gotten me into my messy marriage in the first place. Plus, Commander Squeaky didn't care about any 50-50-90 rule. He lived by one rule and one rule only: sexual satisfaction. And as long as he got that, he was happy with his decisions.

Krista challenged me. “Why not? Susan treats you like shit. I know. I see it. You deserve better.”

I couldn't argue with the naked 18 year-old. Susan did treat me like shit. My marriage lacked love, much less passion. At best, I was Susan's prop-- the husband who completed the picture of the perfect American family to anyone looking in from the outside. And I hated that. I wanted to be wanted, to be loved, to feel passion, to feel special... for me... not to impress a bunch of outsiders.

“How can you stand being married to her?” she added.

*I like being part of a family. I love being a dad. I stay married for the kids.* I shrugged.  
“I love my kids.”

“You should get rid of her.”

The Swede didn't mince words. Plus, she made perfect sense. Damn-- sexy and smart... and just 18. What a wonderful, crazy new world this was!

Not knowing what to do, I put Susan out of my mind, which was a good, albeit temporary, fix to that dilemma. As for the naked Swede before me, that was a different story. I racked my brain.

Out of the blue, the image of a former Commander-in-Chief porking a big-boned intern flashed in my mind. With it, an old saying crept into my consciousness: cannibalism is moral in a cannibal country. Hmmm? And just what, exactly, did this mean? It only took a few seconds for me to make perfect sense of it. It was simple: if the Commander-in-Chief could do it, so could I. Plus, I had no intention of eating the sweet Swede. Although the image of Slick Willie and the rotund intern took some steam out of Commander Squeaky, it symbolized another vote in favor of porking the well-honed Swedish meatball with some Indiana-made sausage. After all, my Krista belonged with Victoria Secret, not Jenny Craig.

As Krista stepped forward to kiss me again, I thought about God and those eternal fires in hell one last time. Thankfully, even Commander Squeaky knew this answer: God would forgive me. That was, after all, His primary business. Plus, it wasn't like I was going to hurt anyone. This was about pleasure. That wasn't un-Christian.

This sealed the deal, and this time when her lips touched mine, I kissed the Swede with new enthusiasm as Commander Squeaky rose to full attention. I kicked out of my shoes. When the foreigner had trouble with my official-issue U.S. Navy belt buckle, I quickly offered assistance. No matter what else happened, I reminded myself, I would always be an officer and a gentleman. When she didn't have trouble with my zipper, my pants and boxers quickly joined my shirt and



Winnie on the floor. Not only had I forgotten how exciting it was to have a woman de-pants me, I'd also forgotten how fast my heart could beat and how rock hard Commander Squeaky could become. Top gun, indeed! By now, the excited Commander was standing firmly at attention for the foreign dignitary with the tight ass and fantastic tits. Indeed, I could almost hear him call out, *"Private Parts reporting for duty, ma'am."*

*"Private," she'd say solemnly in that cute Swedish accent of hers, "I've got a very important job for you."*

*"I'm ready ma'am."*

*"I can see that, Private Parts. You look very, very excited."*

*"Thank you, ma'am."*

*"I want you to pleasure me, Private..."*

*"Yes ma'am."*

My mind was reeling, my body still shaking. Was this really happening? Was the world's most beautiful Au Pair standing there in her birthday suit, offering herself to me? My birthday was still in March, wasn't it? Veteran's Day was a still month-and-a-half away, right? Could September 23<sup>rd</sup> have been the day when Swedish denizens celebrated the end of the Cold War and this was my personal thanks?

On fire now, and fearing the kids might be up soon, I maneuvered our naked bodies into the bathroom, closed the door, and shakily turned the lock. If there was a way to stop, I didn't know it, and we melted in the steamy air onto the tile floor in front of the commode. Like a 5' 10", 110-pound wrestler wanting to be pinned, she wriggled under me and guided me into her, yelping

out in a loud, high-pitch as I penetrated her. That yelp reminded me that I'd crossed some bright line-- adultery-- and it didn't matter if I turned back. That's when I stopped thinking of Susan completely. That's when guilt and Hell's burning fires didn't matter anymore. That's when it got even more fun.

Hornier than a submariner returning from a three month patrol, I thrust into her warm wetness with a gusto that would have made any Commander-in-Chief proud. With every thrust, she yelped out in concert, her eyes shut tightly, as if searching for maximum pleasure. As Commander Squeaky grew inside her, I quickly increased the pace. Following my lead, the sweet Swede began rocking and yelping in quick, high-pitched pulses: Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!

I'd been with my fair share of women, but never one so loud, so uninhibited, so rhythmic... or so much goddamn fun. It was surreal, and consequences were the furthest thing from my mind. Indeed, it seemed out of place to think of consequences as I staked claim to this beautiful Swedish creature below me. Only truth mattered. And truth was this glorious moment in this glorious new world.

Building up, I gulped the humid air, trying to hold back as long as possible, not wanting it to end... ever. Indeed, I wanted to live and die inside her. But as my thrusts quickened, and her high-pitched squeaks converged into one loud echoing yelp, I felt my body convulse and I exploded into her. Spent and drained, I collapsed atop her, sucking oxygen and the apricot body splash that steamed from her fiery body. Jesus! This had to be heaven, and she an angel.

As my heart slowed and the guilt returned, I tried to comprehend what had just happened as I looked down on her. Nothing this beautiful and passionate could be wrong, I assured myself confidently. Indeed, this was the best moment of my life.

"Wow," I groaned with what breath I had left as I lifted off of her and smiled down.

Her faraway eyes locked onto mine like a satisfied lover. "Phew. Ja. That was great, Jeff. Oh wow."

"Tell me about it," I moaned. "Susan hasn't wanted me in over four months."

"Four months? Are you serious? She so crazy. How could she not want you? I want you the first time I saw you."

Even in semi-broken English, the sweet Swede knew the right thing to say. Susan *was* crazy. "Really?"

"Ja. All the other Au Pairs were jealous I got you."

I laughed aloud as I envisioned the Au Pairs sitting around comparing their host dads. [Of course I didn't want to think of myself as a 'host dad' anymore... I was more like a 'host with benefits'... but I digress.]

The second time, I did her from behind in the shower-- a whorish quickie that left me weak-kneed and impressed with her sure-footedness. She attributed it to the icy walkways in Sweden. I chuckled. I'd never done it on an icy walkway or in Sweden, but I was willing to try anything with this Scandinavian goddess. When it was over, I was slumped in the tub-- spent-- looking up at cascading water and the world's most wondrous babysitter. I checked my Timex: 7:45. I didn't even think to wonder whether Susan had won the rush hour battle and made it to her desk in time. All I knew was that my life had changed forever. That, and I'd never make my eight o'clock staff meeting now.

Knowing the kids would be up any minute [if the rest of this precious morning reverted to

normal drudgery], I crawled out of the tub like some newly-formed creature, dried off quickly, and dressed again. In two minutes I was that officer and gentleman again, running up two flights to the second floor, peeking in to see the kids still sleeping. What wonderful, thoughtful angels they were to give me some time alone with their Au Pair! God, how I loved them.

Quickly, I called my secretary Dawn, told her I needed to pick-up a prescription for Jack, and that I'd be in by nine. Taking another cue from that former Commander-in-Chief, I told her to inform Ensign Battle and Lieutenants Anderson and Wilson that the staff meeting would be an hour late. Yes indeed, rank does have its privileges.

Before heading out, I chopped downstairs to tell Krista I was leaving. As I reached the bottom landing of the steps, I sensed a time warp: hadn't I tried to tell her this forty-five minutes, and two quickies, before... back in that other world of drudgery? Should I thank her now?

Her door was cracked open and I entered without even thinking of knocking. Indeed, at that moment, I felt closer to her than any woman ever. "I've got to go," I said unable to contain my broad smile.

Panty-less, she stepped into her jeans, the ones with the holes in the knees, the ones that first started my not-so-holy thoughts just a month ago. "You sure you don't have another minute or so?" she teased.

Jesus! I did have a minute... or so. But I was wiped out... or so I thought. I heard that squeaky voice again: *Come on, Commander. Go for it. The Freon queen hasn't wanted me three times in three years. Last time. I promise.*

I felt him stir. I guess I wasn't really wiped out. I've got to be outta here in fifteen minutes," I said grinning.

"This won't take long," she said, that wonderful, naughty look back on her face. "I just want a little breakfast treat. You wouldn't have anything for me, would you, Mr. Ice Cream Man?" She bent down, pulled a can of Reddi Wip from the small fridge next to her bed, and licked her lips erotically.

My heart shot forward as I envisioned another layout for the Playboy spread: Au Pairs eating their favorite foods. "What do you have in mind?" I asked as Commander Squeaky hardened into a Popsicle.

Walking over, she dropped to her knees and undid my belt without trouble.

"You learn fast," I said, impressed and excited.

She unzipped my trousers and brought my pants and boxers down to my ankles. "I'm pretty smart for an 18 year-old Au Pair," she said, smiling wryly as she smothered Commander Squeaky with cold, creamy topping. [Indeed, it's true: the squeaky wheel gets greased!].

With her hands clasped firmly on my buttocks, she took on Commander Squeaky, working with that wet, wondrous, and obviously experienced mouth of hers. Sensing that I was nearing climax, she let up and backed away. "What's long and hard and has seamen?" she asked playfully looking up at me.

*I know, I know, Commander Squeaky shouted out.*

As for me, my mind was completely gone and the riddle took me by surprise. I shrugged without thinking.

"A submarine," she blurted out, laughing.

I chuckled along. If anyone should have known that one, it was me. I looked down on her

longingly. *What's long and hard, has semen, and misses that mouth of yours?*

Seemingly reading my mind, she took on Commander Squeaky again, now faster and more erotically. When it was over, she looked up, grinned, and said, "Umm, high in protein, low in fat."

Gleefully, I thought of myself as a healthy American delicacy.

"Aren't you glad I'm just a vegetarian and not a vegan?" she added.

"I'm just glad you're *my* Au Pair," I answered with a smiling shrug as I quickly dressed for the third time. "I have to go," I said sadly as I straightened my cover in the mirror next to her bed. If not so dazed, amazed, and utterly spent, I might have seen the dark lens of the video camera strategically placed in the cut-out shoe box on her dresser across the room, recording the whole scene. Obviously I was still the anti-Gump... I just didn't know it... yet.

# TWO

Guilt weighed me down like an anchor during the Metro ride and that first hour at work. For the next seven, my spirits soared like a supersonic F-18 pulling five G's at 30,000 feet. That was something I hadn't felt in years. My bitchy 33 year-old wife may not have wanted me, but our 18 year-old Swedish Au Pair with the killer body, enthusiastic attitude, and erotic sweet tooth sure as hell did. One out of two ain't bad, right? One out of two and I'd be hitting .500, making twenty million a year in the majors. Then, Susan could have everything I couldn't give her on my \$88,000 Navy salary.

It wasn't my fault Susan didn't want me, I rationalized, as I rode home on the Metro that afternoon. I tried like hell to be the best father and husband possible. The problem was, Susan was just too wrapped-up in her make-believe materialistic world to feel love and passion. Plus, it's not like I asked for much. Three minutes of Susan's time would have been enough to keep me

satisfied. Was the traffic at 6:22 really that much worse?

Unfortunately, none of that mattered to Susan. Susan only cared about the next addition to her Colonial, a beach house at Rehoboth, and new couches for the formal living room. And our couches weren't even three years-old for God's sake! Nor had I gone out looking for a piece of ass. The fact is, my wife had brought the scrumptious Swede into my house. ["I think we should get an Au Pair," she had said four months before. "Someone with lots of energy for the kids."].

*Whatever you say, honey. I'm just a dumb-shit sailor without a J.D. degree... a pig farmer's son, no less. Who am I to dare argue with an esteemed member of the bar?* "Okay," I had responded.

As the train pulled into the West Falls Church Metro station, my mind returned to the scene of the crime. When Winnie dropped to the floor, what was I supposed to say: "Krista, do me a favor and please put that towel back on. I don't know what people do back in Sweden, but in America, your behavior is quite inappropriate. Now I'm going to pretend this never happened." *Right... and Winnie the Pooh can see... and Commander Squeaky can talk.*

And poor, poor Krista... so far from home...all alone in a strange place... obviously needing someone to make her feel wanted. What else could I do but bang her twice and let her blow me? I was a considerate, caring Christian and host as much as an adulteress, I told myself. It had never happened before, and it would never happen again. It was just a one-time slip at a weak moment. I'd be ready next time. I decided to talk with Krista the first chance I could... perhaps in the morning... *perhaps after we do her again*, Commander Squeaky chimed in quickly. Although my intentions were jumbled, I walked home with a light heart and an exciting spring in my step, bursting with excitement to see my heavenly Au Pair.



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Feeling an irresistible need for red meat, I fired up the Weber and grilled a big Sirloin on that perfect September evening. I was a new man-- powerful, confident, and alive-- in a new world of unlimited possibilities. [I guess grilling steaks and banging the 18 year-old Au Pair makes you feel that way!]. While the steak seared, I pitched wiffle balls to Jack, while Jenn drew with chalk on the basketball court in front of the garage. To anyone looking in from the outside, we *were* the perfect American family.

Nearly eleven hours after the crime, I continued to rationalize. Factoring the kids into the situation, I told myself that being a good father overshadowed anything else I did. And no matter what, *I was a good father*. Even Susan would admit that. Finally, anything I'd done wrong, was unintentional. *That* was key... both morally and legally. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise: intent matters. I didn't intend to hurt Susan, break my wedding vows, or commit the eighth deadly sin: *Thou shalt not covet thine Swedish Au Pair with the tight ass and perfect tits*. Moreover, Susan wasn't hurt. What she would never know, could never hurt her, right? Plus, if anyone broke wedding vows first, it was Susan. She didn't honor me, didn't love me, and certainly didn't cherish me. Worse, her actions *were* intentional.

Unfortunately, no matter how much I rationalized, something was very wrong with my very real life: my Au Pair wasn't supposed to treat me better than my wife. And I wasn't supposed to lust after my kids' babysitter. Seeing the grill flare, I rescued the steak just in time, along with

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the salmon I was grilling for my vegetarian sweetie, and carried them inside.

One at the dinner table, I could scarcely tear my eyes away from the Swede. Drawn to her, I wanted to watch everything she did-- every chew, every swallow, every move of that unbelievable mouth, every flicker of those sexy blue eyes, every flash of those dimples. She was so perfect-- so alive and passionate-- oozing youthful vanity and devilish delights like a beautiful Siren. As I stared, I couldn't help but wonder what went on inside that head of hers, beneath all that beauty. Did she realize how hot she was? Or that any man she wanted was hers? Did she know that my world was not the same anymore? Or that I was alive for the first time in years? I became so lost thinking about her that I didn't even hear Susan's irritated voice.

"Jeff. How many times do I have to ask? Can you pass the mashed potatoes?"

I startled. "Huh?"

"The mashed potatoes," Susan restated.

"Oh. Sorry," I said, handing the bowl to Jenn sitting to my left.

*Concentrate, I ordered myself. Don't blow this. You're a married man sitting with your family at the dinner table. Focus. Say something... something fatherly.*

I heard Commander Squeaky chime in, "*I really enjoyed that thing you did with the Reddi Wip, Krista.*"

*Dammit. Stop.*

I cut up the sirloin. "How was everybody's day?" I called out, my voice ringing out like a man who'd been satisfied no less than three times that morning. I was upbeat-- too upbeat-- and immediately I feared my guilt showing through. *Dammit. Calm down, you idiot.* Through the centerpiece of fresh flowers I glanced furtively at Susan. *Tone it down... become that boring, stoic*

*pig farmer's son masquerading as an officer and a gentleman.* I slumped down a bit in my chair and turned the corners of my mouth down. *There. Ah, yes... much better.*

Across the table, Susan's brow furrow.

*She's thinking. Uh-oh. This could be trouble.* I put myself on alert. Hopefully, she wouldn't ask how my morning sex with Krista had been. Hopefully, she'd talk about her usual boring weekday work issues: forest clear-cutting, the California redwoods, or the price of tissues... wood and paper... paper and wood. As long as I had a deck for my grill, and toilet paper, I really didn't give a shit about wood and paper.

"Oh, I know what I wanted to tell you," Susan said, remembering whatever she was thinking. "Remember that conference I told you about next week?"

I nodded, even though I didn't. My memory had been reduced to the events of this morning. Anything prior was just irrelevant clutter in my new world. I now had a future... and a heavenly Au Pair!

*Focus, dammit.*

"Well, it's definite that I'm going. Next Monday through Friday."

"Where's it at?" I asked.

"San Diego."

Nodding indifferently on the outside, I burst with happiness on the inside. For some reason, I wanted Susan to be far away-- farther than normal-- and the thought of a fiery plane crash danced in my hopeful mind. [Deep down, I hated thinking and feeling that way].

"I'm thinking of going out Friday afternoon and spending the weekend with Julie in L.A.,"

Susan added. "We may go on a celebrity home tour."

*Why wait? Go now, honey. Go see your sister Julie. Go see all those rich, stuck-up celebrities you covet. Tour their homes... take some pictures... get some decorating ideas... I'll take care of the kids... and Krista.* I nodded unemotionally. "I think you should. You haven't seen her in a while. That sounds like fun."

Susan looked hard at Krista. "Can you help Mister MacDonald out next week, Krista?" she asked. [Susan insisted that we refer to each other as *Mister* and *Misses MacDonald* around Krista, as if to keep a certain distance and respect between us and the hired help with the killer body. Although the word Au Pair means 'On Par,' and thus, Au Pairs are supposed to be treated like family members, Susan treated Krista like a bastard stepchild. As of this morning, I treated the sweet Swede like my personal sex slave, which, I guess, evened things out.]

Krista perked up and answered Susan's question. "Ja. I zink zo."

I smiled to myself as I listened to the sweet Swede's accent. It was always more pronounced around Susan, her English somewhat broken, as if trying to make herself less threatening, less in-tune, almost stupid. In reality, though, I knew she never missed a thing. She had Susan pegged. Unfortunately, as I would later learn, she had me pegged, too.

"You're not on travel next week, right?" Susan asked me.

I shook my head. "Nope. I shouldn't be traveling the next couple of months. We're not testing the new ASROC prototype until January." [Although I'm a nuclear submariner by training-- one of those seamen on those long, hard man-made machines-- at my Pentagon shore duty, I'm the Program Manager for developing the *Advanced Submarine Rocket*, hence ASROC.]

Susan nodded and returned her eyes to Krista. "How were the kids today?"

My blood pressure spiked as I wondered what Krista might say: *Jack and Jenn were fine... your husband Jeff was a frickin' wild pig this morning! Snort, snort.*

Krista answered, "Good. Jenn was up early, so her and I hung out around the house in morning. After school, I take kids to the park."

I relaxed and smiled at the Swede's choppy English and her well-formulated lie: Jenn wasn't up early... Commander Squeaky was!

Unfortunately, things got weird after that.

Flashing me a quick smile, Krista began caressing my leg playfully with her foot under the table. When I felt my face redden, I prayed it wasn't flashing a message on my forehead that I was boinking the babysitter. Thankfully, the centerpiece provided a bit of camouflage. I glanced nervously at Susan to see her staring into the family room, probably contemplating new drapes. For once, I was glad she was so single-minded.

I glared at Krista to my right, my squinting eyes telling her to stop, but she just winked back, seemingly enjoying her new role and the power that went along with it.

When she dribbled a wad of mashed potatoes purposefully from the corner of her mouth toward me-- perhaps as a reminder of our third sexual encounter-- I nearly choked on the sirloin. Jesus! What the hell was the Swede doing? And what should I do? I felt faint. *Do something.*

"How was school, Jenn?" I asked feebly, attempting to divert attention away from Krista's erotic table manners.

"The same. We read Winnie the Pooh, we colored, we played." She sounded bored.

Except for the coloring, Jenn's afternoon kindergarten sounded a lot like my morning

schooling with the Swede. And there was nothing boring about that. I glanced back over to see the Swede acting normal again.

Jenn's answer tweaked Susan's attention. "Just remember Jenn, everything you need to know about life, you learn in kindergarten," Susan chimed-in, almost reading the book title.

The proverbial light bulb flashed above my head. Now life with Susan made instant sense: Susan must have gone to a kindergarten that taught little girls to treat the male species like pesky flies! God, she was irritating, incapable of conceiving an original thought. [That's another trait I hate about lawyers: they read something and it becomes gospel...er, precedent.]. Indeed, if someone puts it in print and Susan reads it, she believes it. Too bad she never read the book: *How to Prevent Your Husband from Boinking the Babysitter*.

What's more, Susan was dead wrong. If kindergarten wasn't teaching five-year-olds about things like seductive, naked 18 year-old Au Pairs, then kids weren't learning *everything* they needed to know about life.

Unexpectedly, Krista laughed out. "I kiss my first boy in kindergarten," she blurted.

Susan flashed her a disapproving look, as if the Swede's words would turn Jenn into the kindergarten class whore.

I, on the other hand, felt a deep, new respect for the Swedish school system. If Krista had learned to kiss in kindergarten, then all that other stuff she knew must have come in grades one through twelve.

Dinner ended mercifully after ten more minutes of small talk, which was good, because Krista's continued rubbing of my leg had Commander Squeaky and his crew of semen surfacing again. "Would anyone like desert?" I blurted out as I shifted the Commander to a deeper, less

noticeable depth and rose from the table.

Krista looked at me almost wickedly, wide-eyed, her mouth opened into an O-shape. She rolled the tip of her tongue around the inside of her cheek and bobbed her head ever so slightly.

*Jesus! Stop it.* I glared at her again.

Again, she just smiled and raised her eyebrows. Did they teach little Swedish schoolgirls the art of discretion, I wondered?

"Can I have ice cream?" Jenn called out.

I nodded. "Sure."

Jack joined in, "Is there any whipped cream?"

*Whipped Cream?! Like Pavlov's dog, Commander Squeaky perked up as the words whipped through my brain. I heard the excited Commander pant: Did somebody say whipped cream?*

"I zink zo," Krista answered.

If anyone knew, the sweet-toothed Swede did. I knew just one thing: life was getting too weird... and too complicated.

"I'm going to do a little work in the office," Susan announced, rising from the table. Until *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood* came on, that was her modus operandi for weeknights. [Evidently she never learned to clean up after herself in kindergarten.]. As for spending time with the kids, why would she do that when she could surf the web for beach-front property and couches? [In fact, if I heard her tell me one more time how much money she was saving us with another Internet bargain, I swore I'd throw up]. While I often wondered why Susan

wanted kids-- given that she spent as little time with them as possible-- deep down I knew that answer. Susan needed everyone to know she had the perfect family: the big Colonial, the formal living room, the Naval Officer husband, and the two perfect kids. Everyone needed to see Susan as Superwoman-- the lawyer, the mom, the wife-- able to juggle everything effortlessly and perfectly. What life was like on the inside, and what the kids and I thought, didn't matter. Both the kids and I were, after all, just props in her perverse 21st Century Pleasantville facade. The whole thing was sick, so sick in fact that I almost wished everyone knew I was boinking the Swedish Au Pair. *Almost*. Be careful what you wish for, I heard an inner voice say.

Thoughts of Susan had returned Commander Squeaky to an at-ease status. "I'll do the dishes," I announced as I carried my plate and Jenn's to the kitchen.

"I can help," Krista said, carrying her plate and Jack's. Normally, she disappeared after dinner as quickly as Susan.

"I think that would be nice, Krista," Susan said, nodding approvingly. One of her complaints was the Swede's lack of help when it came to housework. As of this morning, with the exception of her erotic table manners, I didn't have any complaints with the Swede.

"Can we watch '*Rugrats*'?" Jack asked as he followed me into the kitchen looking for his ice cream.

"Have you seen the whipped cream?" I asked Krista as she handed me the butter.

Her brow furrowed. "I think it might be downstairs in my fridge. Would you come help me look for it?" She moistened her lips erotically.

"Stop," I said to her in a low tone.

She laughed almost wickedly before popping down the steps and returning with the can.



The sight of the red can with the swirling white whips made my heart bang, and I was careful not to use all of it on the kid's ice cream. There were much better uses, I now knew. I also made a mental note to add Reddi Wip to the shopping list and buy stock in the company that manufactured the stuff. Ice cream bowls in hand, the kids disappeared downstairs to watch Nickelodeon.

With Susan firmly absconded in the office and the kids downstairs, I was left alone with Krista in the kitchen. “You’re gonna get me in trouble with your erotic table manners,” I whispered.

“No, I’m not,” she answered playfully, rubbing my arm. “Don’t worry. I’m careful.”

“Yeah, well I’d appreciate it if you tone things down when we’re around Susan.”

“Okay, Jeff. Whatever you say. You know I just want to make you happy.”

Liking her answer, I wanted to hug her and kiss her wildly, like this morning. “Thanks,” I said instead.

“You’re welcome, stud man.” And on that note she left the kitchen and went downstairs, leaving me alone with the dishes. When she didn’t return, it became clear that she had no intention of helping with the dishes. Evidently, she had only wanted Susan to think she'd helped. That was rude, I thought, as I rinsed plates. But then again, I was oblivious as to what was really happening around the MacDonald household.

Ten minutes after I finished the dishes, Krista emerged from the basement wearing her holey jeans, a tight, low-cut leopard-skin shirt, and a pound of make-up. She looked more like a hooker than an Au Pair. But what a hooker!

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Out with some of the other Au Pairs. Would you mind if I borrowed your Saab?" She flashed that pouty, sulky-model look. "Please. I'll owe you," she added, licking her lips seductively, hypnotizing me with her swirling tongue.

*Commander Squeaky answered: Yes, mistress. Your wish is my command.*

I had lent Krista my car for errands a couple times, but never for a social gathering. Commander Squeaky thought it was a fair exchange: the car for another encounter with her tongue and the Reddi Wip. I gave in quickly. "Be careful," I said, handing her the keys.

She perked up. "I will. You know me... I'm very responsible."

As she walked away and I plopped down on the couch in the family room, I was beginning to wonder.

The sound of the garage door opening brought Susan rushing into the family room. "Who just went out the garage?"

"Krista," I answered nonchalantly, looking up from my Sports Illustrated, not yet aware that I'd committed another deadly sin. "I let her use my car."

"For what?" By Susan's hard tone, it was clear she was on the verge of going ape-shit.

"Just to go see one of her friends."

"I thought we agreed that she could only use the cars for family errands?"

"I know," I said with a shrug, trying to diffuse the situation. "But she helped with the dishes and all, and I guess, it was my way of thanking her." [Smart as a whip, I didn't mention the sweet double fuck or the creamy blow job].

"You should have consulted with me before you did that."

*Consult... consult... consult. Shove your consultation up your wide ass, Susan.*

I nodded, trying to appear concerned.

"Once you lend her your car once, she'll want it again."

I understood the concept... it was kind of like eating Lays Potato Chips... or pounding a sweet 18 year-old Swede: once you start, it's impossible to stop. "It's just this once," I assured Susan with all the sincerity I could muster. "I'll make sure Krista knows that."

*We can tell her tomorrow morning after she blows me,* Commander Squeaky added.

I chuckled inside.

"You should have consulted with me," Susan persisted.

There was no mistaking Susan's intensity, and I sensed that she would hound me until I apologized and admitted that I was a stupid pig farmer's son without a JD degree. "Sorry," I said lowly, not wanting to be drawn into her fight. *I was sorry alright... sorry I'd married her.*

I waited for Susan's next volley. If things went as usual, she'd tell me how irresponsible I was, then how average I was, and then how sorry she was that she ever married me... *blah... blah...blah.* In the end, I'd just shrug and life would drudge on.

But before she could start in to me, the opening announcements for *Entertainment Tonight* blared from the t.v. in the office. Mercifully, I sensed a cease fire.

After a final glare, Susan turned and retraced her steps to the office.

As I wondered if the average husband banged the extraordinary Au Pair, I took my average self downstairs and watched *Rugrats* with my average kids. While Tommy Pickles tried to extract himself from his playpen, I tried to figure out how to extract myself from the mess I'd gotten into by marrying Susan. Sadly, I couldn't fathom that I was getting myself into an even bigger mess

by banging the extraordinary Au Pair.

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I was understandably randy in bed that night, so much so that I reached over and caressed Susan's shoulders at one point. Perhaps I could rekindle our lack of passion? Perhaps I could have the same thing with Susan as I had with my Au Pair? If so, I wouldn't need Krista.

At my touch, Susan pulled away and swept my hand off her shoulder. "Stop. I'm tired," she shrieked, stopping just short of saying shoo-fly-shoo.

I rolled my eyes in the darkness. *You're tired? BooFuckingHoo, Counselor. Tired from what? Work? I work, too, remember? Cooking? I do all the cooking? Cleaning up afterwards? Me, again. What about getting the kids ready for bed and reading to them? That was me, too. If anyone should be tired, it's me, Susan. Plus, I fucked the Au Pair twice and let her blow me. Do you have any idea what kind of energy that takes? They say average sex burns two hundred calories per hour. Do you have any idea how many calories sex with that Swedish animal burns?!*

Finally, I rolled over, closed my eyes, and thought of my 18 year-old Au Pair tooling around town in my Saab 900. God, I missed her.

# THREE

I awoke to the sound of the shower running and a rock hard Commander Squeaky. The clock radio on the nightstand indicated 5:53. Commander Squeaky indicated that Susan needed to hurry up and leave. I could almost hear his squeaky voice: *rush into the bathroom and tell the frigid bitch that traffic on 66 is extra heavy*. I ordered the Commander to stand at ease and be patient.

As Susan dressed, I feigned sleep. Then, when the garage door opened, I peeked out and watched the Beamer's rear lights zip away toward the bright red sky to the east. I let out a deep breath and felt myself uncoil. The clock radio registered 6:19. Right on time. Way to go, Susan! You win the rat race!

As if caught in some strange Swedish gravitational force, I felt myself being pulled down

to the basement. *You need to tell her it's over*, a voice in my head said. Un-huh, I answered. Knocking softly, I cracked Krista's door open. "Krista?" I whispered.

A nightlight cast a dim light and I could see her stir. "Ja?"

"Can I come in?"

She seemed dazed. "Wait."

In the dim light, she rolled out of bed naked and stumbled towards me. I wished for more light so I could take in every inch of her splendor. Expecting a hug or something, Krista stopped short, grabbing the doorknob. "Give me a minute," she said, pulling the door abruptly shut.

I don't know why she closed the door, but the lock on the knob turned, the light went on, and I heard noises from the far end of the room, near her dresser. Whatever she was doing, an aroused Commander Squeaky hoped she would hurry. Patience was never one of the Commander's strong suits. Perhaps she was putting on make-up or perfume, I thought. *Or looking for more of that Reddi Wip, Commander Squeaky injected.* [The idea of her setting up a hidden video camera never crossed either of our minds.].

A minute later, the light was off and she re-opened the door. I smelled perfume. Commander Squeaky smelled a feast. How nice!

"Can we talk?" I asked.

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes. "What time is it?"

"Six thirty."

"Oh my, God, Jeff. Are you serious? Six-thirty?" Retracing her steps, she flopped down on the full-sized bed and buried her head into the pillow. I was sure this was a part of the day she'd never seen before. "What do you want to talk about?"

*Tell her it's over*, that voice inside reminded me as I knelt by the side of her bed and gazed at her atop the covers. Even in the dim light, she glistened, and I wanted to reach out, touch her, and ravage her body with kisses.

*Don't*, the voice in my head ordered. *Not again. It was a one-time thing. You're married.*

"About yesterday," I answered.

She turned her head toward me. "What about it?"

*I'm supposed to tell you that we can't ever do that again. I'm supposed to tell you that a married man doesn't cheat on his wife. I'm supposed to be able to resist your gravitational pull and your spell.*

Instead, her foreign gravity pulled out these words: "I just wanted to say thank you. You really made me feel wanted."

Nodding, she said nothing, her eyes drifting shut again.

I studied her mouth and grew even weaker. I felt my chest shaking. "Krista?"

"Huh?"

"Can I lay down next to you?" My heart was booming and my voice trembled.

She knew why I was there. "Can I sleep in until eight if I give you a blow job?"

Commander Squeaky answered without hesitation: *Eight? My God, girl, you can sleep in all day!*

Dammit. Now who was *I* supposed to listen to: my goodie-goodie no fun conscience or the impatient fun-loving Commander? It was another 50-50-90 dilemma. And unfortunately for me, there was no doubting what I would do. "Un-huh," I said, almost ashamed at my complete

and utter lack of restraint.

She rolled out of bed and turned the lights on. "I like it better when I can see what I'm doing," she explained, her eyes now alive.

I smiled. Lights on, lights off... either way was fine with me. No matter what, this would definitely be the last time, I told myself.

*Last time, today,* Commander Squeaky clarified.

She situated me on the edge of the bed and kneeled facing me, as if paying homage to Commander Squeaky. When she untied my robe, her eyes lit up. "I remember this little fella from yesterday," she said happily.

"You should never refer to a man's penis as 'little fella,'" I instructed playfully.

"Okay then. I remember this *big* fella," she corrected smartly.

I laughed.

Without another word, she proceeded to work on the Commander like a porn star on camera. God Almighty did I have it made! She wasn't just beautiful, but accommodating as well. And all this for an extra hour of sleep! What would this goddess do for fifty bucks? Afterwards, I kissed her profusely and thanked her even more. I was bursting with happiness. This was how a man was supposed to start the day. Showering upstairs, I couldn't hear Krista downstairs, watching her latest film. Sadly, I'd forgotten a very important kindergarten lesson, about no free lunches... or, in this case, no free high-protein, low fat breakfast blow jobs.

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After dinner that night, Krista asked to borrow the Saab again and Commander Squeaky convinced me it was another good deal.

I gave in, but I must confess, I was beginning to wonder about Commander Squeaky's judgment. "Can you put gas in it and pick-up the French fry wrappers you left in the backseat?"

"Sure." She put out her hand.

"What?"

"I need gas money."

*That sounds fair*, Commander Squeaky chimed in quickly.

I wondered if a condom would quiet the naughty Commander. "You know, Krista, if you borrow something, you should return it in the same condition." [*That's* what I remember learning in kindergarten.].

"Oh, come on Jeff. I give you the best blow job ever and you can't give me ten bucks for gas?" Her voice was low, the disgust unmistakable. "I'll bet you'd give Susan ten bucks if she gave you head like that."

*Ten bucks? Ha! I give Susan \$5,400 a month after taxes and she tells me Commander Squeaky's disgusting.* There was no arguing with the Swede's logic. Don't be penny wise, pound foolish, and Au Pair-less, I told myself. Little things like gas and fast food wrappers weren't worth losing what other men would kill to have. Lending out the Saab, gas money, fast food wrappers: the sweet Swede was more than a bargain. She was a Godsend. I smiled at her, pulled out my wallet, and handed her a twenty. "I'm sorry," I said truthfully. "I just had a bad day at work."

She perked up as she took the money. "Well, we'll just have to do something about that

tomorrow morning."

Commander Squeaky and I both perked up. That sweet little tight ass walking away is mine, I thought proudly as the garage door opener engaged. Indeed, I was so excited thinking about banging her the next morning that I didn't even hear Susan rushing into the kitchen from the office.

You didn't lend her your car again, did you?" There was Freon in Susan's tone and ice in her glare.

Shit! How could I have forgotten about the frigid bitch who made life so miserable? Adrenaline surged through my body as I sounded the general alarm: *Battle Stations, men!* Desperately, I shook my head sideways as my mind searched for an answer. [I didn't need a law degree to know it was time to lie.]. "I told her she needed to return it with the same amount of gas as when she borrowed it. She went to fill it back up," I said, proud of my quick thinking. Not even Susan could argue with such a responsible position.

"Well, at least, you're teaching her to be a little more responsible."

*Yep... and she's teaching me some things, too.*

I nodded, wondering if my explanation was enough to save the day. After all, *Entertainment Tonight* was still ten minutes away. Surprisingly it was, and when Susan turned and walked back to the office. I turned happily away, not bothering to watch her backside. Why ruin the beautiful memory of Krista's ass with the reality of Susan's?

Unfortunately, I'd only managed to borrow a little time at best. After all, Krista wouldn't be home before midnight... if then. In the morning how would I explain that Krista's ten minute gas trip had turned into four hours... or more? What now?

I thought of two options: I could kill Susan; or do something else. Shit... another tough 50-50-90 dilemma. Not wanting to push my luck and add another mortal sin to my confession list, I opted for the latter. [Little did I know what a bad decision that would become...]. Additionally, it meant I still had to do something now.

I sat on the couch in the family room and channeled my inner Winnie-- *Think. Think. Think.*

I drew a blank.

This wasn't about thinking.

*Scheme. Scheme. Scheme.*

Much better. This was about scheming. And if I was to continue banging the sweet Swede, I knew I'd better become a good schemer. Surprising even myself, I came up with a plan rather quickly. Pulling out my cell phone, I punched out our ten-digit home phone number. Pressing "send", the signal shot out my antennae, sped through the air at the speed of sound, bounced off a relay station a couple miles away, and returned at the same supersonic speed. A split-second later, the phone on the table next to me rang. God, I love technology!

"I'll get it," I yelled out, picking up our home phone and listening, making sure Susan didn't pick up on the office phone. Silence. All's quiet on the Falls Church front, I thought, likening my situation to battle. Leaving my cellular behind, I walked toward the office with the cordless home phone.

"Susan," I called out, just outside the office doorway, "Krista wants to know if she can go to the mall and buy Jack a birthday present." Not even a self-centered lawyer could deny her own

son a present, I figured. And as long as Susan didn't ask to personally talk to the imaginary Swede, I'd be okay.

I could almost see the gears in Susan's head turning as she leaned back in the leather desk chair in front of the computer. "Okay," she said finally, her tone flat, as if she didn't like conceding.

"That'll be fine, Krista," I said fatherly into the cordless. "Just don't be too late."

I waited for Krista's imaginary response. *Thanks, stud man. You and Commander Squeaky will be duly rewarded for your cunningness.*

"Drive carefully," I replied. "Bye."

Click.

I returned my attention to Susan. "That was nice of Krista."

"What?" she snapped. "Calling and asking permission? She better call and ask permission."

There was nothing nice about Susan's disdain-filled voice, and I wondered if Susan could be a little harder on the rest of the world. "No," I clarified, "I mean it was nice of Krista to think of buying Jack a birthday present. She doesn't have to do things like that. The kids are lucky to have her."

Susan shrugged. "I still don't like her going out every night. What time did she get home last night?"

I had this lie already formulated. "Ten forty, I think." Knowing Susan had fallen asleep during the first half of Fox's Ten O'clock news, right after shoeing me away, I was pretty sure my answer was safe. In actuality, the sweet Swede had rolled in around one-thirty. But if I told Susan

that, she'd really go ape-shit.

Walking back to the family room, I should have seen the walls slowly closing-in on me as I lived to appease both Susan and Krista, two seemingly opposing enemy troops. Sadly, I didn't see any of feel that. I was blinded by lust, testosterone, and the infamous Commander Squeaky. Luckily, I, the pig farmer's son, was the smartest one in the house. I was sure I could outwit both Susan, a mere lawyer, and Krista, a naive, teenage Au Pair.

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For the rest of the week, I continued my shameful morning visits to Krista's den of inequity/secret filming studio. She never said 'no,' and in just five days, I had become fully addicted to the sweet Swede. If Commander Squeaky was a healthy American delicacy, then Krista was a habit-forming drug that should have regulated by the FDA. In hindsight, I'm sure she planned it that way. She was, I would later learn, more than just *pretty smart for an 18 year-old Au Pair*. Much more. Indeed, next to Susan, Krista was the most ingenious and conniving little bitch that God-- or perhaps the devil-- had ever created. And as I would come to painfully learn, I was definitely the dumbest, and most naive one in this house.

During that first week, we did everything imaginable, with Krista my personal sex slave, seemingly put on the earth for my pleasure, to play out my every fantasy. If a man without fantasies is a man without a soul, then my soul was as immense as my imagination. If I was in a rough and manly mood, we played the rape victim game. First I was the rapist; then I would switch roles and

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become the investigating officer who made Krista act out her ordeal [*“I know this is painful, ma’am, but I’m gonna need you to get down on your knees and show me just one more time. Ummm, yes, I see now. Ooooooh... yeah... nice. So, ummm, do you, oooh, remember if the perpetrator was moaning or groaning when he forced you to did this?”*]. If I was in an adventurous mood, I was the trucker offering a ride to Krista, the destitute hitchhiker [*“Hey there darlin’, you need a ride? What’s that? You got no gas money? Well then, what do you suggest we do about that...?”*]. But my favorite game was MacDonald’s, which, given my last name, seemed only fitting. I played the counter help.

"Um, let's see," Krista would say deliberately as she looked at an imaginary menu tote board above my head. "I think I'll have the Big Mac meal."

I'd raise my eyebrows suggestively. "Would you like that super-sized, ma'am?"

"Sure."

"Whipped cream?"

"Great," she'd say smiling.

And on that happy note, I'd open my robe and give Commander Squeaky a frothy, cold squirt. "We love to see you smile!" I'd sing happily.

Yes indeed, from meager beginnings as the son of an Indiana pig farmer, my life had become every man's fantasy. In kindergarten vernacular, I was coloring outside the lines, my life as exhilarating as the unlimited possibilities. [In hindsight, it became clear why the teachers had always told us to stay within the lines. They were worried we'd discover how much fun life could be outside the lines, and then they'd lose us forever. It was a conspiracy from kindergarten on...].

Sadly, it never occurred to me that life outside the lines was fraught with danger, too. Nor

did I realize that the difference between a fantasy and a nightmare was a fine line... a very fine line. Is that why they wanted us to stay within the lines? Were they protecting us from us... from our own ignorance?

# FOUR

Although Susan's plane didn't crash going to La-La-land on Friday, I decided that wouldn't stop my fun. She was still three thousand miles away, and I had the perfect Saturday planned. In the morning, I took the kids to see the new Pandas at the zoo, followed by a trip to *Ben's Chili Bowl* for chili dogs and chili fries. Afterwards, we went to the mall and the kids flew kites next to the Washington Monument. As their kites swirled in the air, I envisioned the 550-foot tall monument covered with Reddi Wip and Krista's sensuous lips. [I guess wild sex with the 18 year-old Au Pair warps your thinking a bit, eh?].

After kites, we paddle-boated in the tidal basin near the Jefferson Memorial and I taught the kids about Thomas Jefferson. Although I purposefully omitting details of his sexual escapades, I took personal comfort in the fact that TJ screwed his best slave the way I screwed my Au Pair. TJ certainly had it right: all men *are* created equal... especially men who pursue happiness with



the help of their slaves and Swedish Au Pairs! Hey, if it was good enough for TJ, it was good enough for me, I thought whimsically. All in all, it was a great day, the kind the kids and I would always remember. Indeed, for a man stuck in a loveless, passionless, dead marriage, I never felt so alive.

Besides manufacturing memories, I had an ulterior motive: to wear out the kids. And obviously I succeeded, because at 8:30 they were zonked out in front of the t.v. After carrying them up to bed, I returned downstairs to ready the house for the perfect guy-night: Texas Hold'em with three of my junior officers and two neighbors, the Nats-Dodger game on the boob-tube; chips, dip, and nachos; and two cases of frosty cold Heinekens. [Warm cookies and cold milk were great in kindergarten, but nothing beat gooey nachos and cold beer while playing Texas Hold'em. Could life get any better?].

Krista was out on the town, doing whatever she did with the other Au Pairs, which was fine with me. For once, I liked having the house to myself. I carried the card table up from the basement, set it up in the family room in front of the big screen t.v., and readied the manly hor d'oeuvres. At nine, almost on the dot, Ensign Battle rang my front doorbell. When I told my j.o.'s the game would begin at nine, I expected the 22 year-old to arrive first. That's the way Ensigns were. Everything was literally construed, orders followed to a 'T'. I sometimes wondered if Ensign Battle would kill Susan if I gave him the direct order...

*"It's a matter of national security," I'd tell him. "You must kill her."*

*"Aye, aye, sir."*

*"And afterwards, you must turn yourself into the police and tell them that Susan is the anti-*

*Christ, and you are an Ensign in Christ's Navy, sent to destroy her and save the world."*

*"Aye, aye, sir."*

*"Okay, then, who are you?"*

*His eyes would glaze over. "I am an Ensign in Christ's Navy, sir."*

*"Excellent. And what is your mission?"*

*"I must eradicate Susan MacDonald, the anti-Christ, from the earth."*

*"Excellent. Now get going. Earn your wings."*

*"Aye aye, Christ-sir."*

I invited the ensign in without broaching the topic. Five minutes later, Lieutenants Ben Anderson and Kevin Faller arrived. The two Louies shared an apartment at Dupont Circle, better known around our nation's capital as the Fruit Loop. I thought the two were gay, but of course, couldn't ask. And they weren't supposed to tell. Don't Ask, Don't Tell: another unforgettable policy move by my former Commander-in-Chief. "Don't you ask me about that big-boned intern," I could almost hear him saying in that aw shucks' voice of his, "and I won't tell you about her." It never occurred to me that I might have to invoke the same policy with Susan regarding Krista. Thankfully, I was so much smarter than Big Bubba.

My next door neighbor, Tony, arrived next, then Bob, from three houses down the street. Six players, five easy marks for me. "Get ready to read 'em and weep, boys," I thought to myself as we hunkered down.

I love Texas Hold'em. Like life itself, Texas Hold'em encompasses chance, skill, and luck... with no guarantees. I also love Texas Hold'em because I'm very good at it. Twelve years before, at the Naval Academy, I'd made enough money playing it to buy my first car. That was

two Saabs ago. These days, my semi-annual pilgrimages to Vegas or Atlantic City were the two best weekends of the year for me. Weekends when Susan's away, like this one, were next best.

For three hours we played, ate, drank, smoked cigars, and watched the Nats give away the most important game of the year to the Dodgers. "You'd think a one hundred million dollar payroll would get a team into the playoffs, wouldn't you?" I said disgustedly to Tony.

"Not against a team with a two hundred million dollar payroll," he shot back.

Sadly, he was right.

Although five-dollar maximum Texas Hold'Em doesn't sound like much, with six players, it can add up quickly, and I was up a couple hundred bucks as I lit a final stogie and exhaled a mouthful of smoke. The fact that Susan hated cigar smoke made the experience that much more pleasurable. That men want what they cannot have is the ultimate truism.

But my pleasure was soon interrupted by the sound of the garage door opening. I startled. With my luck, Susan had smelled the cigars from 3,000 miles away and jumped on the first plane back. I could almost hear her: "now we're definitely going to need new drapes." Leaning back in my chair, I peeked around the corner separating the family room from the kitchen. To my delight, I saw Krista. Of course! How could I have forgotten the girl who made life worth living again? The world was right and I leaned back, again at ease.

"Hi, Krista," I called out.

She walked through the kitchen toward my voice, and into the family room. Once in view, twelve eyes and six blind, one-eyed squeaky monsters took her in. *Easy boys!*

"Hello," she said smiling, making the rounds with those big, friendly eyes.

I made introductions, pointing as I said their names: "John, Ben, Kevin, Tony from next door, Bob from three houses down. This is Krista, my Au Pair." [*My Au Pair, indeed! I liked the sound of that.*].

"Hi... Hey... Hello," the five men called out.

"*Your* Au Pair? Or the kid's?" Tony asked jokingly, his eyebrows raised.

I hesitated to answer.

"Both," Krista answered quickly, her eyes twinkling.

I wondered if the others could fathom what she meant.

"Sometimes I think Mister MacDonald needs me more than the kids do," she added.

*Mister MacDonald.* I liked that, too. Nobody would suspect I was banging a girl who referred to me as 'Mister MacDonald.' I watched the five men continue to take in the sweet Swede. Wearing tight black Lululemon leggings and a low-cut, purple V-neck sweater, more than twelve eyes focused on the deep valley defined by her golden tits. No doubt they were envisioning her naked. Even the two Louies from the Fruit Loop seemed to be salivating. They weren't gay, I told myself, as I watched them fantasize. Bi maybe, but definitely not gay. [As the son of a pig farmer, I can also say with confidence that deep down, all men are pigs.].

"Cards?" she asked.

"Bingo," I shot back.

"If that's bingo, then I'm a little teapot," she countered quickly. Either Krista had heard it from Jenn or they sang that same song in kindergarten back in Sweden. [Silly me: I thought they just taught Swedish maidens about sex. *I guess I was naive.*].

Laughs and smiles filled the poker-playing faces. "If you're a little teapot, then come fill

my cup,” Tony called out as he toasted his mug upward. His marriage was about as solid as mine.

Krista threw a wink at Tony and they were quick friends. She could make friends with any man, I was sure.

"Bingo means 'correct'," I informed her.

"Oh," she answered, enlightened. She shook her head sideways. "I hate English. So many words mean different things." She looked at the stacks of chips around the table. "Who's winning?"

All eyes around the table honed in on me and I shrugged. "I guess I'm up a little."

"A little? Jesus, *Mister MacDonald*," Tony cried out, imitating Krista, "you're up over two hundred bucks."

"Are you using those cards with those special marks you put on the back?" Krista asked.

Eyes grew wide around the table and Tony grabbed a card to inspect.

"She's just messing with you guys," I said calmly. "The cards are brand new. I opened them tonight."

"Ha. Made you think, didn't I?" Krista said proudly, flashing her patented smile and raising her eyebrows. As she wandered past the table and into the kitchen, every eye following her swinging ass. Commander Squeaky wanted to tell the five poker players that he was poking that tight ass every morning, but I squeezed my thighs together and put the muzzle on the bad Commander. Discretion was also not one of the Commander's strengths.

"Abbey would never let a girl like that live in our house," Tony said in a low tone.

Bob jumped in, "Yeah. Cindy's first rule is that a babysitter can't be better looking than

she is."

I nodded. Because Cindy belonged in a kennel, that explained why Bob and Cindy never hired a sitter. "My kids' best interests come first," I responded, high and mightily. "My philosophy is this: surround your kids with beautiful people, and they'll become beautiful."

"Hold up the watches men, the shit's getting deep in here," Bob called out.

Even Ensign Battle laughed.

"I know one thing, if I surrounded Teddy with a girl like Krista, I'd spend a lot more time with him," Tony added.

"Anyone need anything?" Krista called out from the kitchen. She was bent down, prominently poking her ass at us while she looked for something at the bottom of the fridge.

Talk about a loaded, open-ended question! I could almost read a few of the pig-headed minds around the table as they fantasized about that ass.

"I could use a Heine, baby," Tony called out in his best Austin Powers imitation, saying what everyone around the table was thinking.

Krista grabbed a Heineken from the fridge and brought it over, smiling. At the last second, she pulled the bottle back and tossed herself down onto Tony's lap instead. "Did you want a beer or this?" she said enthusiastically, shaking herself from side-to-side like a lap-dancer at a bachelor party.

"Yeaaaaah, baby," Tony yelled out as he gyrated playfully against her.

Laughter filled the room as Krista rose and handed the beer to a blushing Tony.

"See what I mean about English," she said. "A good looking guy asks for a Heine and he's cast into an ethical dilemma-- beer or babe."

*An ethical dilemma.* Nobody expected words like that from an 18 year-old Swedish Au Pair. I sensed everyone thinking the same thing: Krista was not only a babe, she was sharp... almost too sharp. And she knew how to work a room full of men.

“Ethical dilemma? Hardly. That’s what we call a no-brainer,” Tony responded.

Krista smiled wickedly at the dark Italian who, minus twenty pounds or so, could have passed as a double for Joey from *Friends*.

"Did I mention that I own a jewelry store?" Tony added playfully, his brown eyes fixed hungrily-- wolf-like-- on Krista.

She laughed and raised her eyebrows. "I think you did. Right after I told you diamonds are a Swedish Au Pair’s best friend."

God, she was sharp. Looking at Tony, I could almost read the naughty thoughts flashing on his forehead... right above his snout. Stay away from my Au Pair, I thought to myself jealously.

Krista returned to the kitchen and we returned to the game. Out of the corner of my eye I watched Tony as he surveyed Krista at the breakfast bar eating strawberries. By the way Tony jostled in his seat I could tell he wanted to show Krista the family jewels. Pig.

A few minutes later, when the berries were gone, Krista waved good-bye and, much to the sadness of the others, disappeared downstairs. As for me, I was glad to see her go, for she could do nothing but get me into trouble. Plus, I didn’t like the way she looked at Tony, or the way he looked back. Nobody could know my secret... and nobody could share *my* Au Pair.

Around one-thirty, we played a final hand and the game broke up quickly. I'd won a couple hundred bucks, which more than paid for the beers and hor d’oeuvres. My three j.o.'s left first,

then Bob, but Tony hung around, pensive, slowly sipping his Heineken, seemingly not wanting to leave. Although he was my closest friend on the street, our conversations generally centered on sports, cars, fertilizer, and Home Depot. Now, however, I sensed something deeper troubling him. "What's up, Tony?" I asked.

"Not me," he confided. "Abbey and I are having some bad problems."

"Like what?"

"Like we don't love each other anymore."

I nodded, unsurprised. I wondered if he suspected the same about me and Susan.

"It's like my only purpose is to bring home money, take out the trash, and cut the grass."

"I hear ya, buddy," I responded, noting the familiarity. Except for his dark Italian features and the extra weight, he was me and I was him: the Brotherhood of Unhappily Married Men...  
BUMM!

"I hate my life," he summed.

Unfortunately, other than telling him to get his own Au Pair, I didn't have any advice for him, and the room grew eerily quiet and uncomfortable. Knowing I couldn't help him, I secretly hoped he'd just leave and deal with it himself. What the hell did he expect me to do about it—share my Au Pair with him?

Seconds later, the sound of footsteps on the basement stairs broke that quiet. We turned to see Krista coming up the steps. She was barely wrapped in a short, silk purple robe that left nothing to the imagination. My heart jumped as I wondered what in God's name she was doing.

Confidently, she walked over to the poker table and sat down next to Tony. "Maybe you need an Au Pair?" she suggested suggestively, looking at him the way she'd looked at me five



days earlier before dropping the Winnie the Pooh towel.

Tony's somber look disappeared as quickly as his erection surely emerged, and his eyes locked onto the swelling breasts that practically fell out onto his drooling tongue. My blood pressure spiked. What the hell was she doing? And why?

Although unable to understand why, I could see where Krista was heading, and I didn't like it. But what could I say? I couldn't very well tell her to go to bed. I couldn't tell her to leave Tony alone. I couldn't tell her anything. Nor could I tell Tony to leave her alone. I couldn't tell him that she was my Au Pair to bang.

Miffed, I flashed Krista a 'how-dare-you' stare.

As if knowing she held the winning cards in this real-life game, she just smiled back. [Or was it a smirk?].

"What good would an Au Pair do me?" Tony responded to her suggestion.

"Use your imagination," Krista shot back sexily. Tossing her hair and stretching her shoulders back, she caused her robe to open even further. Tony didn't need his imagination to see where she was leading him. Those two glorious tits hanging out were clues enough.

On fire with anger and confusion, and not wanting to see or hear any more of this betrayal, I threw my hands in the air. "Hey, I'm staying out of this," I declared. "You two are both adults. I'm going to bed." As I walked by, I flashed Krista a final evil glare. She smiled back brazenly. By the time I reached the master bedroom, I was steaming... and shaking. What the hell was going on? Didn't Krista know she was supposed to be mine?

I lay in bed and listened to their muffled talk and her cute laughs. That didn't bother me so

much. What really bothered me were the sounds of silence... intimate sounds of silence. What else would Tony and *my* Au Pair be doing at two a.m.? Sooner than later, two sets of footsteps crept downstairs. I crawled out of bed and slipped into Susan's walk-in closet. When framing Krista's bedroom, I'd cut into this ventilation duct to run a supply line into her room. Now, with my ear against the metal grate, the duct was like a sound conduit, and I listened to the two traitors...

“I don't understand why you American men put up with wives who treat you like shit.”

“Because divorce is too expensive. Abbey would get half my store, my house, and I'd end up paying her \$5,000 a month in alimony and child support.”

“But if she's such a bitch, why do you stay faithful to her? Why not go out and have a good time when you can? At least make it bearable for yourself.”

“When did I say I was faithful to her?”

“I thought you did. Right after you told me you owned a jewelry store.”

“It must have been some more of that English double-talk,” Tony said.

“So you fool around on her?”

There was a noticeable pause and through the hardwood floor I could almost see the gears turning in Tony's head as he pondered his response to another loaded question. “I'll say this: I've never once turned down a beautiful Swedish Au Pair.”

“Good.”

“Why good?”

“Because I want you to fuck me... right now. I want you to fuck me hard.”

In my mind I could see the Swede opening her robe. I could also feel Tony's blood spurting through his Italian sausage. [Or was that my own blood spurting through my body in jealous rage?].

What kind of bullshit was Krista pulling? *Fuck me hard?* Wasn't I good enough for her? Why did she have to fuck the neighbors, too?

It wasn't long before I heard Tony grunting and the Swede yelping out like that familiar excited doggie. Obviously, I wasn't the only one who could make the little whore do that, I thought sadly as I crawled back into bed and tossed and turned in rage. No longer was I special. Nope, far from it. In reality, I was just some guy she fucked...just one of probably many in her stable. God, my life sucked.

A half hour later, when I heard them do it again, I came close to banging on the floor for them to quiet down. Talk about rude and inconsiderate. The Swedish whore was all but throwing this in my face. At three, my front door opened and closed quickly, and my back-stabbing neighbor slunk back home. He was worse than a pig. He was a slithering, slimy snake. And I was all alone in my bed, mad and sad. I finally fell asleep at 3:40.

# FIVE

Of course Jack woke me at seven the next morning. Why is it that kids sleep in on school days but never on weekends? Groggy and still pissed about the Italian Snake and the Swedish Whore, I pulled my seventy-five pound legacy into bed with me. Hugging Jack allowed me to momentarily forget about the two traitors, and in that moment of clarity, I decided to rededicate myself to my kids, to being the best dad I could be. So what if Krista was a whore? That was her problem, not mine. I had my fun with her. I sure as hell didn't need her anymore. Hell, I went 34 years without her, I was sure I could go another 34. Right? Unfortunately, no matter how hard I tried, I had trouble convincing myself of that. She was just too damn beautiful. I missed her not being all mine.

"Hey buddy," I said to sleepy Jack, "you sleep alright?"

He nodded. "Un-huh. But I kept hearing a dog barking in the middle of the night."

*That was no dog, son. That was your babysitter. "You must have been dreaming."*

"It sounded like a dog."

*It's a new breed... a Swedish whore-dog, I think. I shrugged.*

"Can we have pancakes?" he asked.

"Sure. Let's go."

Jenn awoke twenty minutes later to the smell of homemade pancakes and simmering strawberry syrup. It's a good thing I like to cook; otherwise, there's no telling what the kids would have eaten on a day-to-day basis. I often wondered what would happen if I didn't cook. Would Susan actually make something? Or would she just bitch at me? [Okay... stupid question... I know that answer.]. As for Krista, she'd probably just cut up strawberries and squirt a mound of Reddi Wip on the side: *Dinner's ready. Here, let me show you how to eat 'em, Jenn. I'll teach you how to make men squirm in their chairs.*

At 10:30 mass at Saint James, Father Kane gave one of those fire-and-brimstone homilies that really got my attention. "Do you not know," he boomed from the pulpit, "that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor prostitutes will inherit the kingdom of God."

Of course he stared directly at me when he said 'adulterer'. Where was Tony when I needed him? I slunk down in the pew, closed my eyes and just listened.

"No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. The choice is ours and ours alone to make, just as God does not choose eternal punishment for any of us. Choose to serve the Devil and you chose

the destiny of the Devil: the bottomless pit, the burning fires, and the wailing and gnashing of teeth for all eternity.”

Jesus! Father Kane sure could paint a scary picture. In the darkness, I envisioned myself in hell surrounded by a gaggle of wailing, teeth-gnashing lawyers who argued with me incessantly. A band of gorgeous, naked Swedish whores would be there, too, and each time I touched them my fingers would sear away into charcoal bits. *Ouch. Please God, let the homily end with the usual feel-good note.*

“If you have fallen to temptation, you can still be saved. As a baptized believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, you can be restored to the purity when you were first baptized. Pray for forgiveness and you can again have fellowship with God. Let us pray.”

Liking that ending, I whispered a quick prayer: *Dear God, Please forgive my adultery and make me a better Christian. As for Krista and Tony, punish their evil wickedness with slow, painful deaths.* [I know: not the most Christian thing to do. But what the hell... someday I'd repent for that one. That's the good thing about religion-- one day you're terrible, the next you go to confession, ask for forgiveness, and you're given a clean slate. It's like a Get out of Jail Free card, but for Hell. Truly, what *would* life be like without religion?!].

After church, I took the kids to the park with the big tube slides-- the Tube Park, we called it. Blue skies and seventy degrees, it should have been relaxing. Unfortunately, my mind conjured the image of Tony's Italian tube sliding in and out of my Swedish Au Pair. My blood pressure spiked. Why had Krista done that to me? Wasn't I good enough for her?

As the kids ran around, I studied the other families at the park. How many of these smiling dad's screwed the family Au Pair? Worse, how many screwed their next door neighbor's Au Pair?

And how many of these innocent looking moms treated their husbands like shit? Mostly, though, I wondered what had happened to my life: my wife didn't want me and I didn't want her; and worse, my Au Pair was openly cheating on me with my slimy next door neighbor.

Jesus!

After the park, I made grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch, Jenn went to a classmate's birthday party, and Jack walked next door to play with Tony's son, Teddy. Sipping a leftover Heineken, I brooded alone in the family room and watched the second half of the Skins-Lions game. Down 28-19, even the Redskins— and their *two hundred million dollar payroll!*— were failing me. Good God Almighty, what more could happen?

Around 3:30, Krista finally emerged from her den of iniquity and sauntered into the kitchen. At a minimum, I expected her to be embarrassed or sorrowful for betraying me. She opened the fridge and pulled out strawberries. She looked like she didn't have a care in the world.

“Hey,” she called out rather upbeat, as if screwing the next door neighbor was socially-acceptable behavior.

So much for embarrassed or sorrowful, I thought, having momentarily forgotten about the 50-50-90 rule. I stared at the football game and grew angry for being so ignorant-- even a pig farmer would have been smart enough to have poisoned the strawberries. What was I thinking?

Krista noted the silent treatment. “Hello?” she sang out.

More silence.

“You not talking to me?”

Commander Squeaky stirred at the sound of her voice and the curves barely concealed by

her robe. He hoped to peek at those titties again. Stay the course, Commander, I ordered. [Somewhere in his response I swore I heard the words ‘fuck off, Jeff.’].

Krista spoke out, “Oh, come on, Jeff, I’m not your possession. Why do you have to do this to me? It was nothing... just a sport fuck.” She said it a-matter-of-factly, as if talking about an aerobic exercise.

*A sports fuck.* I turned to her and glared. “Well I’m not out *sport fucking* anyone else. Not even my fucking wife.” My voice was as cold as the Heineken.

She looked at me like I was crazy. “Oh my, God. I can’t believe it. You’re really mad, aren’t you?”

“I don’t like to hear you *sport fucking* the neighbors, that’s all. Not in my house.”

She looked at me like I was the crazy one. “You don’t get it, do you?”

Evidently I didn’t. I shook my head and scrunched my face. “Get what?”

“I didn’t fuck Tony to make you mad. I fucked Tony to make *him happy*. That was the only reason. What’s so wrong with that?”

I played her explanation over in my head slowly. *Huh.* Finally, like an epiphany, it made sense. She fucked Tony *to make him happy*. That was why! It wasn’t because I wasn’t good enough. It wasn’t anything to do with me. It was for Tony! She fucked Tony *to make him happy*! Talk about the ultimate gift! I felt my body uncoil. How could I be mad at her for making Tony happy? *What was so wrong with that? All women should be so giving.* Next, I reminded myself how good she was to me. So what if she was good to others, too? Wasn’t envy one of the seven deadly sins? Wasn’t I committed to being a better Christian? I nodded slightly.

She looked deeply into my eyes. “You know I never want to hurt you, Jeff.”



Both Commander Squeaky and I believed her.

“Would it help if I said I was sorry?” she added.

The sweet Swede knew the right things to say and I couldn't help but smile at her. I heard Commander Squeaky loud and clear this time: *it would really help if you got down on her knees with the Reddi Wip!* He stirred.

She smiled back. “Come on, please don't be mad at me. I'm really sorry. Really. It was nothing.”

I sulked some more, trying to get as much out of it as I could, but I couldn't stay mad at this Au Pair from heaven.

“Plus,” she continued, “if you're mad at me, I won't be able to give you the present I've got planned for tonight.”

Now both the Commander and I really perked up. “What present?”

“If I tell you, it won't be a surprise.”

*Surprise?* My heart leaped. I loved her surprises. “When is this *surprise* going to happen?” I made the quotes sign with my fingers.

She winked. “After the kids go to bed.”

I especially loved her surprises while my kids slept. Indeed, my kids' Swedish Au Pair did her best work while they slept. I smiled at her again and she gave me a quick peck on the cheek.

“Can I borrow the Saab?”

“Sure,” I said, figuring it had something to do with my surprise.

As she walked away, I canceled Krista's death prayer... and Tony's, too. He was only

human, I reminded myself. I would have done the same thing. Check that. I *was doing* the same thing. If God could forgive me, then the least I could do was forgive Tony.

Late in the fourth quarter, the Redskins scored a TD, recovered an on-side kick and kicked a last second 48-yard field goal to pull out a miraculous 29-28 win. Things were definitely looking up for Jeff MacDonald.

I decided to walk next door and see how Jack was doing.

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Tony's wife Abbey greeted me at the front door. I hate Abbey... absolutely hate her. Replace her blonde hair and green eyes with brown, and she could have been Susan's clone. Together, the two women were a dangerous combination, feeding off each other like a deadly virus as they mutated and exchanged ideas about redecorating, husband-bashing, money-spending, and Pleasantville-facades.

"I heard it was quite a poker game," she said dryly.

Your husband certainly *poked her*, I thought to myself humorously. "Yep. Complete with gooey nachos, cold beer, cigars, and lots of testosterone"... *especially your husband's*.

I wondered if Abbey knew how Tony felt about their marriage. She was probably as clueless as Susan. Or maybe it really didn't matter? So long as the facade held up, maybe nothing else mattered?

"Sounds too manly."

"It wasn't a pretty sight," I said, grinning. "Is the master of the Castle up and about yet?"

*...or is he still dragging from sport fucking my Au Pair... twice?*

Now Abbey grinned. “He’s been up with Teddy since seven. Can you believe *he* let *me* sleep in? When he crawled into bed at three. I figured I wouldn’t see him out of bed before 11. Whatever you put in the nachos sure put a charge into him.”

*I use a special Swedish sauce with two nice tits and a tight little ass.*

“Oh yeah? So where is he?”

“He’s out back with the boys. They’re helping him build *his wall*.” Abbey rolled her eyes as she said it. Tony’s wall was almost legendary around the neighborhood. When finished, the hand-laid, stacked stone-wall would cover the entire perimeter of his back yard. The stones alone had to be costing him at least \$25,000. I waved bye to Abbey and walked around the brick Cape Cod to Tony's backyard sanctuary. Tony and the two boys were mixing mortar in a wheel barrel.

“Ah, nothing like the sight of men hard at work,” I called out as I approached.

Tony turned, beaming as brightly as the four o'clock sun. “Hey, buddy!”

I’d never seen him so excited to see me. I guess after a man fucks your Au Pair, there’s a new bond between you. “How’s the wall?” I asked innocently.

“It’ll be done by spring.” His eyes were alive, almost thanking me. Obviously Krista had succeeded in making Tony happy, and at that moment, I felt good for my brethren swine. And why not? Sharing Krista was better than no Krista at all. I remembered another kindergarten lesson: to share. Plus, my surprise was less than eight hours away!

# SIX

I grilled chicken for the kids and we ate on the back deck under a canopy of colorful leaves on a beautiful early fall evening. Other than sharing my mistress with my neighbor, the weekend had been perfect. The fact that Susan hadn't yet checked in from California only added to the feeling. No wonder I felt so relaxed. I looked at my watch: 6:30 here, 3:30 out west. I wished Susan and I were always on different time zones. Knowing she was driving down to San Diego later that evening, I couldn't help but wonder if a tumultuous earthquake was overdue? Wouldn't it be nice if the earth opened up and swallowed Susan as she drove down I-5? I almost laughed aloud. With my luck, though, the earth would probably reject her, spitting her back out like a wad of hot magma.

... *A wad of hot magma.* Commander Squeaky stirred as I thought of Krista and my coming surprise. "Time for baths, kids," I called out abruptly as they dawdled, spreading their peas around

their plates in that timeless kid manner.

"Can we watch t.v.?"

"Not tonight."

"Can we have desert?"

*Not tonight. Daddy's having desert tonight.* "Nope. Time to get ready for bed. You've both got school tomorrow." *You two need to get to sleep so Krista can give me my surprise when she gets home...*

After baths and teeth-brushing, I read the kids *The Giving Tree*. As a kid, my mom used to read it to me almost nightly and I grew to love that book. Afterwards, my mom would tell me that if everybody gave until they had nothing left to give, there wouldn't be any wars or hate, and the world would be the most beautiful, wonderful place-- like heaven, she'd say. I didn't really think much of it back then, but today I knew she was right. As for me on this day, I counted my blessings: I had my own slice of heaven... I had the Giving Swede! And no tree on earth had anything over her.

As I tucked the kids into bed, I contemplated slipping some Benadryl into their bedtime juice, to ensure my surprise wouldn't be disrupted, but in the end, decided against it. The day I drugged my kids was the day I stopped screwing their Au Pair, I told myself. That sure as hell sounded responsible. After kissing them good-night, I bounded downstairs to see if the Giving Swede had returned. With no sign of her, I grabbed a Heineken, laid down on the hammock on the deck, and read *Forrest Gump* under the soft glow of the deck lighting.

I love Forrest almost as much as that Giving Tree. I can relate to him... we're both over-

achieving country boys. But today I felt an even closer connection to the mythical figure from Greenbow, Alabama. Just as Forrest was always in the right place at the right time, for the moment, so, too, was I. Indeed, thanks to the Swedish Au Pair, I was living my own fairytale life. My life could have been a movie... X-rated no doubt, but sure as hell entertaining.

Two beers and seventy pages later, the garage door opened, the Saab entered, and I leaped out of the hammock like a kid leaping out of bed on Christmas morning: *Yippeeee! Time for my surprise!* Closing the sliding screen door to the kitchen, I was unpleasantly surprised to see Krista walking in from the garage with a friend in tow. Instinctively, I wondered if this new development would put a kink in my surprise.

“Hey, Jeff,” Krista called out.

I waved. “Hi.”

“This is Anna,” Krista said, motioning to her friend. “She’s from Sweden, too.”

I faked a smile at Anna. *Well tell her to go home so I can get my surprise.* She was shorter than Krista, slightly dumpy, but with those same Swedish blue eyes, blonde locks, and bronze skin. It never ceased to amaze me how such a northern-most country could produce such bronzed skin tones. Perhaps it has something to do with the hole in the ozone layer, I figured. Screw global warming if this was the result...

“Hi,” I called out.

“Hej,” Anna replied softly in Swedish. She seemed shy.

Krista said something to Anna in Swedish, and the two girls began giggling. I’m not sure what Krista said, but I smiled back, showing my single dimple.

Anna said something back to Krista, again in Swedish, and I began to feel like a foreigner

in my own house. Indeed, if our furniture had been Ikea rather than early American, I would definitely have felt out of sorts.

Krista sensed my bafflement. “Anna thinks you’re cute,” she informed me.

*Swedish women seemed to have a thing for me.* I shrugged. “Tack,” I said, which was about the extent of my Swedish.

Anna whispered something else to Krista, and Krista nodded, her eyes sparkling.

“What’s up?” I asked, wanting to be included in the private conversation.

“Anna wants to know if you’d be interested in a threesome?”

My jaw dropped. A threesome? As in me and you two? So much for Anna being shy! I hesitated. It was one thing being involved with Krista. But this would double my exposure and my risk. For a variety of reasons, I was speechless.

“Surprise!” Krista yelled out excitedly.

*This* was my surprise? My mind raced. “Um, I don’t know, Krista.”

Her face fell. “What’s the matter?”

I motioned for Krista to consult with me in the kitchen. “Look,” I whispered as I glanced at Anna in the family room, “it’s one thing with you and me, but this could complicate things for me.”

“How?”

“You know... the more people involved, the more likely I could get myself into trouble... you know... with Susan.” My eyes were fixed on Krista’s.

Krista shook her head. “It’s okay. Anna’s just visiting. She goes back to Stockholm on

Thursday. She'll be gone before Susan gets back."

That changed things. "Really?" My heart rate picked up.

"Ja."

I glanced over at Anna again. She didn't seem so dumpy anymore. In fact, the longer I looked, the better she looked. I didn't even need Commander Squeaky to chime-in on this decision. Why not? I smiled and envisioned another of my fantasies about to be played out with the Giving Swedes. "Okay."

Krista grabbed a Heineken from the fridge and held one out for Anna. We'll be downstairs getting everything ready. Come down in about ten minutes."

"Should I bring anything?"

"Just yourself. I think I've got everything else."

I didn't doubt the horny Swede. Not knowing how to prepare for a threesome, I settled on a shower, figuring that couldn't hurt. My excitement was tempered by nervousness. Knowing that Krista was more than I could really handle, what was I supposed to do with Anna, too? My sexual situation mirrored life: feast or famine; or poker: a full house one hand, nothing the next. On this night, I had a pair!

Wearing shorts and a Naval Academy t-shirt, I bounded down the stairs to my awaiting destiny.

Krista's door was cracked open, and I stepped inside to find the two Swedes scrunched together under the covers of the full-sized bed. Giggling like silly school girls when they saw me, they pulled back the covers invitingly and without thinking, I stripped naked and hopped between their sweet smelling skin, likening myself to the filling of a bronze Swedish Oreo.



*Boring? Me? No way... my life was anything but boring!* I couldn't wait to see how the movie would end.

Some indeterminate time later, we were human pretzels playing a perverted game of naked twister-- left hand Anna's tit, right hand Krista's ass-- when the phone rang. Reaching for the disturbing contraption, I fell, taking Krista down with me. The two Swedes were laughing in the background when I picked up the phone.

"Hello," I answered heartily, sounding like a man in the middle of two naked Swedish 18 year-olds. I didn't think twice it might be Susan. *Susan who?*

"Jeff?"

Susan's nasal voice drained the blood from my face, and I quickly covered the mouthpiece with my shaking, stone cold hand. "Shhhhhh," I said to the laughing Swedes.

Their laughing stopped.

"Hi Susan," I said into the phone, trying to sound morose. That was the Jeff MacDonald she knew and hated.

"What was that noise in the background?" she asked. [Except for my complete unhappiness, our dysfunctional marriage, and my torrid affair with the Au Pair, the lawyer never missed a thing.].

"What noise?"

"That laughing noise."

"Oh. Uh, I'm just watching t.v."

"I thought you'd be watching Sunday night football."

*I would be...if I weren't playing naked twister. Krista has a real cool rule: anytime the spinner lands on green, you have to touch a fellow player with your tongue.* I thought quickly. "It was a boring game."

"Who's playing?" she asked, not buying my lie. She knew I was nothing, if not a Sports junkie.

*Jesus!* Think Jeff, I commanded. In a flash I remembered an ESPN add from watching the Nats game the night before. "Raiders and Seahawks," I blurted.

"So what are you watching then?"

"Ummmm, just some dumb movie."

"What movie?"

Jesus! Susan should have been a prosecutor, not a lobbyist for the timber industry. "I'm not really sure, I just flipped it on."

"What channel?"

*Fuck you, Susan. Is this why you called... to grill me about the t.v. schedule?* "NBC."

"NBC has figure skating on tonight." Susan, the former skater, always knew when the damn ice fairies were on... even across three time zones.

"No, it's TBS," I said, recovering hurriedly. "Movies for Guys Who Like Movies, I think."

Seemingly satisfied, she stopped the interrogation. "How are the kids?"

"Good. We went to church this morning, then to the park. I grilled chicken tonight."

While I talked to Susan, Anna began to lick my nipples and Krista took on Commander Squeaky. With my free hand I waved for them to stop, but they just smiled and continued, as if enjoying the moment, the irony. And, in all truth, so was I.

Susan's voice filled my ear. "Is Krista helping you out?"

I looked down at the Swede bobbing masterfully on Commander Squeaky. *Yes indeed!*

"A little. You know her, she kind of does her own thing"... *and she does it quite well, I might add!*

"How was your sister's?" I asked, quickly steering the conversation away from the naked Swede doing her own thing with her flicking tongue.

"Good. Yesterday we did the Hollywood walk of fame. Today, we went to the Getty Museum."

*Whipppeeee!* "Uh huh." My breathing increased and I could feel myself almost ready to come. I needed to end the call quick. "Well, uh, that's, all that's really, uh, happening around here," I added, taking quick breaths with each 'uh.'

"What did you'all do yesterday?" Susan asked.

Did she really care? I took a big gulp of air and tried not to think about the two Swedes working me over. But I knew I couldn't hold back much longer. "Um, we... hold on a second, Susan, I think I hear someone at the front door," I said, putting my hand over the mouthpiece as I exploded.

Taking several deep breaths, I regained my composure and uncovered the mouthpiece. "Um, it was just the wind." I took a deep, deep breath and continued. "Yesterday we went to the zoo and to the mall. And I had the boys over for poker last night."

"Okay." She paused. "You seem a little out of it. Everything's alright, isn't it?"

*Things couldn't be better.* "Yeah. I'm fine. I'm just a little worn out." That was true!

"All right. I'll give you a call tomorrow, then."

"Okay, Kr--... uh, honey." I almost slipped and called her Krista. Jesus! And I hadn't called Susan 'honey' in years. I was screwing up badly.

"Bye," Susan said.

"Okay. Uh... bye."

Click.

Setting the receiver down, I took several deep breaths and tried to stop my shaking. That was bad.

Krista smiled at me. "Did you like having two naked girls from Sweden getting you off while you talked with your wife?"

It was hard to be mad or lie, so I just nodded. Susan wouldn't suspect anything, I told myself. She didn't think I was sexy. She would never think that two Swedish girls could find the boring son of a pig farmer sexy.

Before passing out from exhaustion, I watched the two girls go at it with each other. I remember wishing that I had them on film, to show the guys at poker sometime. Of course I didn't know the whole event *was* on film.

# SEVEN

The two Swedes were still in bed the next morning, and before leaving for the Metro, I thanked them for the night of my life, made my staff meeting on time, and had a rather uneventful day. [Clearly, the nights were the exciting part of my life now!]. On the Metro ride home, I amused myself by studying the stoic faces of the other commuters. Those not reading the Post or playing on their phones stared straight ahead with blank faces and ‘I-hate-my-life’ looks. This was, I quickly decided, what life was like for those poor, timid saps who chose to color inside life's lines. Obviously, none of them were banging an extraordinary Swedish Au Pair. If they were, they would have been like me, smiling and wondering what surprises the coming night held. Little did I know how exciting the coming night would be?

As I walked up the street from the Metro, I noted four cars parked in front of the Colonial.

*Hmmmm.* Something was happening at the house, I thought, as I made my way up the flagstone walkway. The booming bass drum and loud party music from inside confirmed my thoughts. Stepping into the foyer, I saw a swarm of bodies dancing wildly in the formal living room to my left. Most held Heinekens. One guy held a bottle of Chevas.

What the hell was going on, I wondered frantically as ‘*Who Let the Dogs Out*’ boomed from the speakers. *Who had let the dogs out?*

I looked for Krista among the dancers, but she was conspicuously missing. I recognized Anna, though. She looked dumpy again, I thought, as I walked over to her. "Where's Krista?" I yelled, barely audible over the music.

She smiled at me and pointed to the basement.

More concerned for the safety of Jack and Jenn than anything else, I ran down the basement stairs. When I found them sitting on the carpet watching *Inspector Gadget*, my heart slowed... a bit.

"Hi daddy," Jack said, not taking his eyes off the screen.

"Hi daddy," Jenn mimicked.

I kissed each of them on the forehead.

"Krista's having a party," Jack informed me.

*Thanks, inspector.* I nodded. "Where *is* Krista?"

"I think she's in her room."

Her door was closed, but I didn't let that stop me. I went to open it, but found it locked. "Krista!" I shouted.

A flurry of noises inside her room followed, the door cracked open, and Krista's head

peeked around the door jam. I could tell she was naked.

"What the hell's going on?" I yelled, almost hysterical.

"What?" she answered calmly, almost oblivious.

I could smell the beer on her breath. "With all these people?"

"Oh. A few friends came over." She didn't seem the least bit concerned. Perhaps having a party whenever she wanted was akin to screwing the next door neighbor? Perhaps she was just throwing a party in my house *to make all her friends happy?*

"What are you doing in there?"

"Nothing."

"You're supposed to be taking care of Jack and Jenn."

"I am. They're fine."

"You're not taking care of them if you're in there with the door locked."

"Look at them," she said, pointing to the kids. "They're fine. They wanted to watch a movie."

A male voice called out from behind Krista. "Hey baby, hurry up."

The whore was sport fucking again! My blood pressure spiked, and without thinking, I pushed the door open and stormed into the room. An impatient punk with a goatee sat up in Krista's bed. "Who the fuck are you?" I shouted.

"Who the fuck are you?" the 20 year-old shot back, clearly unimpressed by my Navy whites and the three gold stripes on my shoulder pads. Perhaps he thought I was the Good Humor Man bringing desert for the party.

"I'm the fucking guy who owns this house," I shouted.

He smiled, unfazed.

I spelled it out for him. "So get your fucking clothes on and get the fuck outta here," I said with teeth and fists clenched in rage. I hate punks like him. He probably couldn't spell U.S.A. First Tony, now this prick. No matter her reason-- to spread happiness to every man with a stiff dick-- she really was just a two-bit whore.

"Okay, dude. Chill already." His head bobbed like a bobble-head doll, as if he couldn't fathom anyone so uncool.

"I'll chill when you're outta here."

Two minutes later, goatee-boy was dressed. "I'll see you later, baby," he called out to Krista as he sauntered by me.

Not if I had anything to do with it.

Following him up the stairs, I hit the power button on the speaker. "Party's over," I announced to the dancers in my living room.

Amid crazy looks and mumbles of 'bullshit', 'asshole', and some Swedish words I didn't understand, the room cleared quickly enough. From the living room window I watched the teenagers pile into the cars outside and drive away. Shaking, I walked back downstairs to deal with Krista.

"This is bullshit," I said, closing the door to her room behind me.

She sat topless on her bed sipping a Heineken. "What's bullshit?" she answered, almost mocking me.

"A party. Here. In the middle of the day. Without asking. What the hell were you



thinking?"

She swigged her beer and chuckled. "Jesus Jeff, you're starting to sound like Susan."

"Don't give me that crap, Krista. You can't just have a party whenever you feel like it. And you can't just lock the door and fuck some dirtball with my kids right outside the door. Even if you're doing it to make him *happy*." I made the quotes sign with my fingers.

"But I can fuck you, right?" she shouted back angrily, as if wanting Jack and Jenn to hear.

"Shhhhhh," I said, trying to calm her. WTF? "This isn't about you and me. It's about this house and my kids." I'd never seen her so confrontational.

"What's your point?" she asked.

"My point is this: you still need to follow the rules of the house."

Her face took on a look of confidence and superiority. "Here's the new rule of the house, Jeff," she said, "I'll do what I want, when I want, where I want, and with anyone I want." She smirked.

Playing her words over in my mind, confusion saturated me. Before my eyes, it seemed, Krista had been transformed from a heavenly Swedish Au Pair into a hellish American teenager. What in God's name was wrong with her?

"Not in this house," I countered, standing my ground, wondering if this was a prelude to future teenage battles with Jack and Jenn.

"Yes I will."

"Says who?"

Now a dry smile came over her face, like a Texas Hold'em player with aces in the hole.

She got out of bed and picked up a VCR tape from her dresser. "Says this," she said, boldly holding the tape out for me.

Although my brain didn't fully understand, my heart sensed danger. It jumped. "What's that?"

"Why don't you go see for yourself?"

I was shaking as I imagined what might be on that tape. Was that possible? No way. Krista wouldn't do something like that. We were too good together. We were genuine.

"But you might want to send the kids upstairs, first," she cautioned. "Seeing their daddy naked on the big screen might be a little too much for their innocent little eyes and ears."

Her words made me go faint and I felt my chest tighten. As I walked out of her bedroom into the rec room, my heart was thundering against my ribs. "Jack, you and Jenn go upstairs and watch t.v. in the family room," I ordered, my voice as serious as the heart attack I felt coming on.

The two quickly scampered up the stairs as Krista, now in a tank top, joined me in front of the t.v. I ejected *Inspector Gadget* and inserted Krista's tape into the VCR. Holding my breath, I waited for the screen to light up. My legs were jelly, my chest like a vice, and I imagined myself as a death row inmate sitting in the electric chair, waiting for the switch to be thrown, wondering how much it was going to hurt.

When the screen lit up I saw myself in Krista's bedroom, dressed in Navy whites. Damn... I *did* look like the Good Humor man. My heart was pumping wildly and I gulped air as I studied the screen.

"I've got to go," I heard myself say.

"Are you sure you don't have another minute or so?" It was Krista's teasing voice, but she

wasn't in view.

“I’ve got to be outta here in fifteen minutes.”

"This won't take long. I just want a little treat. You wouldn't have anything for me, would you, Mr. Ice Cream Man?" On the tape I could hear the sound of the small fridge door next to her bed opening.

“What do you have in mind?” I heard myself say. As I watched, I knew the answer to that one. And I was sick... down to the bone. Shit. I felt my stomach heave.

On the t.v., Krista walked into view. I looked hard, certain it was the devil and not her. When Shakespeare said the devil hath the power to assume a pleasing shape, he must have had her in mind. Helpless, I watched as she dropped to her most unholy knees and undid my belt.

“You learn fast,” I heard myself say.

Krista looked up, smiled, unzipped my trousers, and pulled my pants and boxers down. “I’m pretty smart for an 18 year-old Au Pair.”

As I watched Krista top Commander Squeaky with creamy Reddi Wip, I knew just how smart the little bitch really was. I also knew she was more than just a horny teenager looking for a good time or a sport-fuck. Truly, this demon was the devil's Au Pair.

“What’s long and hard and has seamen?” Satan's little helper said playfully on the t.v. With a numb mind, I watched myself shrug. This wasn’t playful. Nor was it just a game any longer. This was my life. And it was falling apart.

“A submarine,” Krista said aloud in unison with her answer on the t.v. She hit a button on the remote and paused the tape, freezing the larger-than-life image of her and Commander Squeaky

on the big screen.

"What the fuck is this about?" I asked, trying to sound in control. Unfortunately, I couldn't stop my voice from shaking... nor could I erase the picture staring back on the t.v.

"I told you, Jeff. It's about doing what I want, where I want, when I want, with whoever I want."

Still shocked and in disbelief, I said nothing. Obviously, they didn't teach fair play to Swedish kindergartners. That, or Krista had been too busy kissing classmates and had missed that lesson.

"Everything we did is on the tape," she said coldly. "All the games we played, even the threesome while you talked to Susan on the phone last night." Now Krista was smiling wickedly, almost sadistically, seemingly proud of herself.

No longer was she the Giving Au Pair, I was sure. And I was no longer Forrest Gump in the right place or the right time. Shit. How could she? Why? And how could I have let this happen? Was this really happening?

Taking a deep breath, I thought back to all those poor saps on the Metro with the blank looks. I longed to be like them again, to be back inside the safety of the lines. "What do you want from me?" I stammered. It was, I knew, the ultimate question.

She raised her eyebrows, walked to her room, and returned with a piece of paper. "This is what I want," she said, handing me the paper, obviously prepared for my question.

My mind grew frantic as I scanned her numbered list quickly. Holy fuck. She wanted quite a lot. Numb and disoriented, I searched for answers to questions that didn't make sense. "Why are you doing this?" I managed to ask. "I thought you liked me? I thought you said you'd

never hurt me?"

She shook her head and smiled that evil grin again. Now, I hated her mouth. "Obviously, you thought wrong. I lied."

*Obviously.* I put my head in my hands and sat down on the Cargo sofa. Jesus Christ! My fantasy life was over. Just like that... in the blink of an eye. Now, my nightmare was happening. Could this really be? My chest heaved and I wondered if she'd feel sorry for me if I cried.

Krista sat impassioned, staring past me.

"Why are you doing this to me?" I asked.

She smirked. "Because."

"Because why?"

"Because I can."

Her cold callousness hit me hard. I wasn't dealing with a normal human being anymore, I told myself. Krista was some sort of hellish Swedish psychopath. Jesus!

Knowing kindergarten would be no help in this situation, my mind fast-forwarded to the Naval Academy. I remembered the first lesson they taught in Leadership 101: even if you're scared, pretend not to be... nobody will know the difference. "This isn't going to work," I said bluntly, trying to sound convincing. Unfortunately, my pretending couldn't keep my voice from shaking.

"Yes it will," she countered quickly, cool and confident, like a seasoned poker player holding the nuts-- the winning hand. "This tape is gold. If Susan ever sees it, she'll kill you. I could probably get you kicked out of the Navy with this tape."

Clearly, the foreigner knew how powerful the tape was. I could face court-martial for adultery. And, given the lewdness of the tape, it was more than just a probability. It was almost a certainty. As for Susan, she'd have a field day with the tape in court. I'd probably even lose basic visitation rights with the kids. In a flash, I saw myself losing my kids, my house, my career... everything. In pleasuring myself, I had nuked myself. Shit! This wasn't happening. It couldn't be... no... please, God, no.

Dazed, weak, and sick, I looked over her list again. One, use of the Saab whenever she wanted. Two, an increase in her weekly stipend from \$165 to \$500. Three, a case of Heineken plus a bottle of Absolute each week. Four, no babysitting on weekends. Five, an extra two weeks of holiday during the next year. And sixth and final, round trip tickets for two wherever she went on holiday, plus expenses.

It was a lot, but given the alternative, I was beginning to think her demands weren't so unreasonable. I did some quick mental calculations. The money was do-able. I'd have to cash in some stocks Susan didn't know about, but I could handle that. The harder issues involved the Saab, the weekend babysitting, and the vacations. How could I manage those things? With Susan already on my case about the lazy Swede, what would she say when Krista used the Saab whenever she wanted? And that Krista should have all her weekends free? And that Krista should have four weeks of vacation even though we were only required to give her two?

What would Susan think? That was an easy one: she'd think Krista had some dirty pictures of me. And unfortunately, she'd be absolutely right. Jesus H. Christ. What had I done? What could I do?

# EIGHT

My first thought was to rip out the tape and destroy the evidence. Unfortunately, Krista seemed to read my mind. “I’ve got another copy, so don’t think about tearing this one up, or finding the other one. The copy isn’t here at the house. It’s safely tucked away.”

Somehow, I expected nothing less. In this new world of horror, the Swede was truly smarter and more conniving than any 18 year-old, American or otherwise. She'd outwitted me this far, and I was sure she had all the bases covered. Next, I considered killing her... even if it would add another biggie to my list of sins. But that would be my last resort. For the time being, I would try and work a deal. “You really think this is going to work?”

"I know it will."

Her supreme confidence was unnerving. I eyed her hard. "How do you know?"

"It's the first thing the old Au Pairs teach you before coming here. After a month or so, they tell you to become friends with the husband, come-on to him, and get some dirty pictures; once that's done, you're free... and being an Au Pair becomes a lot more fun. I'm surprised you didn't know about it."

I let out a single, frustrated chuckle. "That wasn't one of the things they mentioned in the Au Pair informational pamphlet," I said dryly.

"All the Au Pairs do it," she boasted.

"Sounds like quite a racket."

"It is... at least for the ones who succeed."

"I guess it pays to have a homely Au Pair," I responded.

"Is that a compliment?"

"Oh come on, Krista... like you don't know. Give me a fucking break. You know exactly how I feel about you. I can't believe you're doing this to me."

"Don't take it so hard, Jeff. It's nothing personal. It's just business."

"Sure, Krista," I said, without emotion. But the pain and fear felt personal enough.

"I'm serious. I like you. I really, really like you. And I feel sorry for you, too. Susan does treat you like shit."

Although she sounded sincere, it didn't help. After all, at the moment, the Swede wasn't exactly treating me any better than Susan did. I paused long enough to remind myself that she was a cunning, lying blackmailer who held my life in her twisted hands. "I guess that makes me the perfect candidate for your little scheme-- the unhappy husband who loves his kids and wants to stay married for them more than anything."



“You're close, but not perfect,” she answered quickly, almost a-matter-of-factly.

Jesus! Now I wasn't even a perfect candidate for blackmail! [I didn't want to think what this would do to my already-fragile self-esteem?]. “Oh yeah? Am just what the hell am I lacking?”

“Truthfully?”

“No, lie to me,” I said sarcastically. “On top of everything else, that'll probably feel real good right about now.”

She laughed, amused by my sarcasm. “You're not as rich as I hoped you'd be.”

I hung my head in feigned shame. This was getting too bizarre. “Gosh darn, Krista,” I said in my best pig farmer's voice, “You know, I'm really sorry about that. I'll really try harder in the future. I promise.” I couldn't have been more sarcastic.

“It's okay. You've made some smart investments.”

Now mock horror filled my face. Did this mean she knew about my hidden nest egg? “Well, there's some good news. I'm glad I'm not *too* disappointing. I'd really hate to disappoint both my wife *and* my blackmailing Au Pair.” The sarcasm was thick.

“Don't be so down, Jeff. You really are a great guy.”

“What are you doing now, trying to soften me up? Is that another thing the old Au Pairs teach you... after you screw him, try and make him feel good?”

“No. I'm serious. In my own funny way, I really love you. Don't take it so personal. I told you, I just want to make my year here more fun. It's not a lot of fun wiping the ass of a kid that's not even yours.”

“Unless I'm missing something here, last time I checked, Jack and Jenn were both potty

trained.”

“I know. That's the other thing I like about this house.”

Not knowing what else to say, I said nothing. Oh God, this couldn't be happening.

Krista filled the silence. “Look, I know you're probably still in shock. But the fact is, the only way this can work is if we work together.”

*We.* She spoke like she and I were teammates. I maintained my silence.

“If Susan finds out about this, neither of us win,” she added.

I couldn't find any fatal fault with her logic... except for one thing. I asked about that: “How, exactly, do I *win* in this little game of yours?”

She smiled sheepishly. “Actually, you don't win. You can't. The best you can do is keep from losing.”

She was too sharp, too conniving, and I couldn't disagree with her assessment of my predicament.

“You're screwed, Jeff,” she said succinctly, seemingly summarizing my life to date. “If I don't win, I'll just be out of a job that I really don't like.” She said it like a Swede who knew what the English word 'understatement' meant.

“True. But if I go down, you won't be getting what's on this list.” I said it like an American holding the short stick.

“I know. That's why I'm willing to work with you a bit.”

*How gracious of you, you conniving little bitch.* I wondered what she meant by ‘a bit’?

She continued. “I assume you can handle the money part without too much trouble, right? After all, you've got a pretty nice stash that Susan doesn't know about.”

“How do you know what I have?”

“One, because I *really am* smart for an 18 year-old Au Pair; and two, because I set-up my camera on your computer and recorded the password for your Waterhouse account. This morning I checked your portfolio.”

Jesus! She was more than just smart and conniving. She was methodical, too... she and her secret little camera.

"You had a nice little run with Apple," she added.

She knew everything. I stared blankly ahead.

She continued talking, “The hard part will be the Saab, the weekend babysitting, and the holidays, right?”

I nodded. Like a visionary, her thinking was leap years beyond mine.

“I’ve got a plan,” she announced, not missing a beat.

Somehow, I wasn’t surprised by her pronouncement.

“You buy yourself a new car, and tell Susan you traded in the Saab. Meanwhile, you’ll stash the Saab down at the end of Grove Street, back behind that old garage in that vacant lot. Whenever I want to use it, I’ll just take it. When I’m done using it, I’ll put it back there. Susan will never know.”

“You’re sure the five minute walk to the car won’t be too much trouble?” My sarcasm was thick.

“No. It’ll be good exercise. Now that I won’t be fucking you anymore, I’ll need something else to help keep off the calories.” She seemed proud of her witty comeback.

*Ouch.* The blackmailing bitch wasn't even going to keep fucking me? That realization seemed to hurt worst of all. That's when I should have known I was in deep, deep trouble. "What about the babysitting and vacations?" I asked, dryly.

"I'll agree to work the vacations around your family vacations and whenever Susan goes on travel."

"Nobody ever said you weren't generous," I said, again sarcastic. "What about the weekend babysitting?"

"You need to convince Susan that I should have that time to myself. You should be able to handle that much."

"Your confidence is comforting. I hope I won't disappoint you."

"You better not. Because if you do, you're screwed, not me."

I let out a deep breath as I thought of the longer-term implications. "Alright, assuming we can pull this off, what happens when next August rolls around and you take your blackmailing ass back to Sweden?"

She stuck her ass toward me. "You mean this sweet little ass that you won't be touching anymore?"

I smirked.

"Then you'll get the tape back," she said.

"Including all copies?"

"Of course. Why not?"

"Duh. I don't know, Krista. Maybe you'll want to keep blackmailing me?"

"Look, Jeff. I'm not doing this to hurt you or to make the rest of your life a living hell."

"Like I said, it hurts."

"It could hurt worse."

"I'm not going to say 'thanks.'"

"I don't expect you to. But I hope you know that I'm really not asking for anything too outrageous."

I shrugged.

"I *could* ask for more."

I didn't respond, although deep down I knew she was right.

"I just want enough so I can have fun this year."

"Well, you're certainly on your way to doing that."

She smiled proudly. "I know. I love being a good looking girl."

"I'm sure you do. You seem to have developed quite a nice little niche."

She nodded proudly.

"At this rate, you might never have to work another day in your life."

"God gave me gifts," she sighed dramatically, "I just use them as best as I can."

And God gave me an over-demanding, insatiable wife who had to beat rush hour, an immoral former Commander-in-Chief, and a blind, one-eyed monster with a squeaky voice and poor judgment. "And God gave me a penis," I said, boiling my transgression down to the essence.

"You and a couple billion other men."

I nodded. She was just too damn smart. And if I didn't hate her for what she was doing to me-- if I wasn't so damn scared-- I might have liked her. She got what she wanted, when she

wanted it, using the powers God had given her. In a sick sense, that was admirable.

She continued, “You should also know that if anything happens to me during the next eleven months, Susan will receive this tape. So don’t get any ideas about killing me or making me disappear or anything crazy like that.”

So much for the last resort, I thought, nodding. “The world would be much less interesting without you.”

“I’m glad you’re taking this like a man,” she said. “I knew you would. You’re a stand-up guy.”

Having never been called a stand-up guy by a blackmailing 18 year-old Swedish Au Pair, I wasn’t sure how to respond. Yes I did. “Fuck you, Krista,” I shot back.

“No fuck for you,” she said, imitating the Soup Nazi from the Seinfeld re-run we’d watched on Friday night. [Was that just three days ago? It seemed like a different world ago.]. “Oh, and one other thing, if you ever mention any of this to anyone, the deal’s off. Susan will get the tape.”

“Oh yeah? And just who the fuck do you think I might mention it to?”

“I don’t know... maybe Tony from next door?” she suggested.

I nodded, as a light went on above my head. Of course! That explained why she had fucked Tony after poker. It wasn’t a sport fuck... it was one of her business fucks. I could almost envision her having this same conversation with my brethren swine. I could also imagine her on a shopping spree in Tony’s store... *I’ll take that, and that, and those.* Jesus!

“Do we have a deal?” she said, extending her hand.

I wanted to break her arm, but contained my anger and reached out and shook her hand instead. “Deal,” I said with resignation, knowing it was my only alternative.

Now that I'd made my pact with the devil, I wondered if she'd fuck me one last time. I decide to ask. Why not? What did I have to lose now? "Does this mean you and I can't get together anymore?"

"You mean can you still fuck me?"

I nodded, almost ashamed at my lack of willpower.

Her eyes lit up and she grinned, as if hoping that's what I meant. "Come on down tomorrow morning. We'll see. Like I told you, Jeffie, I really like you. I hope you know that. That's no lie." She waved and walked away. "I'm heading out. See you in the morning." She held the keys to the Saab up and gave them a little jiggle.

As I watched her ass wiggle up the stairs, I knew one thing: her ass was no longer mine. Rather, mine was hers. But in the morning, if she let me, I'd fuck her as hard as she just fucked me... if that was possible. Deep down, however, I knew it wasn't.

# NINE

Lying in bed alone that night, I sipped a straight scotch. Although I rarely drink anything but beer, tonight I needed something with bite, something to still my trembling mind, something to help me sort out this unbelievable predicament. For obvious reasons, I was petrified. My life was in Krista's hands. At any time, for any reason, she could completely destroy me. As unnerving as that was, at the same time, I was strangely engrossed.

Blackmail has always fascinated me, regardless of whether the blackmailer's a terrorist, hijacker, kidnapper, or now, a Swedish Au Pair. That's because everyone has a pressure point of some kind. To be effective, the blackmailer must find that pressure point and apply the correct pressure. Too much pressure, and the blackmailee gives up. Too little pressure, or not finding the right pressure point, and the blackmailee doesn't give in to the demands. But if the blackmailer finds the right pressure point and applies the right amount of pressure, the blackmailer owns the blackmailee. Obviously, Krista had succeeded in finding my pressure point. Knowing how much



I loved my kids, the video gave her the potential to take them away from me. Plus, she was applying just the right amount of pressure-- she didn't want too much or too little... just right.

Of course, she could have been bluffing. That's the other element of blackmail. One never really knows whether to call the blackmailer's bluff ... until it's too late. If the bluff is called, the blackmailer has to be ready to lay everything on the line. That's easiest done when the blackmailer has nothing to lose... as in this case. Like all good blackmailers, Krista had all of the leverage and none of the risks. She'd said it all: there was no winning for me. The best I could do was not lose. As for her, the worst she could do was not lose.

Perhaps the Swede was bluffing and I should call her? Would she really give the tape to Susan? If so, she'd get nothing... except a plane ticket back to Sweden, her days as an Au Pair over. Unfortunately, I knew that wouldn't bother Krista. So what if she was sent back to Sweden for violating her Au Pair contract?

On the other hand, I had a lot to lose. That's why she could do this so successfully. It wasn't losing Susan that bothered me. I'd be happier without Susan. Losing the kids was what I had most to lose. And I could never let that happen. While I was convinced that Susan and I would divorce someday-- which is why I'd been squirreling away the extra cash-- under no circumstances did I want that divorce precipitated by a tape of me screwing the Swedish Au Pair. It didn't take a law degree to know I'd be the big loser in court. No, if I could just weather this hellish Swedish storm for the next year, I'd be much better off. Then, when Krista was gone and the tapes were mine, Susan and I could get divorced, perhaps even amicably. But if Susan saw that tape, there would be no amicability... that much was sure.

I considered the possibility of just filing for divorce right now. It sounded reasonable. After all, that had the potential to take away Krista's power. Unfortunately, because the law required a one year separation prior to divorce, I'd still be at Krista's mercy... the same as now. Nope, no matter how I sliced it, I'd have to make it through the year.

I spent a lot of time thinking about Krista, too. The right woman could rule the world, I'd always thought. And Krista was the exact type of woman I envisioned in that role... smart, cunning, beautiful, and sexy. Saddled with a penis, a man is no match for such a woman. I thought of the old saying: when you've got 'em by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow. And make no mistake about it: she had me by the balls and wasn't afraid to pull.

It's not like I'm a dummy, either. I just happened to be the wrong man in the wrong spot at the wrong time... truly, the anti-Gump. If Krista had become an Au Pair at a million other American households, I was sure she could have done the same thing. Men are just too easy. What unhappily married man doesn't think he deserves better? What man thinks his wife gives him everything he deserves or wants? The possibilities for Krista were endless. And obviously, she knew this. Clearly, I had underestimated her Swedish schooling. Krista, I knew, would go far in life.

My musing completed, I picked up a pad from the nightstand and made a list of actions. First, I needed to go out and buy another car. And I'd be wise to do that this week, before Susan returned from California. Otherwise, I'd have to *consult* with her, and I wouldn't be able to stash the Saab. Two, I needed to sell some shares of Apple and raise some cash, to account for the Saab I wouldn't be trading in, weekly money for Krista, and her vacation money. Three, I had to come up with a reason why Krista shouldn't babysit every other weekend, per the agreement with the

Au Pair agency. That would be the hardest part. I thought of several reasons, and practiced saying them: “Susan, I think we should give Krista the weekends off. She works hard during the week, and I think the weekends should be hers... to see America.” I could almost hear Susan’s response: *“Krista’s got pictures of you screwing her, doesn’t she, Jeff?”*

Or, “Susan, I checked with the Au Pair agency, and they said most families give Au Pairs the weekends off. The people at the agency seem to think that creates a better relationship between the Au Pairs and the host families. I think we should try that.”

*“Right, Jeff. Have you been fucking Krista?”*

What about: “Susan, Krista’s mom’s really sick. Some type of cancer, I think. Anyway, Krista asked if she could have the weekends off, so she can earn extra money to send to her mom. I told her she could. I know I should have consulted with you, first, but she was upset and crying and I wanted to help her out. She’s really a nice girl. We can always hire Kelly from up the street if we need a sitter on the weekends, right? I knew you’d understand.” Although weak, it was the best I had.

But I also knew it could have been worse... much worse. At least Krista wasn't asking for nuclear weapon secrets, submarine design info, sub routes, op tempos, or details about the sealed authentication system used for weapon launches. And for that I was relieved. I could never give that up. That was treason.

And even on a parochial level, Krista wanted a lot, but not everything. She could have just as easily asked for a thousand dollars a week or a \$50,000 lump sum. She'd obviously seen my Waterhouse account. She knew about the unbelievable break I'd caught years ago when I bought

a thousand shares of Apple at thirty bucks a share. Today, two splits later, that \$30,000 investment was worth almost \$285,000.

So why hadn't Krista asked for more? I racked my brain, but came up with just one answer: she wasn't greedy, and she wasn't trying to hurt me. She just wanted enough to have fun, just like she said. The realization was an amazing epiphany, and in a weird sense, I began to like Krista more than before. That's when I should have known I was in even deeper kimchi than imaginable.

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I tossed and turned and slept understandably restlessly. Around three I heard Krista return home... alone. At least she hadn't brought home some dirt-ball with a goatee, to fuck under my roof, under my bed, under my tears. So much for bright spots. Around six-thirty, I debated whether or not to slink downstairs. Despite everything, I really didn't want to stop my morning rendezvous with the Swede. That might have been the saddest thing. That's when I knew how powerful she really was. Here she was blackmailing me, threatening to take away my kids, my career, my house, and I still wanted to be with her. God Almighty, this girl could own the world...

Sliding out of bed, I crept down to her room. Knocking softly, I entered. "Krista," I whispered in the dark.

She stirred. "Ja?"

"It's me." *Duh.*

"What do you want?"

Somehow, the words, "I miss you," came out of my mouth. [Given the circumstances, I

know that doesn't sound like a rational thing to say. But it was true. What's rational, like so many things in life, is relative. And addictions make your sense of rationality different. Just ask the druggie who sells herself for a fix, or the alcoholic who gives away a career and family for the bottle, or the addict who breaks his arm on purpose to get prescription pain killers.].

In my case, it must have been the right thing to say because in the dim light she scooted over and made room for me in the bed. I flopped down beside my blackmailer.

“You're crazy,” she whispered. By her smile, it was obvious that she liked the power and control that came from being the addicting drug.

“You made me this way,” I answered.

“Even after what I did to you, you still want me, don't you?”

I nodded, sensing that I was closing in on my fix.

“How do you want to do it?” she asked.

“How about with no lights and no camera.”

I guess she thought that was funny, because she laughed out. “You're really a funny guy, Jeff. I mean that.”

I smiled and she kissed me.

As I kissed back, I sensed a new lease on life. As weird as it sounds-- the lost money, the lies to Susan-- none of that seemed to matter. The fact was, I could still have my Au Pair! “Thank you,” I whispered as our lips parted.

Now she really laughed out.

“What?”

“I’m blackmailing you and *you’re* thanking *me*.”

I shrugged. “I know. It’s bizarre. I’m pathetic.”

“You’re not pathetic,” she assured me. “You’re just addicted... to me.”

We made wild, frenzied love... more passionately than ever before, and when we finished, Krista was smiling broadly. “I always knew you were an animal deep down. I like it rough like that.”

Catching my breath, I sensed that we would have a strange relationship for the next eleven months. I also found myself falling in love with my blackmailer. Even an irrational, addicted, boring pig farmer's son knew that couldn't be good... could it?

WWFD...What Would Forrest Do? *Run, Jeff, Run...*

# **PART TWO**

## **The Punishment**

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# TEN

Barring a plane crash, Susan was scheduled to return home on Friday afternoon, so when my phone at the Pentagon rang at 4:05, I was sure she was on the other end. I was also sure why she was calling. With trepidation, I picked up on the second ring, “Commander MacDonald.”

“Why is there a new Toyota Camry in our garage?”

Susan’s greeting was a far cry from, *‘Hi, honey, I’m home. I missed you. I can’t wait until you get home, tonight. I’m going to make wild, passionate love to you like that Au Pair of yours.’*

“I sold the Saab,” I answered in my best stoic tone as I braced for the coming storm.

“What?” Susan screeched, not disappointing me.

“I told you it was getting old. I wanted something more dependable.” I spoke calmly, having rehearsed these lines for three days.

“You sold it without even talking with me?” She made it sound like I’d sold Jack or Jenn... or worse, her brick Colonial.



“What’s the big deal, Susan? It was *my* car. I thought you’d be happy that I got a family car.”

“You should have consulted with me first. That's not the kind of decision you should make on your own.” *Have you forgotten you’re just an inferior pig farmer’s son who’s incapable of making the right decision?* “Why do you always...*blah blah blah...*”

I held the phone away from my ear as her cadence and volume picked up. By now I could almost repeat her spiel about respect and responsibility verbatim. A minute later, when she finally finished, I returned the phone to my ear. “So, how was the conference?” I asked, changing the subject, and hoping she was true to form and hadn't ended the diatribe with a question I was supposed to answer.

“Fine. Too much time spent on the spotted owl issue.”

I nodded into the phone... yes indeed, the old spotted owl issue... I knew it all too well. To the tree huggers who were the mortal enemy of the AFPA, those ugly ass birds were more important than toilet paper. In fact, if it came down to it, I was sure they'd have us wiping our asses with our hands or fallen leaves if it meant saving the home of one spotted owl.

“Where are the kids?”

“Krista said she was taking them to the park this afternoon,” I answered.

“Were you smoking cigars in the house this week?”

I rolled my eyes. Five days of airing out the place, burning scented candles, and spraying with aerosols had failed to throw the legal beagle off the scent. “I told you we played poker Saturday night.”

“Yes, but you didn’t tell me you smoked cigars. You know that smell never goes away. I think we may have to get new drapes to go along with the couches.”

*Of course!* I said nothing.

“When are you coming home?”

“In about an hour. Why?”

“I’m hungry. They only gave us peanuts on the connecting flight.”

“I thought we’d go to Suvio’s for dinner,” I said, “to celebrate your return.” I had an ulterior motive, of course. Pizza was Susan’s favorite food, and the best way I knew to soften her up, figuratively and literally. Sure, I could have bought her a beach house. But then she’d have ranted and raved about not consulting with her first. Plus, pizza was cheaper.

“Okay.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

I hung up, dreading the thought of spending the night and weekend with my wife. On the bright side, however, I seemed to have made it past the car issue without too much flak, which was something. I’d broach the weekend babysitting issue after pizza. Sometimes after pizza, Susan was actually civil, leaving me to wonder what life would be like if I served pizza nightly.

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Suvio’s is our local pizza joint in Falls Church, family-owned and casual. The kids like it because of the homemade Gelato for desert. Susan likes the New York style pizza. I like Suvio’s

because they sell beer. In my book, *that's* what makes a good family restaurant. A cold beer always makes meals with Susan more tolerable.

“So, did you kids have a good week with just your Dad?” Susan asked the kids as we waited for our pizza to come up.

Given Susan's limited interaction with the kids when she was in town, I wasn't sure Jack or Jenn understood the distinction posed by her question. Across the booth, Jack looked up from his red and green paper placemat. He'd been studying the map of Italy. “Un-huh.”

“Did you do anything special?”

I expected the kids to tell her about the zoo, kite flying, or paddle-boating. “Krista had a party,” Jenn announced, instead.

I almost spit up the beer flowing down my esophagus.

“A party?” Susan drew out the word as she turned and glared at me-- the evil eye.

The booth got suddenly cold and I shook my head sideways. “She had some of the other Au Pairs over one afternoon,” I explained calmly. “I wouldn't really call it a party.”

“They were drinking beer and playing loud music,” Jack disagreed.

*Thank you, Jack. Perhaps you'll become a reporter when you grow up... I mean, if you grow up.* I thought about kicking him under the booth, to shut him up, but decided it was my fault, not his. In hindsight, I should have taken a clue from plebe summer and drilled five basic responses into their malleable little heads: “Yes, mother”, “No, mother”, “Thank you, mother”, “I'm sorry, mother”, and “I'll find out, mother.” Obviously plebe summer at the Naval Academy taught more than kindergarten. Given the look on Susan's face, it would take more than pizza to soften Susan

up. I came close to shouting out that I was thinking about buying a beach house.

“A couple of the Au Pairs snuck a beer,” I explained, downplaying the tragedy. “As soon as I found out about it, I put an end to the get together.” I wasn’t about to call it a party.

“Which Au Pairs?” Susan fumed, as if beer drinking was a crime worthy of the death penalty. I could tell she was ready to launch a federal task force to investigate the beer-drinking Au Pairs.

“I don’t know. They all look alike to me...” ...*at least with their clothes on.*

“Well I want to find out which ones and call their host families.”

I shook my head. “Chill Susan, it’s not a federal case, okay? I stopped it. Let’s just drop it.”

Of course Susan wasn’t going to drop it. Once something made its way into her head, it never got dropped. Instead, it got magnified, dissected, and analyzed. She was as relentless as any prosecutor, and I made a mental note to alert Krista. I’d tell her to play dumb about the beer, to act like it was news to her that some of the other Au Pairs had been drinking.

“So, tell the kids about California,” I suggested, steering the conversation to what seemed like a safe topic.

I must have been right because Susan's demeanor changed in a snap. She actually looked happy. "Well, let's see. Aunt Julie's doing fine. She has a new boyfriend named Jerry. On Saturday we--"

"Krista has a boyfriend named Jerry," Jack said, cutting her off.

I almost lost my beer again. *Jesus H. Christ. What were the odds?* I came close to asking Jack if he thought he thought he could stuff his entire napkin into his mouth.

"How do you know Krista's boyfriend?" Susan asked quickly, focusing.

Jack answered smartly. "He comes over in the afternoon sometimes. He's got a beard and three tattoos."

Susan perked up. She was learning a lot about Krista.

Where's the goddamn pizza, I wondered, knowing that if I didn't get something in my kids' mouths soon, they'd blow everything. I motioned for our waitress. "Is our pizza gonna be up soon?"

"Yours is next."

I shook my head in frustration. That's what they always say...

"What does Krista do when her boyfriend comes over?" Susan asked, continuing to cross-examine our eight-year-old sitting across the booth.

"I don't know. They go in her room and close the door."

I hoped Jack wouldn't mention the doggie-like grunts and high-pitched yelps that probably emanated from the room. In case he did, I decided not to reach for my beer, fearful that the reflex action might be fatal if my epiglottis didn't function properly.

"Who takes care of you and Jenn?" Susan asked.

"We usually watch t.v. until they come out."

Susan looked at me with disdain, as if *I* was the one banging the Swede. Words spewed from her mouth like hot magma. "I told you she was irresponsible. She's supposed to be taking care of the kids, and she's in her room, doing God knows what."

*I know what she's doing!* Commander Squeaky yelled out.

I nodded, trying to look serious. "I'll have a talk with her," I said. But deep down, I knew my answer wouldn't fly with Susan. Being the son of a pig farmer, and a non-lawyer to boot, I wasn't competent to talk with the Swede alone.

"We'll both have a talk with her," she corrected.

Great... just the kind of threesome I've always wanted-- Susan ranting and raving about respect and responsibility to Krista, while I nodded, looked concerned, and hoped the Swede wouldn't whip out her secret video and screw me to the wall. *Whippeee!*

I took a long pull on the draft. God, I needed about six of these. *Help...*

Mercifully, the pizza finally arrived and we made it through the rest of dinner without another revelation about Krista. Once back home, Susan set out on a search-and-destroy mission for the beer-drinking, boyfriend-fucking babysitter. I could almost hear their conversation:

*"I want the names of every Au Pair who was at that party."*

*"I'm not telling you who was there."*

*"Either you tell me or I'll ground you and you will never have another friend over."*

*"Fine. I'll just stay home and fuck your husband every morning after you leave for work, like I've been doing for the past two weeks. Want to see the video?"*

*That's when I'd start running like Forrest... and never stop.*

Thankfully, Susan's search was unsuccessful-- the Swede was out. If only she stayed away forever... or at least until I had a chance to alert her and explain my plan.

"Did she tell you she was going out tonight?" Susan yelled, directing her anger to me.

I gave my most concerned shrug. "She might have, Susan. I can't really remember. You know I've been pretty busy with the kids and work."

“I think this house would fall apart if I left you in charge for more than a week.”

*Why don't you leave for 52 weeks and we'll see?* I bit my tongue.

“So you have no idea where Krista is?”

I shook my head. “All I remember is that she was upset about something this morning... something about her mom. She didn't want to talk about it.” I planted the seed in Susan's head about a problem with Krista's mom. Now it was just a matter of some careful watering.

“Well from now on, I want her to write down where she going to be on weekends. She's not supposed to be free to come and go as she pleases.”

“God almighty... she's 18, Susan, not 12. And she's not our kid. She works for us.”

“She's supposed to be a part of this family. That's what the Au Pair manual says. That means she's got responsibilities just like the rest of us. She can't just pack up on Friday, disappear all weekend long, and magically reappear on Sunday night. What if Jenn were an Au Pair with some Swedish family? You wouldn't want her running loose around Sweden, would you?”

That didn't sound as bad as seducing, videotaping, and blackmailing the host family husband. “Krista's essentially a college kid,” I countered. “College kids don't check in with their parents every weekend.”

Susan had trouble countering that one, so she decided to attack me. [I guess that's something they teach in law school: if you start to lose one argument, create a new argument you can win. It certainly wasn't something I remember learning in kindergarten or plebe summer.]. “I knew something like this was going to happen,” she said, her voice charged. “This is all your fault... Mr. Laid Back, Mr. Whatever. No rules... just let everything happen and hope nobody gets

hurt. You really don't understand anything about parenting, do you? Kids need discipline... teenagers, too. You have to set limits. Otherwise, they'll walk all over you. That's why Krista does whatever she wants when I'm not around."

*That, and the dirty tape.*

My blood was boiling, and for once, I decided to stand my ground. "Look, Susan," I shouted back, "nothing I do is ever good enough for you, is it? I'm a lousy husband, a lousy father, a lousy provider, and the son of a pig farmer. In fact, if it weren't for me, you wouldn't be forced to live in this shitty \$600,000 Colonial. If it weren't for me, you'd have a beach house at Rehoboth. If it weren't for me, you wouldn't have to work as a lawyer. If it weren't for me you'd be a famous actress, on *Access Hollywood* and *Entertainment Tonight*... I know all that, Susan."

She eyed me hard. "All I said was you need to set limits. You said all the rest."

"You didn't say it, but you think it... every day."

Susan didn't deny it.

Rolling, I continued, "If God himself came down from heaven and said, 'Susan, Jeff is a very good dad. He isn't perfect, but he does his best and always puts the interests of the kids before his own', you'd probably smirk in His Almighty face and say 'Bullshit'."

Susan smirked. "God would never say that about you."

I shook my head in frustration. "Jesus H. Christ. You just don't get it, do you? It was a hypothetical statement, okay? God damn."

"I still don't think He'd say that about you. If He said anything about you, He'd say you need to set limits with kids."

I kept my distance as my blood pressure spiked. I'd never hit a woman in my life, but I felt



like I could easily hit her, no matter what they taught us in kindergarten.

"You just can't admit that I'm right," she said smugly.

"You're right about everything," I yelled. "Every fucking thing. Okay? Are you happy, Counselor? You win. Case closed. You're great and I'm just a big fuck-up. You scored higher on your SAT scores than me, you went to Georgetown, and you're a goddam fucking lawyer. Stupid me... couldn't make it at a real college, so I had to settle for the Naval Academy, where they spoon-fed us for four years. And now, I'm just a robot in the Navy, following orders because I'm too stupid to think on my own. I'm not smart enough to be a lawyer like you. I should be a goddamn pig farmer, right?"

"You said it, not me."

"God Almighty, you are so fucking pleasant to be around," I shouted, as my body lurched forward, wanting to attack her. Knowing I'd better leave before I really did hit her, I pulled myself back, grabbed my windbreaker, and walked toward the door.

"Where are you going?"

"The Laid Back Pig Farmer is going out. See if you can manage to get the kids to bed by yourself for once. Maybe you should explain their *limits* to them." I slammed the door as I left.

# ELEVEN

I was shaking as I drove away in the new Camry. I hated this car almost as much as I hated Susan. I wanted my Saab back... I wanted my life back... I wanted to love someone who loved me... and I didn't want to live in fear of a blackmailing Au Pair whom I lusted.

As I turned onto Broad Street, I pulled out my cell phone and called Krista on her new I-phone. [Hey... at least she was supporting my investments!].

"Hello," she answered on the second ring. Not surprisingly, laughter and music blared in the background. That seemed to be the story of her life.

"Krista, it's Jeff."

"Hey, Jeffie." She sounded happy to hear my voice.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Georgetown."

“Doing what?”

“What else? Partying.”

Of course. Her life was one big party. “Susan’s pretty mad,” I said.

“About what? The Saab?”

“No. I made it past that without too much trouble. She’s mad that you come and go as you please. She thinks you should ask for permission before you go out, and that we should know where you’re at.”

Krista laughed. “I’m not one of her kids... or her husband.”

“Don’t remind me,” I said, as I approached Tyson’s Corner. “Susan also found out about your party, the drinking, and the fact that some guy named Jerry comes over during the day.”

“I can have friends over.”

“Yeah, but Susan wants you to ask first. And your friends aren’t supposed to drink beer, and she doesn’t want you in your room fucking anyone while you’re supposed to be watching the kids.”

"Screw her. I'll tell her it's none of her business what my friends and I do."

"No, you won't. That'll just get her even madder. Look, if this thing's going to work for the next eleven months, you've got to learn how to play her. Believe me, I know Susan well enough."

My words hung in the air and I could almost feel her brain waves coming through the handset. She was thinking about what to do. “So what should I do?”

What irony: *my* blackmailer was seeking *my* advice. “I think you better come home with

a good explanation.”

“Like what?”

“Anything but the truth.”

“So I shouldn’t tell her that Jerry comes over to fuck me because you're at work and unavailable?”

*Ha Ha.* “Exactly.”

“What should I tell her then?”

“Tell her something like this: Jerry’s an old friend, maybe an exchange student who stayed with your family in Sweden. You two are good friends... but only friends. He’s been coming over because you just found out your mom was diagnosed with breast cancer and you needed someone to talk to about it. You turned to Jerry because he went through a similar situation with his mom a couple years before.”

“But my mom's dead.”

“So? Susan doesn't know that. Right?”

“Un-huh. You think she’ll buy that?”

“She will if she doesn’t smell the alcohol on your breath and doesn’t find the videos of you fucking me and every other man in America.”

I could almost hear her mind racing over the cellular. “You’re sneaky, Jeff.”

Coming from her, the Queen of Sneak, that was quite a compliment. “I have to be sneaky,” I replied, “My Au Pair's got a dirty movie of me.”

“It's not dirty... it's money.”

Talk about perspective. I said nothing.

“Have you talked with Susan about the weekends yet?”

“No,” I grunted in futility. “She was too pissed about your party. I couldn’t. After you tell her your sad sob story, maybe you should mention that you’d like to get a weekend job so you can send money home to your mom. I’ll be there to back you up. Not even Susan will say no to that.”

“Okay. I like that.” She paused. “I’m such a nice girl, aren’t I?”

“Right,” I said sarcastically.

"I am, Jeff."

"Nice girls don't do what you do."

"Okay then, I'm a good girl."

That didn't sound right, either.

“When should I talk to Susan?” Krista asked, before I could counter.

“It’s not going to be your choice. She’s going to confront you the minute she sees you.

Are you drunk yet?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you are.”

“Right you are, Jeffie. Ha ha.”

“Then you better wait ‘til tomorrow,” I said. “Come home in the morning, sad-looking. Tell Susan you’ve been up all night trying to figure out what to do about your mom. Tell her you're even thinking of going back to Sweden.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“And try not to smell like Absolute.”

"Gotcha, coach."

I hesitated to say good-bye, hoping she might invite me out to party with her. I'm not a huge party person, but I wanted to be with her. We were, after all, teammates in this perverted little game upon which my life hinged.

“Bye,” she said.

"Bye," I repeated sadly.

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Not wanting to go home, I pulled into a 7-11, bought a six-pack of Budweiser, and drove across the American Legion Bridge into Maryland. I exited onto the Clara Barton Parkway and turned into the first parking area. From there, I walked down the wooden steps leading to the C&O canal where I could be alone. Next to the canal was a footpath where mules and horses walked as they pulled the barges to and from Georgetown in the 1800's. Today that footpath was for me and my Bud-- the King of Losers and the King of Beers, together.

The night was clear and cool, the moon just a sliver, and the stars twinkled through the oaks that lined the canal. I walked in serenity for a couple of miles, thinking about my life as I sucked down my Buds. God, I wished my life could be different. Was it possible that over-achievement could only take a person so far? I was, if nothing else, an overachiever.

Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to earn more than \$50,000 a year, or own a house worth more than half a million dollars. A pig farmer's son from Dutton, Indiana just doesn't

dream-- much less, think-- like that. Both my expectations and dreams were always simple: a loving wife, a couple happy kids, a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, and perhaps an interesting job that allowed me to travel once in a while. I guess that's why the Navy appealed to me. To a land-locked kid who'd never seen the ocean, I figured I could make a decent living, see the world, and do something worthwhile for my country. To me, it really did sound like an adventure and not just a job.

While my family always had the basics growing up in Dutton, it didn't take a genius to figure out that a college scholarship was my only ticket off the pig farm. That's why I worked harder than anyone else in high school. Receiving my appointment to the Naval Academy was one of the biggest things to ever happen in Dutton, much less in the MacDonald family, and I'll never forget the barbeque the town threw for me before I left for Annapolis, although half the town probably thought I was heading to *Indianapolis*, because I'm not sure most ever heard of Annapolis.

Once at Canoe U, the Academy academia projected me to finish in the bottom half of the class, based on my SAT score and high school grades. And with that as my motivator, hard work and sheer determination put me in the top twenty percent of my class at graduation. Yes sir, I'll never forget how proud I was hurling my midshipman cover into the sky. Donning my officer's cover, I was sure I could compete with any non-pig farmer's son. The world could be mine.

With continued determination after graduation, I became the top ensign at nuclear power school, the first to qualify at the nuclear reactor training prototype, and the hot-running j.o. aboard my submarine. When I moved to D.C. for my first shore tour in the Naval Sea Systems Command

at Crystal City, I was sky-high with confidence... perhaps too sky-high. That's when my life changed forever.

The lesson: one should never let one's guard down, because life can change forever in just one night... or one lusty morning. Amazing thing life is...

It was a Saturday night in May 2001, and I was at a party thrown by a fellow j.o. Across the room I spied a petite, wild brunette laughing and screaming with a group of friends as they downed shots. From afar, I was immediately attracted to her. She seemed happy, fun, and carefree. [I would later learn that she had just finished her last law school exam (which explained why she was partying her brains out).]. Certain that I could all but walk on water, I walked over, joined in on the shots, and ended up getting trashed with her. Later on, around 3 a.m., we were doing the nasty in the back of my Saab. To me, it was no big deal, drunk or not. I'd had my share of one-night stand drunk-fucks before. And I was sure a wild girl like Susan had, too.

For the next month, we dated off and on, and everything seemed to be going okay. Susan was attracted to my wit, my uniform, and I guess, my looks, although I found it strange that we never did the nasty again during that month. [She blamed the Cuervo Gold at the party and explained that she never slept with a guy until they had dated for at least six months. *Great*].

I also came to discover some other interesting facts: she was a high-strung, Type A personality, not happy-go-lucky; she aspired to be an actress, not a lawyer; her family was rich, her mom and dad both lawyers who strongly pushed her into law school; and she wasn't the least bit impressed to hear that my dad was a pig farmer from southeastern Indiana. Bottom line: she wasn't anything like the girl from the party. Still, that was okay-- we hung out, dined out, and saw movies together, which was fine with me. Because I didn't know too many other girls in D.C.,



she was better than nothing, and while I never expected anything more serious, I also never expected the phone call that came in mid-June.

“I’m pregnant,” Susan cried on the phone that fateful morning.

I went quickly numb. “Are you serious?”

“Un-huh. I just took a pregnancy test.”

“Jesus!” I said, gulping a deep breath. This was definitely one of those defining moment in life. I tried to think clearly.

“Jeff?”

“Yeah, I’m here. Geez, what are we going to do?”

“What do you mean, ‘what are we going to do’? I’m going to have a baby.”

“Are you sure it’s mine?”

“Of course I’m sure it’s *yours*.” Her tone was hard now, almost pissed at the suggestion.

“What kind of girl do you think I am? You’re the only one I’ve been with in six months.”

That figured. “You’re sure you want to have it?”

“You know I don’t believe in abortion.”

I sat at my desk shocked. *Fuck me. Not this.*

“Jeff?”

“Un-huh.”

“Talk to me. I’m scared.”

“It’ll be okay,” I said, pretending to be brave, remembering Leadership 101.

“I love you,” she said.

Jesus! Where did that come from? Fear? What was I supposed to say now? “Uh, I love you, too.” Pause. That didn’t sound right, much less feel right. “What do you think we should do?”

“What do you think?”

*I think I should run over and see my detailer. Maybe there’s a slot open for a fast running, hard-charging Lieutenant on a sub tender in Scotland... or some other far-away place.* “We could get married,” I suggested, now trying to sound like an officer and a gentleman who would always opt to do the right thing, the honorable thing.

“Really?”

Deep down, that wasn’t the response I’d hoped to hear. I wanted her to tell me that was crazy. Now what?

Remembering all those nights my mom read me *The Giving Tree*, I told myself I could make any woman happy. After all, I was a giver, not a taker. I didn’t need much myself. I would give and give and give... I could make Susan happy. She was smart... her family was rich... we’d be okay. Maybe this was a blessing in disguise? Maybe someday we’d look back and know it was the right thing to do. Unfortunately, that’s not how it felt, deep down. “Sure... I guess. We get along pretty well, right?”

“Un-huh. I do love you, Jeff.”

“I love you, too.” But I knew I didn’t. And I was pretty sure she didn’t love me. I was, after all, just a boring pig farmer’s son... with simple expectations.

In a frenzied month, we whipped together a wedding, and by the end of July, we were honeymooning in the Bahamas. That’s when I knew for sure we were wrong for each other. And

everything's been downhill since.

Of course Susan and I are polar opposites in terms of expectations. As the little rich girl, hers are grand, of fame and fortune. Over the years, I've come to conclude that expectations are the most important factor in picking a mate. Spouses with polar opposite expectations might as well pack their bags and cut their losses...

In the seven months that followed, Jack was born and Susan passed the bar. Two years later, we moved to Norfolk for my department head tour, Jenn came along unexpectedly, and Susan was just another Navy wife, her Hollywood dream officially dead. Not long after, she was completely fed up with me, the Navy, and the fact that I would probably never be anything more than a run-of-the-mill Naval Officer in the post-Cold War world.

Five years later, following my XO tour in Groton, Connecticut, we were back in D.C., buying a \$600,000 Colonial and wishing we'd never met that fateful night in May. And today, while I contemplated my worthless life, she was back home in her measly \$600,000 Colonial teaching our kids about limits. *Fuck me.*

I sat on the edge of the canal and looked up at the stars. God, I was so stupid. Why had I thought marrying her was doing the right thing? It didn't feel right then and it doesn't feel right now. Marrying the wrong person is never the right thing to do.

I made a mental note to teach Jack and Jenn this: make sure the person you marry loves you for exactly who you are... for all your faults, and weaknesses, and insecurities. Make sure that person knows your hopes and dreams, and make sure that the person loves you when you fail as much as they love you when you succeed. And finally, marry someone who gives more than they

take, who wants to love you and sacrifice for you as much as you love them and want to sacrifice for them. Make love, and giving, your only competition with your spouse. Marry someone with the heart and soul of the giving tree. And don't marry a fucking lawyer who dreams of being a celebrity and blames you for not being one...

That's what I intended to teach my kids. And if I accomplished that, I wouldn't have to teach them to not fuck the babysitter.

Chugging the final Bud, I made my way back to the Camry, dreading my return to the house. I wondered if all these lies would work. I also wondered how many more lies I would tell the woman I didn't love. Mostly, though, I wondered why I wanted Krista so much, in spite of everything.

# TWELVE

I slept in the guest room and awakened myself at 6:30, before the kids awoke. The rest of Saturday morning was typical-- French toast and cartoons for the kids, coffee and the newspaper for me. With no rush hour to battle, Susan slept in, as she usually does on weekends. When she awoke, she kissed the kids, glared at me, and went out running. Although she runs to relieve stress and anger, amazingly she can't shed those extra twenty-five pounds or all that penned up anger.

While she ran, I considered throwing the kids in the Camry, taking off, and never coming back. There was just one problem with that: if Susan would hunt down some underage drinking Au Pairs, I could only imagine what the relentless bitch would do to me. Actually, I knew what she'd do... she'd unleash the hounds, that's what. And I couldn't give her the satisfaction or the opportunity.

"Is Krista back yet?" Susan asked, when she finally returned. No doubt she'd spent the entire forty minutes thinking of the Swede and what she was going to say to her. Her single-mindedness scared me to the bone: if she was this worked up over underage beer drinking Au Pairs, imagine what she'd do if she found out I was screwing the Swede?

When I shook my head sideways, Susan stormed off to shower. I went out back and shot baskets with the kids. An hour later, I saw Krista strolling up the driveway, seemingly without a worry in the world. God, I missed that feeling. As Krista turned up the walkway toward the front door, she threw me a casual wave.

"Daddy's going inside for a few minutes," I said to the kids nervously. I was dreading the coming confrontation. In truth, I dreaded almost all confrontations. But I knew I had to be there when it went down. After all, if my teammate failed, *I'd* lose. I hated her sick little game. "You two stay here and keep shooting. Remember, keep your eye on the basket and follow through. I'll be right back."

The kids nodded.

I sensed another defining moment in my future. My life, as bad as it was, could be over if the confrontation went wrong, and I entered the kitchen and made it to the living room just as Krista opened the front door. Like a wildcat waiting for prey, Susan charged from the office toward Krista.

"I have to go back to Sweden," Krista announced before Susan could spit out her first bullet. Tears formed in the Swede's eyes, giving them a glacial look. God, she looked so beautiful with that downtrodden, pouty mouth.

I loved her dramatic opening. "Why? What's the matter, Krista?" I replied quickly, not

wanting to give Susan a chance to talk.

"My mom's sick."

"Sick with what?" Susan asked. The Swede's strategic strike had taken the steam out of Susan's attack before she could begin.

Krista burst into tears, sobbing and shaking. "Cancer."

I watched in awe. The little Swede should have been an actress, not a blackmailing Au Pair. I was almost in tears myself, and I *knew* she was acting.

"She has breast cancer," Krista sobbed, stepping forward. She threw her arms around Susan and put her head on her shoulder, as if only another woman could comfort her.

Caught off guard, Susan stroked Krista's back. "It's okay," she whispered.

I'd never seen Susan so compassionate.

Krista continued her brilliant crying for another minute or so, and when she finished I knew it was impossible for Susan to begin her inquisition. After Krista explained that she needed to go back to Sweden and help her mom with bills, I jumped in again. "The kids are really gonna miss you, Krista."

This sent Krista into tears again. "I know. I'm gonna miss them. I really love them."

The room grew quiet.

The pause gave Krista time to come up with the idea that might save the day. "If I could get a weekend job, I could earn money for my mom and still stay," she said.

It sounded like a brilliant suggestion to me. Unfortunately, only Susan mattered. Would she see through this whole act?

"Do you really want to stay?" Susan asked.

Krista nodded. "I don't want to leave the kids. I just want to help my mom. My friend Kaya knows a family I could work for on weekends."

I motioned for Susan to join me in the office, knowing she'd like a consultation. "I think we should let Krista take the weekend job," I said solemnly. "The kids really love her. We can get another babysitter on the weekends when we need to."

I could tell Susan didn't want to hassle with getting another babysitter. "Okay," she agreed, "but I still want to talk to her about the drinking and her boyfriend."

I nodded sincerely. I didn't want that dirtball coming over and fucking my Au Pair, either. It was bad enough that I had to share Krista with Tony next door.

"Krista," Susan said, "Mr. MacDonald and I can give you the weekends off to get another job if that'll keep you here."

Krista's face lit up. "Really? Oh, my gosh...thank you. You two are the nicest host family."

I shrugged... I was certainly doing everything within my power to make the Swede's stay in America as pleasant as possible.

"But I want to talk about your boyfriend Jerry who comes over during the day."

Krista's face changed instantly, and she couldn't contain her smile.

"What's so funny?" Susan asked, not amused.

"He's not my *boyfriend*. He was exchange student in Sweden two years ago. He lived at our house. He and I are like brother and sister."

Satisfied, Susan nodded, seemingly accepting the lie.

"We also wanted to talk about the Au Pairs who were drinking here last week," I injected,



sounding as concerned as Susan expected.

Krista nodded. "I know. They are some bad girls. I told them they can't come over again."

Susan didn't push the issue any further, which was strange. But I wasn't about to argue. For the moment, all obstacles seemed to be overcome. *Holy shit... maybe I could pull this off...*

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The next two months were relatively uneventful. Halloween came and went, Apple gained another twenty percent, Krista and I continued our morning workouts, and by mid-November, I was almost comfortable with the blackmailing situation. This wasn't so bad... not bad at all really. Perhaps, I could pull it off. That's when Krista informed me that she was taking her first extra week of holiday-- to Las Vegas, with Tony my next door neighbor. After nearly shitting a brick, I decided to pay Tony a visit.

# THIRTEEN

Founded in 1912 by Tony's great-great-grandfather, Bartolucci's jewelry store is a Washington institution. The original store, just blocks west of the White House on Pennsylvania Avenue, is run by Tony's dad. Ten years ago, Tony opened his own store in Mazza Gallery, one of Washington's most upscale malls. Although the mall at Mazza isn't nearly as big as the suburban malls at Tyson's Corner or Pentagon City, its opulence more than makes up for the diminutive size. The floors are polished marble, the elevators glass, and stores like Nieman Marcus, Versace, F.A.O. Schwartz, and Gucci cover the 30,000 square feet. It's the mall where the 'haves' shop. And Bartolucci's is where they buy their jewelry.

Dressed in my Service Dress Blues, I walked past the armed guard standing at the entrance to Bartolucci's. A tall, regal woman within a horseshoe-shaped bank of dazzling display cases greeted me with a wide, inviting smile. Perhaps the three thick bands of gold on my sleeves made

me look like I could afford to shop here, I figured, as I sauntered towards her. She was wearing a low cut mauve suit and I made eye contact with her breasts before wrestling them away to meet her eyes. She was striking, and I wondered if Tony banged her the way he banged my Au Pair.

“Good afternoon, sir. How may I help you today?” Her voice was husky and sexy-- European perhaps-- and a squeaky voice inside my head said that her offer extended beyond jewelry. [Then again, maybe I was reading too much into this...].

Tony was smart to hire a woman like this, I thought, as I smiled back. Men liked being seduced as they were getting screwed paying three hundred percent mark-ups. “Hi. I’m Jeff MacDonald, a friend of Tony’s. Is he around?”

Sensing a lost commission, her smile evened out and she gestured for me to follow her toward the back of the store. “I’ll get him,” she said as she tapped lightly on a large, beveled glass mirror.

Seconds later, Tony opened the door next to the mirror. Dressed impeccably in an Armani double-breasted smoky gray suit with a sparkling yellow tie against an immaculate white shirt, he was pure money. Glowing gold cuff links and a diamond-studded tie clasp completed the look. I chuckled to myself and wondered just how high his mark-up really was.

“Hey, Jeff,” he exclaimed, both happy and surprised to see me. He looked at the sexy saleswoman next to me. “Thanks, Crystal.”

She nodded and walked back toward the display area.

“What brings you down here?”

“Crystal,” I said jokingly, raising my eyebrows for effect, as I motioned toward Crystal’s

swaying ass.

“Isn’t she incredible?” Tony whispered, leaning in towards me.

“Yeah... a knockout.”

“She’s pretty wild, too.” He winked.

*Then why did you have to fuck my Au Pair and why are you going to Las Vegas with her?*

I nodded.

“You looking for some jewelry?”

I shook my head sideways. “I’m looking for some answers.”

His face scrunched. “Like what?”

“Like why you and Krista are going to Las Vegas together?”

Surprised by my question, and quickly nervous, Tony motioned toward his private office.

Evidently, I'd struck a nerve.

A minute later, I was sitting in a leather chair facing his desk. To my left was the mirror Crystal had tapped on to get Tony’s attention. It was a mirror on the store side, but a one-way window on this side, and from his desk, Tony could see everything that went on in the store.

I stared at Crystal’s ass. “Um, nice view,” I remarked.

Tony chuckled. “Would you believe she doesn't wear panties?”

"Maybe you should pay her a little more," I said smiling.

He was too engrossed staring at Crystal to laugh. That, or he was too nervous. "Yeah. Sometimes, when nobody’s in the store, she hikes her skirt up and does a little dance for me.”

I looked out to see if anyone was in the store. A rich old lady with white hair had just walked in. Darn the bad luck. “Sweet. And she sells jewelry, too?”

“She could sell jewelry to a monk sworn to poverty.”

I chuckled and tore my eyes away from the panty-less clerk.

Reaching into his bottom drawer, Tony pulled out a bottle of Dewar’s and two glasses.

“Drink?”

“Sure.” Somehow, we both sensed a drink would make the coming conversation easier.

Knowing it would, I took the glass proffered.

“To the brotherhood of married men,” Tony toasted, setting the mood.

“To the brotherhood of *unhappily* married men,” I corrected, clicking his glass in agreement and putting him at ease. We unhappily married men had to stick together... to a point.

We drained our glasses. “So what’s the deal with you and Krista going to Vegas?” I asked.

“She wasn’t supposed to tell anyone.”

“Well she did.”

Tony looked down at his glass and took a deep breath. I assumed he was gathering courage. He spoke. “You know what happened that night we played poker, right?”

I nodded and winked. “I heard... you *poked her*.”

Clearly embarrassed, he didn’t acknowledge.

I didn’t let the silence linger. “Hey, no worries, Tony, your secret’s safe with me. The last thing I’d ever do is tell Abbey anything. We’re part of the same brotherhood, remember?”

Tony exhaled, visibly relieved. His eyes locked onto mine. “Long story made short, Krista and I have been doing the nasty ever since.”

I nodded unsurprised. That’s how Krista operated. And by now she probably even had a

nice little movie starring Tony, too. But clearly, Tony didn't know this... yet. My mind blurred as I sensed very important crossroads ahead. For now I played it cool. "Are you serious? When?"

"Mondays and Thursdays, usually. Monday's my day off. Thursday's I take a long lunch."

I envisioned the husky jeweler sneaking around naked in the basement of my house. "You better be careful, Tony."

"It's cool. Abbey doesn't have a clue."

Clearly, Tony didn't have a clue that Krista, not Abbey, should be his biggest worry. I knew the feeling. "What about Krista? You're sure you can trust her?"

Tony smiled. "That's the best part. I've got her wrapped around my finger."

That's what I had thought, too. Sadly, Tony didn't know Krista. Knowing what I did, I felt sorry for my brethren. He was a fat Italian lamb being led to the slaughter. The brotherhood part of me wanted to tell Tony about Krista's film-making, to alert him before it was too late. But it was probably already too late for that. Looking to my left, through that one-way window, I envisioned the inventory in his store slowly disappearing in sick slow-motion. The self-preservation part of me said 'keep quiet.' After all, Krista had made it very clear that if I told anyone about her-- and specifically Tony-- that she'd give Susan the tape. It was an easy choice. I was weak and selfish and couldn't risk jeopardizing my own situation. Tony's a big boy, I rationalized... a rich big boy. He could take care of himself. Plus, I thought selfishly, if the Swede went after Tony, that might actually take some of the pressure off me. Deep down, though, I hated the fact that I wasn't going to do anything to help him. And I hated Krista for putting me in this situation.

"She's a little nympho," Tony continued. "As long as I keep giving her the old Italian

sausage, she's happy."

It was sickly familiar. I wondered if Tony and Krista played fantasy games, too. Perhaps their games were *The Mafia Man*, *The Family Jewels*, and *Hide the Sausage*. I tried not to think about it. "So what about Vegas?"

"She asked me to go with her."

"She's taking you?" I said it with disbelief.

Tony's brown eyes twinkled. "Pretty wild, huh? She's got a rich uncle who sends her money every month, and she wants to take me to Vegas. Can you believe that?"

I could. After all, *I* was that rich uncle. "Doesn't that seem weird, Tony... an 18 year-old Au Pair taking you to Vegas?"

Tony flashed a studly grin. "Never look a gift horse in the eye," he said, "and never say 'no' to a rich Au Pair with a killer body and a wild appetite for Italian sausage." He paused. "I don't know how you can live in the same house with her and not jump her bones."

I shrugged. "Evidently she's getting everything she needs from you."

"All I know is that she treats me a helluva lot better than Abbey ever has."

I remembered thinking the same thing once upon a time... in a different world... in a world when a man could actually trust his Au Pair. "Just be careful, buddy. I don't want to see you get hurt."

"Nobody's going to get hurt. Krista and I have everything planned."

*Krista and I?* He made it sound like they were genuine lovers. My mind considered this different angle. What if they were genuine? What if she really loved Tony and had no intention

of blackmailing him? In a flash I felt a pang of intense jealousy toward Tony and deep hatred toward Krista. “What plan?” I asked, hiding my emotions.

“After Abbey and I get divorced, we’re getting married.”

“Jesus, Tony! Married? You and Krista?”

“Yeah. Why not? Like I said, I’ve never met a girl who treats me so well. I love her. I really do.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

I wanted to tell Tony that she was the devil’s Au Pair... that she was going to fuck him, and fuck him hard, and take everything in his store. But then again, maybe she wasn’t? Maybe I was just jealous that she picked him to love and not me.

“She’s so young. Jesus, Tony, she’s barely 18. You’re twice her age.”

“I can’t help the way I feel. She feels the same way about me.”

He couldn’t know that. He didn’t know the Swede. I knew the Swede. And I was sure she was incapable of love, or any other feelings for anyone except herself. At least that’s what I hoped. Truth be told, I didn’t want my blackmailing Au Pair to love anyone else. “What about Abbey?” I asked. “You think she’s just going to sit by and let you walk away and marry the Au Pair from next door? She’ll fight you hard.”

“That’s the best part. There’s not going to be anything for Abbey to get.”

“How’s that?”

“I’m going to have my Dad buy me out of this place. Then, I’m transferring all my assets to Sweden. Abbey won’t be able to touch me. Once I get to Stockholm, I’ll open up a new store



and be right back in business. I'm even learning Swedish."

"You're just going to walk away?"

"It's either that, or live the rest of my life with Abbey's claws in me. I don't have a choice."

Tony poured us each another shot.

He seemed to have it all figured out. "What about Teddy?"

Tony hesitated, clearly pained. "That's going to be the hard part." He paused.

"But...", I said, leading him onward.

"But I can't live the rest of my life unhappy," Tony filled in. "I need to have passion."

"But you can abandon Teddy?"

Tony shook his head. "I'm not abandoning Teddy. I'm just trying to put myself in an equal bargaining position with Abbey. If I divorce Abbey now, she'll screw me to the wall. She'll get custody, she'll get half the store, and I'll end up paying her half of what I make in alimony and child support for the rest of my life. You know how Abbey is. She's got expensive tastes and expensive habits. And she's not going to change just because I'm divorcing her."

I nodded.

Tony continued. "I've already talked to my lawyer. He agreed with me. He says if I sell the store to my Dad and transfer my assets overseas, I'll be in a much stronger bargaining position with Abbey."

"In other words, make it so hard for her to get at your assets that she'll be willing to compromise."

"Exactly. I don't want to abandon Teddy, but I don't want to be held hostage by Abbey,

either.”

I nodded. Tony was right about so much. But was he right about Krista? I focused on that aspect. “You and Krista have really talked about getting married?”

Tony nodded. “As soon as I can get out from under Abbey.”

“What time-frame are you talking about?”

“I’m going to go back to Sweden with her next summer. We’ll get married after that.”

“So between now and then, you’re going to continue playing the role of husband and daddy while you make all the arrangements with the business?”

“Un-huh.”

Deep down, I was sure Krista had no intention of marrying Tony. She told lies better than most people told the truth. “Geez, Tony, this is pretty drastic. You sure you know her well enough? What if all this is some big fantasy game to her?”

“Then I’ll play along as long as I can. There’s no harm in that.”

That’s what I had thought. “Look Tony, Krista’s not all she seems. She’s not a nice girl. I know. I see her every day.”

He looked at me like I was crazy and I saw a flash of anger in his face. “What do you know about her?”

“She sleeps around Tony. I see the guys coming and going. You can’t trust her.”

I could see that he didn’t believe me. “Look Jeff, I appreciate your concern. But I’m a big boy. I know she’s kind of wild. But I’m the one she’s taking to Vegas, not someone else. And I’m the one she’s going to take back to Sweden. The way I look at it, even if things don’t work out, then at least I’ll have fun in the process. Right? Don’t worry, okay?”

Although my attempt to warn him was weak, at least I had tried, I rationalized to myself. "You're whipped, man," I said aloud.

He laughed. "True. And if you ever had a piece of that ass, you'd know why."

I *did* know why. And even with Krista blackmailing me, I felt the same way. "What did you tell Abbey about Vegas?"

"I told her there's a big gemology conference. I told her it might help us pump up our margins. She loves to hear me talk about pumping up our margins."

"Meanwhile, you'll be pumping Krista."

Tony smiled wryly and poured us another shot. "I know I can trust you to keep all this to yourself, right?"

I nodded. Of course. I held up my glass. "To the brotherhood."

"The brotherhood," Tony echoed. We killed the scotch.

"Go pick out a nice set of cuff links for yourself," he added.

I could almost see Tony's brain at work: a man who'd been given a nice pair of cuff links would never betray the giver. Sadly, my betrayal was by not telling Tony the whole truth about Krista. But I had to be true to myself first, my friend second. "I'd rather have Crystal," I remarked.

"Waterford or the sweet ass out there?" Tony said, motioning toward his saleswoman.

"What the hell would I do with a vase?"

Tony chuckled. "Hey, if you really want, I'll see what I can do?"

"Nah, I'm just kidding." I stood and extended my hand. "Be careful, Tony."

"I will, buddy. Thanks for coming by."

"And have fun in Vegas."

"Now that's something I'm sure I will."

I wondered. Krista was a blast until she unveiled her secret video.

On the way out, I looked at the cuff links. They were nice, but I decided my first instincts were right-- Crystal was better. When done looking, I said good-bye to her and threw a wave toward the mirror. Tony was probably watching Crystal's ass, but I did it anyway. Walking away, I felt a mishmash of emotions-- jealousy and trepidation mostly-- for the man on the other side of the mirror. Unfortunately, I had my own problems with the Swede and there wasn't much I could do to help Tony. Still, I hated myself. And I hated Krista, too. She was either going to screw Tony to the wall, like she was doing to me, or marry him. Either way, I'd feel terrible.

# FOURTEEN

Time moved tortuously slow the week Krista was away in Vegas. The fact that my next door neighbor was bottom knocking my Au Pair didn't help. Truth is, I missed the blackmailing Swede more than I could have imagined. And not just the morning sex, either. I missed our conversations, the laughter, even the cuddling. In spite of everything, she made me feel wanted. Deep down, I hoped she *would* blackmail Tony. One, he could afford it, and two, I wanted her to want me, not him. Take my word for it... her spell was powerful and deep.

When Krista finally returned, we settled back into our routine and the world felt right again. Not wanting to upset our situation, I made the conscious decision to not ask her about Tony or Vegas. Whatever happened between them was beyond my control, I reasoned pathetically. *Beyond my control...* that seemed to be the story of my life for the time being. And so, like current,

I went with the flow, my direction and speed dictated by outside forces.

As Thanksgiving rolled by and December rolled in, I began to wonder how I'd survive the two-week Christmas holiday when Krista returned to Sweden. Little did I know, how drastically the world would change by the time she returned.

The date was December 10<sup>th</sup>, and Krista and I had just finished our morning aerobic workout when I noticed the shimmering stones adorning her earlobes. They were too big to be real. But they were too beautiful to be cubic zirconium. Had CZ technology come that far? If so, perhaps I'd take Susan's diamond, sell it, and replace it with a CZ. That, itself, would pay for the increase in Krista's weekly stipend, plus her remaining vacations. "Where'd you get the earrings?" I asked, as I stepped into my boxers.

"Tony," she answered matter-of-factly.

"Tony Bartolucci?"

"You know any other Tony who owns a jewelry store?"

"Are they real?"

"According to the GIA certification they are."

*The GIA Certification?* Krista sounded more like a gemologist than an Au Pair. "How'd you get them?" I asked, wondering if they were a pre-wedding gift or a blackmail payoff.

"He gave them to me."

"Why?"

"For being his secret girlfriend." Her eyes twinkled like diamonds as she said 'secret girlfriend.'

"He just gave them to you?"

She nodded. "He's very nice to me."

"I'll say. How big are they?"

"A carat and a half each."

Depending on the cut, color, and clarity, that translated into a gift of almost \$15,000. Not bad. "And he just gave them to you?"

She smiled, raised her eyebrows, and flashed that evil grin. "He did after I showed him the video I made."

*Of course.*

The little film-maker had done it to Tony, too. In a heartbeat any feelings of jealousy toward Tony disappeared completely. He and I were brethren again... the Brotherhood of Blackmailees. I felt my chest tighten. This was getting more complicated. "You're going to get yourself in trouble," I said.

"I doubt it."

"Oh yeah," I said with disgust. "And why's that?"

"Because I'm not the married man fucking the 18 year-old Au Pair," she answered succinctly.

"Yeah, but you're the 18 year-old Au Pair blackmailing the married men, and someday you're going to push one of them too far."

"You married men have more to lose than me."

"Maybe. But you can only push a person so far before they break."

"I know," she said grinning slyly. "That's why I push just a little less." She held her thumb

and forefinger up with a razor-thin space between them.

"You're not short on confidence."

"Or diamonds." Her voice was wicked now.

"Just be careful... please."

"Hmmm? You sound almost concerned, Jeffie."

I shrugged. My concern was mostly for my own well-being. Any blow-up between Tony and Krista had the potential to include me. "I just don't want to see anyone get hurt."

"Including me?"

"Including anyone." And right then and there I decided another visit to Tony's store was in order.

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I sat across from Tony in his private office, trepid about the conversation about to unfold. "Those earrings you gave Krista sure are nice," I said, figuring that was a good way to ease into the conversation. I wasn't sure exactly what I was after, but I needed to hear Tony's take on the situation.

"Un-huh," he responded plainly, not offering anything more.

Knowing he was hiding the truth, I eyed him hard. "I talked to Krista about you and her," I said. "She says you two aren't getting married."

"Yeah? So?" Tony shot back quickly, his anger flaring. Either he was mad at me for not minding my own business, or he was mad at the mention of Krista.



"So, if you two aren't getting married, why did you give her diamond earrings worth almost fifteen grand?"

Tony hesitated. "Look," he said bluntly. "I really don't want to talk about any of that. Okay?"

"Okay," I responded, backing off quickly. "I just came here to talk to you.... as a friend. I thought I could help, that's all... nothing more." My eyes met his. "Sorry, man."

"Yeah. I know," he said conciliatory. "I know." While he hesitated, I contemplated standing up and leaving.

"No problem," I said. "Like I said, if you ever need someone to talk to..."

He cut me off. "It's just that I feel really stupid about what happened, that's all. It's nothing to do with you, Jeff. It's all me."

"No problem, bud. Like I said, after what she told me, I thought you might need someone to talk to. That's all."

"I appreciate it, Jeff. I really do."

"Okay then," I said, rising from the chair, getting ready to leave. "If you do want to talk, you know where to find me."

"Wait," Tony said quickly, reversing himself. "Sit back down. I guess if anyone should know what's going on, it's you. Maybe I can help you."

I wasn't sure what he meant by that last remark. But he had my attention. Did he know that I was in the same boat as him? Would he suggest that we band together and somehow defeat the blackmailing bitch? I sat back down.

"I'm not supposed to tell you this," Tony said in a low, almost embarrassed tone, "but you might as well know the truth. Krista blackmailed me."

I was surprised by Tony's gratuitous admission. Personally, I like to keep my dirty laundry to myself. Plus, it was clear that Krista had given him the same warning she'd given me, to not tell anyone. "Blackmail!" I repeated, my voice charged with disbelief. "Jesus, are you serious?" I'm not much of an actor, and I wondered if Tony could see through my feigned surprise. If he knew the truth-- that Krista was also blackmailing me-- then my feigned surprise would sure as heck look contrived.

"No," he said with resignation, "I always give away \$15,000 earrings for a good fuck."

At least Tony still had some semblance of a sense of humor, I thought. By his reaction to me, it was clear that Tony didn't know I was in the same situation. Now the issue was whether or not I would tell him. Would I be better off working with Tony, or going it alone? "How is she blackmailing you?"

"Easy. She set-up a secret camera and taped me fucking her in her bedroom... and in Vegas. She said she'd show it to Abbey if I didn't let her pick out some earrings."

"Holy shit, Tony."

He nodded. "Holy shit is right. You were right about her, Jeff. She was just using me."

"What a conniving little bitch. God, I can't believe it. She seems so ditzzy."

"You better believe it. And there ain't anything ditzzy about that bitch. She even knew which diamonds of mine were best."

"Damn Tony. I don't like this."

"Tell me about it... I'm the one she got on tape."

“Where’d she come up with an idea to do something like that?” I asked.

“She said all the Au Pairs do it.” He paused. “If I were you I’d watch myself carefully. You may be next. That’s why I couldn’t let you walk out of here without knowing.”

I nodded, wishing that would help. Unfortunately, it was too late for that. But obviously Tony didn’t know that, and I gave him credit for thinking about me. “I’m not getting anywhere near her,” I responded.

Tony spoke, “Abbey would take me to the cleaners if she saw that video.”

“So I take it you got the tape back from her?”

“Yeah.”

“What about any copies?”

“She told me this was the only copy.”

“And you believed her?”

“What choice did I have?”

I shrugged. Tony was right. Now, he could only hope, like me, that Krista was true to her word.

“She made out all right. There’s no reason for her to screw me any further,” Tony added, hopefully.

“Unless she decides she wants a matching necklace,” I suggested.

“If she does, I’ll kill the bitch,” Tony shot back, sounded more mafia-like than jeweler. “I told her if she tries to blackmail me again, I’ll kill her.”

“What did she say?”

“Nothing. She was too busy shaking.”

I wondered if the Swede was really scared, or just hiding behind her great acting abilities.

Tony continued, “Trust me, Jeff, she won't fuck with me again.” Tony sounded confident, leaving me to wonder if I should have taken a similarly decisive stand with the sweet Swede.

“So I guess you won't be fucking her anymore, huh?”

Tony's serious demeanor changed quickly. Indeed, he was actually smiling as he shook his head sideways. “Actually, that's the only good part. After I told her I'd kill her if she ever blackmailed me again, she started crying and said she was sorry. She said we could continue fucking. It was weird. One minute she was all tough and bossy, the next minute she was crying and telling me she was doing it because her mom has breast cancer and she needed the money to help her.”

I wanted to tell Tony that Krista's mom didn't have breast cancer... that we made that up so she could successfully blackmail me. But of course, I didn't. I couldn't do anything that threatened my own survival. As selfish as that sounds, it was true: it wasn't Tony and me against Krista. It was me against Krista and Tony against Krista. We had our own fight with the blackmailing Swede. And we had to fight the best way we thought. Tony had drawn a bright line.

Deep down, I was sure Krista wasn't finished with Tony. I spoke, “I'd be careful around her, Tony. That girl's trouble. If she did it to you once, she might try it again.”

“I doubt it,” he shot back. “She knows I'm serious. We have a mutual understanding: she doesn't fuck with me anymore, I let her live and fuck her every Monday and Thursday.”

I shrugged. “I hope you're right.”

“I am,” Tony shot back confidently. It was clear he was finished talking about the situation.

"Well," I said rising, "I'm sorry things didn't work out like you planned. But I appreciate you giving me a heads up."

"Things worked out alright," Tony replied. "It would have been worse if I had married the bitch and she screwed me after that. At least this way I'm just out a pair of earrings. Plus, I get to keep fucking the bitch... that's worth the price of the earrings... maybe more. She's still the best lay I've ever had."

I nodded and shook hands with Tony. "Yeah. That's not so bad. Take care, Tony."

"You too, Jeff. Thanks for coming by."

"No problem." I turned and walked out of his office. Inside, a little voice told me that Tony was screwed... and me, too.

# FIFTEEN

The date was December 16th, and I awoke with a stuffy head, scratchy throat, and aches all over. Either someone had beaten me with a stick, or I was dying. That's when it hit me-- I had AIDS. In ten years, I hadn't been sick, hadn't been to a doctor for anything but my annual physical and radiation screening. But today, I was sick... very sick. This is my punishment, I told myself. This is what happens when you boink the promiscuous Au Pair without protection. You deserve this as much as anyone.

I'd always wondered how I would die. Now I knew.

When Krista dropped Winnie the Pooh that fateful morning, AIDS was the furthest thing from my mind. And why not? There were so many other things to occupy my thoughts: her perfectly-shaped firm breasts and pink nipples; her silky-smooth skin; those long, endless legs; and her flickering blue eyes and naughty smile. Commander Squeaky wasn't thinking of AIDS

when she started yelping like an excited doggie. Sadly, the Commander never thought of AIDS.

Several times afterwards, I'd thought about AIDS, though. The potential was there, I remember thinking. After all, Krista was more than just promiscuous; she was super promiscuous. And now, here I was with AIDS. Jesus! I shouldn't have boinked the Au Pair. I closed my eyes.

In the darkness, I saw my white blood cells disappearing, devoured by a bunch of killer viral organisms within me. Damn it. What an idiot I was. The Swede may have been a great lay, but she wasn't worth dying over. Perhaps I could beat this thing, I told myself? My thoughts shifted to Magic Johnson, still going strong after more than two decades. Unfortunately for me, Magic never boinked Krista. He didn't have *her* AIDS strain. Krista probably had *super*-AIDS.

I rolled out of bed and slowly made my way to the master bath. Death stared back in the mirror. Soon, my eyes would lose their color and dark circles would surround my sockets. My weight would slowly disappear, my arms and legs would grow spindly, my cheekbones would protrude as my face sucked inward, and I'd get those terrible sores. I could see it all right there in the mirror. It was inevitable... death by AIDS was my fate. I knew it. And I deserved it. I pissed a clear, vitamin-less stream, staggered back to bed, and collapsed, closing my eyes. Jesus H. Christ... I had AIDS!

Like everyone facing a crisis, I told myself to be brave. Even though I hadn't able to stop boinking Krista, I could stop being scared. Attitude is your last freedom, I told myself. Wither away bravely. Nobody forced you to fuck Krista. Take the good with the bad... even if the bad is a death sentence. Be brave.

Next, I whispered a series of prayers to God, some Our Father's, but mostly Hail Mary's.

Of course, I felt like a hypocrite. Here I was, the man who fucked the Au Pair every which way possible, asking the mother of Jesus-- a virgin no less-- to pray for me. What a twisted coward I was. A real man would have been praying like this:

...Hail Mary, full of grace, pray for someone less fortunate than me. I fucked the Au Pair and deserve to die. Pray for children born with AIDS; pray for hemophiliacs infected through no fault of their own; pray for the innocent now and at the hour of their death. But please, do not pray for me. I fucked the Au Pair, and I deserve to die and burn in hell.

A million thoughts blurred through my head: how would I tell Susan? Should I tell Susan? Should the kids know their dad screwed the babysitter and died because of it? Could I up my life insurance? And where should I have my ashes spread... Sweden?

I fell back asleep and dreamed...

*...I was in the basement, wearing Navy Whites, cover in one hand, briefcase in the other.*

*The shower was running. I knocked on the bathroom door. "Krista?"*

*"Ja," she answered from under the water.*

*"Krista, I'm about to leave for work."*

*The water stopped, the shower curtain slid open, and through the closed door, I pictured the 18 year-old stepping out of the tub and onto the bath mat. "I'm coming," she said, her voice now closer. "One minute. Wait. Please."*

*I heard a towel moving across skin. Then, sooner than expected, the bathroom door opened and Krista stood before me, wrapped completely in a white towel plastered with Winnie the Pooh. Her blonde hair dripped, her blue eyes apologized. "I'm sorry. I'm late, right?"*

*I smiled at her as the steam from the bathroom danced in the air behind her. "No, you're*



*fine. I'm a few minutes early."*

*Framed by the door, she smiled back, relieved. Now her eyes twinkled. "Off to sell ice cream?"*

*"Standard Navy issue," I answered. "What can I say?"*

*"I like your uniform. You look like Tom Cruise in that Navy movie."*

*"Top Gun," I said.*

*She nodded.*

*"Okay. Well, I just wanted to make sure you were up and about. I better get going."*

*"I thought you said you were early." She sounded clearly disappointed again.*

*"I've got a few minutes."*

*"Can you wait then?"*

*Before I could utter the word 'sure', her right hand pulled the tucked end of the towel free and Winnie the Pooh fell down to her feet. When I looked, she was a ghoulish skeleton.*

*I screamed.*

*Krista laughed and danced, her skeletal bones clicking and clacking eerily, her teeth chattering. This Swedish import definitely looked better with clothes than without them. She reached out with a skeletal finger and curled it towards me. "Come and get me, Mr. Ice Cream Man."*

*I screamed again as I ran up the stairs. "Help. Help."*

*As she chased me, the clicking and clacking of bones grew louder the nearer she drew. There was no escaping her and I finally stopped and faced her. "Please, no, leave me alone," I pleaded.*

*She laughed. "You think I'm pretty, don't you?"*

*Duh. No. I shook my head sideways.*

*She stepped toward me. "I like you, Jeff", she clacked. "You're nice to me. I want to be nice to you."*

*Then put that towel back on and leave me alone. "Please stop," I stammered.*

*Her skeletal teeth grinned and she reached out to touch me.*

*At her touch, I screamed out. "Nooooooooooooo..."*

I awoke to the sound of my scream echoing in my bedroom. When I opened my eyes and looked around, Jenn was standing by the side of the bed, crying. I shook my head to clear it.

"Jenn? Are you okay?"

She cried some more.

"Jenn, honey, it's okay."

She looked at me with teary eyes. "You scared me, daddy."

"I was having a bad dream," I explained as I took some deep breaths.

Jenn wiped her face. "You have bad dreams?"

"Sometimes."

"I'm sorry, daddy. Can I have breakfast now?"

I nodded. "Where's Krista?"

"She's still sleeping."

"Okay. I'll be right there."

When Jenn turned and went into the family room, I mustered the energy to get out of bed and threw on my robe. After getting cereal for Jenn and Jack, I went down and woke Krista.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Eight."

She turned and closed her eyes again.

"Krista, I need to go to the hospital. I'm sick."

She turned back to me. "What's wrong?"

*I have AIDS and you gave it to me.* "I don't know."

"Okay. I'll be up in a minute."

I dressed and drove to Bethesda Naval Hospital.

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The Navy doctor finished his examination, saying, "I think it's just a case of flu."

*No, it's not. It's AIDS! I've been fucking our Au Pair. And she's been fucking every living man she comes across.* "Can you run a blood test on me?"

"For what?"

"Just so I know it's not something else."

"Sure, Commander. We can do that." He called out to the next room. "Petty Officer Clark?"

A tall, spindly female corpsman entered. She looked skeletal and scary. "Yes, sir."

"Would you draw a blood sample from Commander MacDonald for me, please?"

"Yes, sir. For what tests?" She found a needle and the blood gathering cartridges.

"A complete blood work-up."

She nodded as the doctor left.

She found the vein in my left forearm, swabbed it, and inserted the needle. As the red blood filled the first cartridge I swore I could see those nasty viral organisms. "Will they do an AIDS screening?" I asked hesitantly as she inserted the second cartridge.

She looked at me curiously, as if to say, 'you haven't been fucking your Au Pair, have you, Commander?' "Yes, sir," she answered.

"How long does it take for the results?"

"Usually two to three days. But if we put a rush on it, we can have the results tomorrow."

"Would you do that for me?" *I've been fucking the Au Pair and I'm scared shit less.*

"Sure, Commander."

"Thank you."

"I'll call you tomorrow if you leave me a number."

I gave her my home phone. "Thank you."

She nodded.

I went home, took two Nyquil, and passed out. Now that I was dying, my life's clock ticked at warp speed, and when I awoke, it was already dark. I crawled out of bed and shuffled into the family room.

"Hi, daddy. Are you feeling better?"

I smiled at Jenn and nodded.

"I made you some chicken soup," Krista said.

I spied the Campbell's soup can next to the stove. "Thanks."

I ate at the breakfast table, took two more Nyquil, and went back to bed. I don't remember hearing Susan come home, nor do I remember her leaving the following morning. I awakened the next day to the sound of the phone ringing on my nightstand. "Hello."

"Commander MacDonald?"

"Yes."

"Commander, this is Petty Officer Clark from Bethesda Naval."

I perked up and braced myself. Here it comes... my death sentence.

"Sir, all your blood tests came back negative."

Negative? As in, I don't have AIDS? "Negative?"

"Yes, sir. Nothing abnormal, everything within specs. Your cholesterol was a little high, but that was probably because you didn't fast before I drew your blood."

"Nothing else?"

"No, sir. All of your other results were fine."

"Thank you," I said, with renewed energy as I set the phone back down. I wasn't dying! I said an Our Father and a Hail Mary. Closing my eyes, I started lusting after Krista again...

# SIXTEEN

Krista flew to Sweden on December 18<sup>th</sup> and wasn't scheduled to return until January 4<sup>th</sup>. Left alone with Susan, Commander Squeaky braced himself for the two-week famine. With my own relationship deteriorating by the day, I, too, dreaded spending two weeks with the woman I had pledged to love, honor, and cherish all the days of my life. I was understandably thankful when my sister from Albany visited with her kids that first week, then, as luck would have it, Susan was called upon unexpectedly to attend a three day conference in Miami the week after Christmas. When Susan returned on December 30<sup>th</sup>, New Year's was the last remaining hurdle until the sweet Swede returned.

As had become the neighborhood custom, Tony and Abbey hosted a New Year's Eve dinner party for a group of couples from the street. It was actually one of the few social gatherings I enjoyed. The men congregated on the deck in the cold winter air, drinking beers, smoking cigars, eating chips and dip, and talking Redskins football while Tony grilled steaks and skewers of

shrimp; the women relaxed in front of a roaring fire in the Bartolucci's formal living room, sipping Moscow mules, sampling hor d'oeuvres from Ridgewell's, and discussing color schemes and decorating ideas. After dinner, we'd all retire to the downstairs rec room for charades, 8-ball, and champagne while we waited for the ball to drop in Times Square. Of course I didn't know this New Year's Eve, like seemingly everything else this past year, would be different from any other. On this New Year's Eve, both the ball and a bomb would drop, and life would never be the same.

At the stroke of midnight, everyone kissed and shook hands, and we sang Old Lang Sine. Another year gone-by, I mused to myself, only four more days until Krista returned. Thirty minutes later the party broke-up. "Can we help clean-up?" I offered after the last of the other couples had left.

Abbey took me up on my token offer. "Thanks. But before we clean-up, there's something I want everyone to see." She looked excited as she led Susan, Tony, and me downstairs to the rec room. "This year, I made a videotape of our family's most memorable moments, and I thought you'd enjoy it." As we sat, Abbey clicked on the VCR and dimmed the lights.

On the couch next to Susan, I groaned silently as I awaited the coming torture. God, I hated crap like this. It was bad enough that seemingly every relative, friend, and passing acquaintance sent a rambling "bragging letter" inside their Christmas card. Did people really think I wanted to hear the gory details of their lives? Sure I was happy Uncle Frank had successfully battled irritable bowel syndrome, and Cousin Carol had finally found a vaginal cream that didn't irritate her crotch. I can't begin to tell you how much sleep I lost over the year worrying about those things. But come on now, I didn't need to read about it in Christmas cards wishing me peace

and joy. If they really wished me peace and joy, a simple note saying, "We're doing/feeling fine" would have sufficed. The only thing worse than those bragging letters would be a bragging video, I figured.

Still, as the t.v. lit up, I told myself to grin and bear it. My resolution was to be more patient... and to keep a closer eye out for hidden video cameras.

In the first scene, little Teddy was sitting at the head of the Bartolucci dining room table, a blazing birthday cake before him. A group of neighborhood kids, including Jack and Jenn, sang Happy Birthday to him.

"This was Teddy's 6<sup>th</sup> Birthday," Abbey announced proudly. While she and Susan cooed in unison like puppies, I rolled my eyes in the darkness. Jesus Christ! This was not how I wanted to spend the first hour of my New Year. If this was a prelude, then I sensed a long, difficult year ahead. My mind drifted to Krista. I wonder how she'd spent her New Year's Eve. No doubt alcohol, laughter, and fun were involved. Probably great sex, too. God, I missed her. Not an hour went by that I didn't think of making love to her.

I refocused on the t.v. and saw Tony and Teddy building a sand castle on the beach. "This was our vacation at Nags Head," Abbey narrated.

My eyelids drooped. God Almighty... this was almost as exciting as watching Tony build his wall. *Almost*. The camera panned the ocean.

"See those black things in the water?" Abbey said excitedly, pointing to some microscopic specs of black on the grey horizon. "Those are dolphins."

*Great footage*, I thought to myself sarcastically as I contained a yawn. *Silly me, I thought they were just microscopic specs of black on the grey horizon. Top notch, Abbey. Those National*



*Geographic specials have nothing over this.*

Standing next to the couch, Tony sensed our boredom. He spoke out, “Hey Abbey, I really don’t think Jeff and Susan want to see our home movies.”

Abbey smiled at him in the darkness as we waited for the next great Bartolucci event to appear on the big screen. “Oh, hush, honey, there’s only a couple more minutes. Plus, it gets better.” She said it nonchalantly.

I bet it doesn’t get better, I thought silently, forgetting about the 50-50-90 rule.

Of course I was wrong.

Nobody knew the full extent of Abbey’s remark until the 46-inch screen lit up again. Expecting to be bored, I looked up to see Tony-- *in his birthday suit*-- thrusting into a woman before him. She was facing forward, kneeling on all fours, taking him from behind. I recognized Krista’s unmistakable ass. “Ummm...umm...umm...,” Tony grunted as he rammed into her, grabbing her hips for leverage. Through the surround-sound speakers, he sounded more animal than human, and I almost dropped my beer. “Ooooh... oooh.... oooh,” the sweet Swede yelped out in that familiar high-pitch of hers.

*Jesus H. Christ!*

If my eyes had been shut it would have sounded like a pack of wild animals copulating in stereophonic euphoria. But they weren’t shut. Absolutely not. They were glued to the screen as if Tony’s life, and perhaps my own, were on the line. By now my heart was thundered against my chest.

“This is when Tony fucked your Au Pair,” Abbey narrated dryly.

I continued to watch the passionate frenzy. Tony the Tiger was pumping up more than just the margins. Wow! Obviously, his threat hadn't scared the Swede. Finally able to tear my eyes away, I looked over to see Tony sucking air. Not only could I feel his pain, worse, I felt my own fear. Holy shit!

Back on the t.v., Tony finished pounding the Swede with a booming grunt and some deep breaths. Finally, he collapsed atop the Swede onto the bed.

"Phew," Abbey exhaled breathlessly, "I don't know about the rest of you, but I could use a cigarette."

Nobody laughed.

For a split-second, the screen went black. I braced, wondering if my image would be next, wondering if Tony and I were both going down tonight. Holding my breath, my heart boomed in my chest and I tried to convince myself to be brave. Unfortunately, my words rang hollow. If God wanted us to be brave, he never would have given us legs. I looked toward the stairs and planned my escape.

Suddenly the screen lit up with Tony and Krista in a new setting. I uncoiled momentarily and let out a deep, silent breath. Better Tony than me, right? Why ruin two lives?

"This is when Tony took the little whore to Las Vegas last month," Abbey said, continuing the dry narration.

On the t.v., Krista was kneeling before Tony, bobbing rhythmically as she gave Tony one of her patented blowjobs. Fearless Commander Squeaky perked up as he watched his brethren get off.

"Wow! She's really good, hon," Abbey sang out sarcastically. "Look at that big smile on

your face. Was that as much fun as it looks like?”

I was pretty sure I could answer the question, but decided right then and there that silence was the key to a long, healthy new year.

Speechless, Tony stared into the darkness. He was gone... dust in the New Year's air.

“Here comes the good part,” Abbey announced as Krista finished up.

I startled. The good part? What were the parts we had just watched? I held my breath and listened as Tony's voice came through the speakers, “Everything's set, Krista. I talked to my lawyer. He said I can skim-off about \$800,000 in inventory, sell the store to my dad, and send the money to Sweden to set up the new store. We'll lay low for a while until Abbey eventually gives up trying to sink her claws into me. Then, we'll be home free.”

As Krista hugged Tony in that Vegas hotel room, the screen went blank.

In the darkness, the rec room was eerily silent-- almost deafening-- the tension unbearable. Sitting there, I felt an urge to break the silence. But what do you say at a moment like that? *Does she swallow? Tony. No way. That Tony sure is a great Dad, huh Abbey?* Probably not. *Are you going to let Tony live, Abbey?* A possibility. But in the end, I just kept my mouth shut. After all, but for the grace of a devilish Au Pair named Krista, my naked ass and Commander Squeaky could have been up on there that screen.

Secretly, I hoped Tony would sneak up the stairs in the darkness, run away, and never come back. That was his only way out. *Run, Tony, run*, I implored silently. Get away while you still can. Unfortunately, when Abbey flicked the lights on, Tony was still standing there, dazed and shaking.

I looked down at the carpet, unable to make eye contact with my brethren, now wishing I hadn't betrayed him. Maybe I should have told him about Krista when I had the chance. Perhaps this might not be happening.

“Would anyone like some more champagne?” Abbey sang out in a weak attempt to break the tension.

Still shocked, no one responded.

“Oh come on!” Abbey appealed, “It’s New Year's, not a funeral. Smile. It’s not the end of the world. It’s just the end of Tony and my marriage.”

I glanced over at Tony to see tears streaking down his cheeks. I wanted to cry with him.

Standing next to him, Abbey looked at Tony with blazing eyes. “I met with my lawyer this morning,” she said a matter-of-factly. “He said he’s going to help me sink my claws into you-- adultery, conspiracy to abandon, and conspiracy to commit fraud. He said a jury will have a field day with this tape. But since you’re not going to want a jury to see this tape, he said you’ll settle out of court, on my terms. So here’s what I want: the house, half the assets of the store, monthly child support of three grand, and alimony of five grand. Okay?” Abbey was smiling devilishly.

Tony remained silent, his eyes fixed ahead, his world obliterated.

Abbey spoke again, “Relax, Tony. It’s not so bad. I'm not trying to hurt you. All I’m going to do is fuck you as hard as you fucked Krista... as hard as you fucked me and Teddy. That’s only fair, right?”

Wisely, Tony didn't acknowledge.

"I hope she was worth it, Tony. Because that’s going to be the most expensive fuck and blowjob you'll ever have," Abbey added.

I didn't doubt that. The fifteen grand diamond earrings would pale.

Without saying a word, Tony walked upstairs and left the house. Of course I had no idea I'd never see Tony again.

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To say the rest of the evening was tense was an understatement. Being the last male remaining, everything somehow felt like my fault. Not knowing what to say, I told Abbey I was sorry. [That's another thing I remember learning in kindergarten-- when you see someone hurt, and you don't know what to say, tell them you're sorry... plain and simple.]. I said it as sincerely as I could muster. And in truth, I was sorry. But I was sorry for Tony as much as Abbey. Abbey treated him the way Susan treated me. This was as much her fault as Tony's... and Krista's.

Abbey looked at me with tears in her eyes. "Thanks, Jeff. I'm sorry if this ruined your New Year's Eve."

Watching good porn could never ruin my New Year's Eve, I wanted to say. Instead, I nodded solemnly and said, "I'm sorry" again.

"Where do you think Tony went?" Susan asked.

"Probably to his parents," Abbey responded.

"Is there anything we can do?" I asked.

Abbey shook her head sideways. "I'll be okay. But thanks."

She had misinterpreted my question. I was thinking of Tony, not Abbey. "Do you want

me to go look for Tony?” I asked more specifically.

“I really don’t care. He’s not my concern anymore.” Abbey couldn't have been colder. “I just don’t understand why he did this... after all I’ve given him... after all I’ve done for him. I gave him everything. Why did he do this to me?” Abbey was crying now, and Susan stepped forward to embrace her.

Abbey hadn’t given Tony everything, I thought to myself... there’s no way she gave him what the Swede just gave him on the screen there. If she did, he probably never would have messed around.

After a few more minutes of awkward condolences, we finally said good-bye. “Call us if you need anything, okay?” Susan said to Abbey as we left.

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The New Year’s air was cold and refreshing as we walked back home, which gave me a chance to sort my jumbled thoughts and calm my frayed nerves. I was glad Krista was away, because after seeing that tape, I wasn’t sure how Susan would treat her. Did Susan blame the Swede? Or Tony? And how would Susan feel about having the Swede living in her house? And Abbey-- would she insist that Tony’s little whore be sent back to Sweden? Then what? Would Krista screw me the way she'd screwed Tony?

Needless to say, I couldn't have been more scared. If Tony’s threat to kill Krista hadn’t stopped her, what could I do? Clearly, she was a psychopath and I was at her mercy.

Lying in bed later on, Susan brought up the issue of Krista. “What do you think we should

do about Krista?”

Still semi-shocked, I hesitated, hoping I wouldn't say something stupid. I tried to think like a lawyer and came up with a winning response. “Uh, jeez, I don't know.” That seemed safe.

“Do you think we should call the Au Pair agency and let them know about this?”

Another hesitation. *What would an innocent man say right about now?* I decided to stick with an answer that had worked. Another kindergarten lesson-- if something ain't broke, don't fix it. “I don't know,” I said again

“I don't like the idea of her living in our house.”

*What woman would?* “I know.” I nodded.

“But the kids really like her,” Susan added, as if trying to talk herself out of getting rid of the whore she harbored under her roof.

“I know,” I said with resignation. *I really like her, too*, Commander Squeaky chimed in. “She's good with the kids,” I added... *not to mention with that wondrous mouth of hers.*

“I'm going to talk to Abbey about it, and see how she feels about Krista living next door.”

I was shocked. Was I hearing correctly? Was Susan going to leave Krista's fate up to Abbey? And if Abbey was okay having the sexpot next door then Susan was, too? It didn't make sense. Was this a test? Did she want me to say, ‘No way, Susan... she can't stay here. Not after what she and Tony did.’ After all, no wife in her right mind would let a seductress like Krista live under her roof... right? “Okay,” I said instead, completely helpless.

“I can't believe Tony did that to Abbey and Teddy.”

“I know.” I tried to say it with disgust.

“Abbey is such a good wife.”

*In your twisted book she is.* “I know.”

“Why would Tony risk everything he had?”

*After watching the Swede on t.v., you really don't know?* “I don't know,” I said sadly. My responses had been reduced to ‘I don't know’ and ‘I know’.

A very uncomfortable silence followed.

“Do you think Krista's pretty?” Susan asked, out-of-the-blue.

Glancing over, I noted Susan's lethal stare. My heart shot forward like a bullet and I thought about my options. I could lie and say 'I don't know.' Unfortunately, Susan would see through that and my tenuous credibility would be shot. Of course the Swede was pretty. She was drop-dead gorgeous. Anyone with a sense of sight could see that. Hell, one didn't even need eyes. Just listening to those yelps was enough to convince any man that the Swede was something special. My other option was to tell the truth... tempered, of course. “Yeah, she's pretty... if you're talking about her physical features”... *and if you like goddesses who give the best head ever.* “But she's so immature and irresponsible that it detracts from her.” I paused. “Why?”

“Just wondering.”

I told my heart to slow.

“You wouldn't ever cheat on me, would you?”

So much for the truth... tempered or any other way. It was time to lie... and lie intensely! “Now way, Susan,” I shot back, my voice charged with emotion. I tried to make eye contact. “You know I love you... and the kids. Why?”

The fiery glare in her eyes made it clear I was going to hear ‘why.’ “Because if you ever



do, I'll cut your penis off and feed it to the squirrels." She wasn't joking.

I shuddered as the image of a squirrel nibbling on a lifeless Commander Squeaky unfurled in my mind. Were squirrels even meat eaters? That damn Lorraine Bobbitt... vindictive wives would forever copycat her. As I lay there, I contemplated wearing a protective cup over the Commander to bed, but figured that might tip Susan off. I could almost hear her: "Why are you wearing that?"

"Um, uh, doctor's order." And then I'd start running. *Run, Jeff, Run.*

I waited for Susan to ask me the more troubling questions about Krista, like why the Swede had videotaped herself having sex with Tony, and how Abbey had gotten hold of the videotape. Those were obvious questions, yet Susan didn't even bring them up. That's when I should have known something was definitely rotten in the MacDonald household. Unfortunately, I wasn't thinking straight. Fear does that to you. Someday it would all make sense... someday too late.

"Good night," Susan said, scooting far away from me to her side of the bed.

"Good night," I echoed. But it wasn't a good night. It was a bad night... a very, very bad night. I thought of Tony. Poor Tony. Where was he? And what was he doing?

# SEVENTEEN

Less than six hours into the New Year, the phone on the nightstand next to the bed rang. Who in their right mind called on New Year's morning before nine a.m.? Uncle Frank? Cousin Carol?

When Susan answered, I rolled over, turned my back to her, closed my eyes, and hoped to recapture my dream of being back in bed with the blackmailing Au Pair who scared the living crap out of me.

“Oh my God!” Susan shouted out in horror. “Are you okay?”

My eyes shot open. From the emotion in Susan's voice, something was definitely wrong. And I was sure it didn't involve irritable bowel syndrome or vaginal itching. I turned toward Susan and saw her crestfallen face. “What's wrong?” I whispered to Susan.

She shook her head at me as if to say, ‘don't interrupt me, you pesky fly.’ Her eyes darted

about in panic as she listened on the phone.

“Just stay calm,” Susan finally responded into the phone, “I’ll be there in a minute.” She hung up shaking.

“Who was that?”

“Abbey.”

I was sure it was connected to the New Year’s Eve horror show. Or had that been just a bad dream? “What’s wrong?”

“Tony’s dead,” Susan said point-blank.

I went cold as the nightmare from the previous night re-registered in my mind. Oh God, it really *had* happened. “How?”

“A car accident.” Susan was out of bed, stepping into a pair of sweats and a sweater.

“Where are you going?”

“To Abbey’s.”

“I’m coming with you.”

Susan shook her head. “No. You stay here. Someone needs to be here when the kids wake-up.”

“But...”

“No,” Susan interrupted. “You stay here.” There was no slack in her tone.

Two minutes later, Susan was out the door and I was left still shaking in bed. Jesus! Not this. Tony couldn’t be dead... not yet. He hadn’t finished his wall yet...

About an hour later, Susan returned and filled in the missing details. According to the

police, Tony's car had crashed through a stone wall on the GW Parkway and landed a hundred feet below on the rocks of the Potomac's bank, killing Tony instantly. With his blood alcohol level twice the legal limit, and no signs of foul play, the police theorized that he'd fallen asleep at the wheel or failed to negotiate the steep curve. Either way, as far as the police were concerned, it was another alcohol-related accident.

I had my own theory-- I was sure Tony had killed himself. Jesus, what a way to start the New Year. Of course, I had no way of knowing this was just the beginning of the end.

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Over the next several days, we commiserated with Abbey and did everything possible to help out with little Teddy. Tony's family was understandably shocked. Had they known about the videotape and its premier showing on New Year's Eve, they'd have been even more shocked. But as I expected, Abbey didn't tell them. Instead, Susan told her in-laws that she and Tony had fought after the party, and Tony had stormed out to be alone. Given the Bartolucci's fiery relationship, that wasn't uncommon, and even Tony's family would believe that. Of course I wanted to tell them the truth. But Susan told me to keep quiet and mind my own business. And given my fragile existence, I also figured it was probably best to lay low and not involve either myself or Krista.

"What happened is between Abbey and Tony," she instructed. "It's none of our business. If Abbey doesn't want Tony's family to know he had an affair with our babysitter, then we should respect that. I'm sure Tony's parents don't want to hear anything like that about their son. Let

them remember him as a loving husband and father.”

“So what am I supposed to say if anyone asks me questions about Tony and Abbey?” I asked.

“Just tell them you were Tony’s friend, but didn’t know any details about his personal relationship with Abbey.”

“What about the videotape?”

“Abbey said to not mention it. All it could do is complicate the situation.”

Spoken like a true lawyer... duh. “Then why the hell did she show it to us?”

“She said she had to. She didn’t want to be alone when she showed Tony. She thought he might go crazy and try and kill her.”

I nodded and wished he had. Better Abbey dead than Tony. “How do you know all this?”

“I’m her best friend, Jeff. She told me.” Susan rolled her eyes at my stupidity.

“Well I wish Abbey would have done things differently...”

“Why? None of this is here fault.”

I remained quiet.

Susan could read my thoughts. “The videotape didn’t kill Tony,” she said. “Tony killed Tony.”

My mind wandered. Not true. Krista had killed Tony. And somehow, I felt like I’d contributed to killing him, too. Shit. At that moment, I hated Krista like never before. She was pure evil... a devil in a Playboy bunny’s body.

I spent a lot of time wondering if I should call Krista and tell her what happened to Tony.

After all, she was at the center of everything and I wondered how she'd react. Would she feel any responsibility? I also wondered whether I could use Tony's death to my own advantage. Could I threaten to go to the police and implicate her? After all, blackmail was a crime. Unfortunately, if I did that, I knew it would be over for me. No doubt the tape of me would come to light. And I couldn't afford for that to happen. Plus, it wouldn't bring back Tony. And so, in the end, I just decided to stay quiet and see what happened when the Swede returned.

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The funeral was held on a January 3<sup>rd</sup>, a cold, grey day that looked like death in any world. Dressed as dapperly as ever, with his thick, dark hair slicked back and a nice, innocent smile on his mouth, Tony made a handsome corpse. He looked so peaceful that I couldn't help but wonder if I'd be better off with him... no more bitchy wife... no more blackmailing Au Pair... no more 9-to-5 drudgery at the Pentagon. Just peace and quiet... forever.

After the funeral, Abbey hosted a reception at her house. Milling around downstairs in the rec room, I couldn't bear to look at the t.v. The last time I'd looked at it, Tony was in heat, living large in his birthday suit, as he thrust into the beautiful, blackmailing Swedish Au Pair. Today he was a lifeless, cold mass six feet under the frozen ground. I couldn't imagine two greater extremes.

Across the room, I watched Abbey talking animatedly with friends and relatives. She seemed to be handling the tragedy well... almost too well. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. Evidently, being a widow with a big life insurance premium was better than being a jilted divorcee. I walked over and pulled her aside. "How are you holding up?"

She looked at me with clear green eyes. “I’m doing great. Ready to get on with my life.” She tipped her gin and tonic at me as if toasting her good fortune, and I envisioned her doing a jig on Tony's fresh grave later that night.

Her unequivocal lack of remorse almost caused me to ask if she was glad Tony was dead. But I didn't. I knew that answer. “Did you tell the police about the videotape?” I asked instead.

She looked at me like I was crazy. “What videotape?” she said coldly.

I nodded my understanding at the rich, royal bitch. “I guess Tony had life insurance, huh?”

Now her eyes twinkled like emeralds. “Of course. You know how much he loved Teddy and me.”

*Teddy... yes. You... no.* I said nothing.

“Have the police spoken with you?” she asked.

I shook my head sideways.

“It’s been tough enough for Teddy and Tony’s family,” she preached solemnly. “I’d appreciate it if you don’t say anything about New Year’s Eve or Tony and my relationship. I really don’t want Teddy or Tony’s parents to know he was fucking your Swedish Au Pair. I think Tony would have wanted it that way.”

I nodded my understanding, agreeing with Abbey on that last point. I theorized that Tony had purposefully driven off the GW Parkway to make his suicide look like an accident, not wanting suicide to be his legacy. And even if that meant Abbey would receive his life insurance premium, I was sure that was Tony’s way of saying he was sorry for cheating on her, and ensuring that Teddy would be taken care of. If that was Tony’s dying wish, then who was I to not honor it?

"What about Krista?" I asked Abbey.

"What about her?"

"Won't it bother you having her living right next door?" I clarified.

"I don't know."

Her laissez-faire attitude took me by surprise. *What do you mean you don't know? That girl screwed your husband left and right... and you don't care if she's living right next door?*

"Don't you blame her for what happened?" I asked.

"I blame Tony," she answered directly. "He should have kept his dick in his pants. She didn't force him to screw her."

"Did you ever consider that she entrapped him?" I asked, treading carefully.

Abbey laughed. "Entrapped him? She didn't entrap him. He entrapped himself by not keeping his zipper shut."

I asked another troubling question. "Do you wonder why she... um, you know, videotaped Tony and gave you the tape?"

Abbey answered quickly, "I really don't care why she did it. I'm glad she gave me the tape. What's done is done. Tony screwed around and got caught. Right now, I only care about making sure Teddy is okay."

I nodded at her lie. Abbey only cared that *she* was okay. Based on everything I knew, Teddy was conceived so Tony would be forever indebted to Abbey, unable to walk away cleanly. Unlike Krista, Abbey had used a different means-- a more conventional and socially-accepted means-- to entrap Tony.

And that was that. Abbey collected \$750,000 in insurance money, Tony's father agreed to



give her an annual stipend from the store at Mazza Gallery, and the world saw her as the poor widow who lost her husband in the terrible New Year's accident. I saw her as Susan's evil twin.

# EIGHTEEN

Although Krista had been gone for just two weeks, it seemed more like a lifetime. [If he were still alive, I was sure Tony Bartolucci would have agreed.]. As I waited inside the terminal at Dulles, I still hadn't made sense of the past week's stunning events. Of course I hated Krista for what she'd done to Tony. He was dead because of the blackmailing Swede. At the same time, I feared Krista like never before. Obviously she wasn't afraid to use her trump cards.

But I questioned her judgement. Why had she played her trump cards and given away all her power, so early in the game? After all, in giving Abbey the video, Krista had given up any and all future demands against Tony. With the video exposed, there would be no matching diamond necklace, no gold bracelets, no nothing. Why in God's name had she done that? After all, it wasn't as if she'd exhausted Tony financially. The man was filthy rich for God's sake. Everyone knew that. So why had she given all that away? That was the question I pondered as I waited for her flight to arrive from Stockholm.

One obvious answer surfaced: she was so scared of Tony that she decided to screw him once and for all. *Game over. See ya... wouldn't want to be ya.*

Unfortunately, the more I considered that answer, the less sense it made. After all, by royally screwing Tony, Krista would have opened herself up to even greater retaliation from Tony. She had to know the game wouldn't be over until Tony got revenge. As it turned out, Krista's only saving grace was Tony's suicide. But she couldn't have known he would do that. No way. If she had been truly scared of Tony, she would have just let him go... softly and quietly.

That she didn't let Tony go softly and quietly meant one thing: Krista didn't give Abbey the video out of fear. But if not fear, then what? Just what had the Swede gained by giving up the video? I racked my brain but came up with nothing. No matter how I sliced it, it just didn't make sense. Jesus, my life was getting too complicated.

Perhaps more importantly, my life was getting even scarier. Was Tony's New Year's Coming Out Party a prelude to my own fate? Did it matter that I did everything Krista asked of me? Would she screw me like she'd screwed Tony? I felt weak and nauseous.

When the SAS flight landed, I searched for Krista among the de-planing passengers in the international terminal. When I didn't see her initially, I considered another possibility: maybe Krista wasn't coming back. Maybe she really was too scared of Tony. Maybe she'd given Abbey the video as a parting shot at Tony, and had no intention of coming back. Hmmm. That made absolute sense. And if that was the case, then maybe I was in the clear. As much as it would break Commander Squeaky's heart, I prayed that she wouldn't walk through customs. As I played over that scenario in my head, I was sure she wasn't coming back.

Of course my prayers went unanswered. And I was damned by the 50-50-90 as well.

Wearing a white fur mini, black leggings and a black turtle neck, the tall blonde with the French braid stood out from the crowd as she walked through the doors of customs and into the terminal. She was larger-than-life, more beautiful than any cover girl model, and with Tony's death casting such a dark pall over life, I'd almost forgotten how strikingly beautiful she really was. Of course Commander Squeaky hadn't forgotten... little things like blackmail and the death of a neighbor didn't affect his one-track mind.

When our eyes met, she broke into a wide, white smile and ran to me, hugging me like a separated lover returning home. Obviously it was good that Susan wasn't with me. "Hi, Jeffie," Krista said without a care in the world. "I missed you."

Forgetting about all the nasty business with Tony and the videotape for a brief moment, I hugged her hard, unable to resist her body against mine. She felt too good, and the sweet smell of Chanel brought Commander Squeaky to life for the first time since watching the videotape of Tony. But as I released her, my anger toward the blackmailing Swede returned. I wondered how she'd react to Tony's death. Would she care or feel any sense of responsibility? Would she be relieved that he was gone and could not exact revenge? Mostly though, I wondered if she'd turn on me someday.

"I've got some bad news," I said, prepping myself to observe her reaction to the news.

"What?"

"Tony's dead."

I watched her face fall in disbelief. It was one of the few times she looked anything but carefree. This wasn't exactly the reaction I expected.

“Are you serious?”

I nodded grim-faced. "The police say he was drunk and accidentally drove off the GW Parkway into the Potomac. I say he did it on purpose. Except for the insurance money, it really doesn't matter how he died. The fact is, he's dead. And it's no coincidence that he died right after Abbey showed him the videotape you made. He's dead because you gave that videotape to Abbey." I paused to let that sink in. "You killed him," I added, point-blank, my tone now hard.

Her expression changed quickly. "Bullshit," she shot back, sounding more American than Swedish. There wasn't a scintilla of responsibility in her words or tone.

"You did," I countered, "with that videotape of yours."

"If he killed himself, he killed himself."

It sounded like something Susan or another lawyer would have said. *Duh*. "Don't you get it," I said, pressing ahead, "you pushed him too far with your blackmailing... you pushed him right over the edge of that cliff."

"Fuck you, Jeff," she said combatively. "I didn't hold a gun to Tony's head and force him to fuck me. Just like I didn't force him to drive off the road. Obviously, he did that all by himself."

She sounded cold and callous, and I wondered if challenging her so vigorously was prudent. After all, I couldn't bring Tony back. I could, however, still save myself... at least I hoped so.

"Life's about choices," she continued, now sounding less mean, and more philosophical... too philosophical for an 18 year-old. "And people have to live and die with their choices. Sometimes, when people choose wrong, they die. Obviously, Tony made the wrong choice."

I found nothing wrong with her logic... except for the fact that men have blind, one-eyed monsters that too often make the choices. I wondered how the Swede would feel if ruled by such a beast? For the moment, I decided to keep quiet as we waited at the baggage claim. There was no sense in making a big scene in the airport. When Krista's bags came up, we walked to the car.

Krista continued defending herself during the walk through the parking lot. "All I did was have sex with him. That's not a crime. He's the one who cheated on his wife."

"You also made a video and forced him to give you diamonds."

"They were presents he gave me," she replied, correcting me, "for being his secret girlfriend."

I threw the bags in the trunk, paid for parking, and pulled onto the Dulles access road. "What about the video?"

"I don't know anything about any video."

I took my eyes off the road and stared at Krista, blazing. "Cut the crap, Krista. I'm not a cop. I just want to know why you gave Abbey the video. What did Tony do to deserve that?"

"Obviously he didn't give me everything I asked for," she explained, her glare as hard as her tone.

"Weren't you scared that Tony might do something to you after you gave Abbey the video?" I asked. "You know... get revenge?"

She shook her head. "Nope."

I expected more. "Really. If I did that to someone I'd be scared they would kill me."

"Not me," she answered. "I don't fear death."

"Really?"

“Un-huh. Sometimes I wish I were dead.”

I knew the feeling.

"Is there anything you wouldn't do for money?" I asked next, almost not wanting to hear her answer.

"Nothing," she replied coldly. She smiled in that devilish way that made me hate her. I was sure she'd sell me out if the price was right.

I felt a chill, certain she was the devil's Au Pair. Whatever she was, I reminded myself that she had me by the balls... and she wasn't afraid to yank... and yank hard. "So it really doesn't bother you that Tony's dead?"

"No way, why would it? He got what he wanted-- to be free from Abbey. Plus, why would I feel bad... he's the one who threatened to kill me.”

"You don't feel any guilt... for entrapping him?"

"I didn't trap him... he trapped himself. Plus, I gave him a lot more than he gave me... the best sex he ever had. He told me that. And all I wanted were just a few more things... nothing too big. He was just too cheap... and arrogant."

"Jesus Christ, the man's dead for God's sake. How can you be so cold?"

"Maybe because I grew up in Sweden?" she answered jokingly.

"How the hell did you ever get like this?"

"Like what?" she snapped with disdain.

"You're beautiful, you're smart, you're sexy... but you have this twisted outlook about life... like you can do anything you want and not be responsible if someone else gets hurt. That's just not right... it's twisted."

Her face took on a cold, irate look. "Twisted?" She practically scoffed the word. "Let me tell you something, Jeff. If you think that's twisted, you obviously don't know much about me or the world."

I thought she was being melodramatic. "I never claimed to know you or the world... all I know is you're twisted, with a capital 'T'."

"You want to know what twisted really is?" she asked, her tone ominous, like someone with a deep, dark secret.

The hair on my neck stood on end, and I took a deep breath, not sure I wanted to know. But I had to. It might explain why she was the way she was. "Okay, what's twisted?" I replied calmly, looking at her.

Her eyes met mine. "A step-father who offers his step-daughter to his friends to repay his debts is twisted." She said 'twisted' with biting anger.

Her words stopped me fast and I glanced over to see a harsh, faraway look filling her eyes. Treading on thin Swedish ice, I wondered how to respond. "Is that what happened to you?" I asked timidly.

She stared silently ahead.

A minute passed. I asked again. "Is it?"

This time she looked at me and nodded. "My step-father was a drunken bum," she answered. "He bummed money from anyone. One night, when I was 13, a man came to our



apartment to collect a thousand kronor my step-father owed him— barely a hundred dollars. When he didn't have the money to pay, the man started beating him up. I was in the kitchen, watching all this, screaming for him to stop. When the man looked at me, he stopped hitting my step-father. Then he whispered something to him. My step-father nodded. The next thing I knew, my step-father sent me to my room, told me to turn out the lights, and lie down in bed. A few minutes later, the door opened and I heard footsteps coming toward me. It was dark. I was scared. When the footsteps stopped, the man crawled into bed with me. I could smell the vodka on his breath. Then his hands were on me, touching me, squeezing me. I wanted to scream, but he put his hand over my mouth and told me to stay quiet or he'd kill my step-father. I felt his fingers moving down my belly, under my panties. I just laid there and tried not to cry.”

Krista paused, lost in memories.

Jesus!

She continued, “He undid his pants and rolled on top of me. I could almost see him smiling. I felt a sharp pain. He was too big for me, but he didn't care. He just kept pushing and pushing, and I felt myself tear and bleed. I begged for him to stop but he said no, so I closed my eyes and tried not to think about him. He was grunted and humping me like a dog and I prayed I would die soon. Then, he screamed out and collapsed on top of me. When he was done, he kissed my cheek, pulled on his pants, and left. My step-father didn't even come in to check on me. In fact, I think he went out drinking with the man. I cried myself to sleep, and awoke the next day on top of the dried bloody sheets.”

Silence permeated the Camry as I pictured her lying there. I wanted to throw up. No wonder sex was her personal weapon against men. It explained everything. "I'm sorry," I said, solemnly, again remembering my kindergarten lesson.

She shrugged. "It was terrible."

I looked into her eyes and saw pain welling from her soul. I'd never seen this side of her before.

"After that first time, my step-father figured I could make money for him, so almost every week it would be another man, then another. I was his whore for almost three years. When I turned 16, I ran away."

I didn't know what to say, but she had more to say.

"I survived the next year by selling myself. By then, I was pretty good and the money was all mine. Then a friend told me the big money was in America... as an Au Pair."

There was no doubting why Krista felt no remorse for Tony... or any man, and I wondered just how much I could trust her.

"I thought about killing myself a couple times, but I always remember something my mom told me before she died: "If something doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger."

I knew the saying. Normally, I hate ridiculous, feel-good platitudes like that. It's like saying that everything happens for a reason... or that things always work out for the best... or that God opens a window whenever He closes a door. What nonsense. Things work out for the worst more often than not. Just look at Tony... or at me. And God? I think He just set this whole crazy earth into motion, and is sitting back just watching, letting nature take course... amused, no doubt.

"Why are you telling me all this?" I asked, expecting her to say she considered me a friend. As usual, I was very wrong.

"I want you to know how much I've been hurt by men, and how much I hate them. I also want you to know that you better never cross me. Because I really don't care about much... especially men who fuck girls much younger than them."

She didn't mince words, and I was more scared than before. She certainly knew how to press a winning hand. My God, how was she only 18? "After what you did to Tony, you've got my attention."

She nodded, business-like.

"So, as long as I keep my end of our agreement, you'll keep yours?" I asked hopeful.

"I know you think I'm evil, but I keep my word."

I believed the part about her being evil, but wasn't so sure about her keeping her word. Of course, I didn't really have any choice. I was forever at her mercy. And she knew it, flaunted it, and loved it. She really was evil. And she lived with a nothing-to-lose attitude.

I could tell that she sensed my disbelief. "Look, Jeff, you and I have a different relationship than Tony and me. He treated me like an object-- like a piece of jewelry that he wanted to display on his arm someday. You're different. You treat me with respect and kindness. That's what's going to save you."

I nodded as I played her words over in my head. I didn't need a kindergarten diploma to recognize the right answer when I heard it. If she wanted respect and kindness, I would dole it

out. Otherwise, I was sure I'd end up like Tony. I also made a mental note to never bring up the subject of Tony Bartolucci again.

"I missed you," I said softly, now thinking only of saving myself. "I thought of you every hour."

She smiled, happy with that. "I missed you, too, Jeffie. You know how much you mean to me, right?"

I nodded. But deep down, somehow, I was sure the next eight months would kill me... not make me stronger.

# NINETEEN

Tony was dead as a result of Krista's videotape. That much I understood. What I didn't understand was the budding relationship that bloomed between Susan, Abbey, and Krista after Tony's death. Having the video porn star living in her house, under her roof, didn't seem to faze Susan one iota. That wasn't just weird, it was unfathomable. As for Abbey, she didn't seem the least bit upset to be living next to the girl who video-fucked her husband and, for all practical purposes, precipitated his suicide. [Forgetting the 50-50-90 rule for a moment, I never would've bet on any of that...].

In actuality, the three women bonded like chain-gangers-- they shopped together, took kids to Discovery Zone together, and even went to a few chick flicks together. Maybe it was some sort of warped display of Thelma-and-Louise feminine unity? Maybe you needed to be a woman from Venus to understand? Maybe my Martian penis prevented me from understanding? All I really

knew is that it made absolutely no sense to me. None. But then again, I wasn't in the right frame of mind to argue or judge or understand. In my own little naïve world, I guess I was just happy to have my Au Pair back, and some semblance of tranquility under the roof of my earthly Colonial.

But I was curious. And one morning, after one of our naked aerobic workouts, I made the mistake of asking Krista about it. “What’s the deal with you and Susan and Abbey?” I asked. “You three seem to be friendlier with each other now than ever.”

“Yeah? So?”

“It’s just odd,” I said. “I mean, you *did* fuck Abbey’s husband.”

She looked directly into my eyes. “You want to know the truth?”

Talk about a loaded question! The Swede was like a lawyer-- whenever her mouth moved, the likelihood of the truth coming out was pretty slim. But what the hell did I have to lose? “Yeah, sure,” I replied.

“They’re proud of me.”

My jaw dropped. “Why? Because you fucked Tony and blackmailed him?” The words flew from my mouth with deep impunity, and immediately I regretted saying them. Respect and kindness, I muttered to myself like a mantra... respect and kindness. I hated the mantra almost as much as I hated the situation that forced me to employ it.

Krista smiled wickedly. “No, silly. They’re proud of me for getting back at Tony after he raped me.”

*Raped?* “What do you mean after he raped you? When?” I spoke in measured tone. Had I missed something along the way?

“After the poker game.”

*Huh?* “He didn’t rape you,” I challenged, now less measured. “You two *sport fucked*.” I made the quotes sign.

She looked at me like *I was crazy*. “He raped me, Jeff. You were sleeping. He forced me to go down to my room and then he raped me.”

*Huh? Was she on drugs? Or a Swedish schizoid?* “What the hell are you talking about? He didn’t rape you. You told Tony to fuck you. I heard you in my room that night. And the next day... you told me you fucked Tony to make him happy. I know you remember.”

Krista smiled devilishly, like a woman with a million secrets. “You really are naive aren’t you?”

“What’s the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“Think about it, Jeff. Which version do you think Abbey and Susan believe-- your version or mine?”

Enlightened, I shook my head in disgust. “I can’t believe you told them that Tony raped you?”

“Why not? It sounds better than the truth.” Her eyes were twinkling with pride.

“And I suppose you told them you set up the video camera to get back at Tony, huh?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Of course. Now you’re learning.”

I didn’t know how to respond.

She continued, “Face it, Jeff, Tony was a fat pig. Abbey thought so, too. If you want to know the real truth, she’s glad he’s dead. She said Tony was fucking a girl at his store, too. She said it served Tony right that he finally got caught. She said I was her hero for getting back at

Tony.”

Hero? Jesus Christ. All the lies, all the distortions: life was getting too bizarre. *Getting?* No, life *was* too bizarre. Sadly, I was too scared to understand what was really going on. In hindsight, it would all make sense. Hindsight isn't blurred by fright or a tough-talking Swedish Au Pair with a killer body and an irresistible lying mouth.

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During this same period, something else equally weird happened: Susan went on a spending spree like a woman with no worries about the fiscal future. Tapping into the equity of our home, she enlarged the family room, installed new granite counters and stainless steel appliances in the kitchen, and purchased those new couches and drapes. We couldn't really afford it, but I didn't argue. Her mind was set on doing it, and that was that. I guess I had become so emasculated at this point that I didn't even try and put up a fight. In my rationalizing mind, I chalked it up as a cost of doing business, of keeping the peace. Plus, Apple had split again, the outlook for the cell phone market was still strong, and I was sitting pretty well. Indeed, when Susan and I split later that year-- after Krista returned to Sweden and the video was mine-- Susan could have the house... and the home equity loan.

While I wish I could say that life was good, it really, really wasn't. The Swede was as erratic as she was beautiful. Some days she seemed to genuinely love me, other days it was unequivocal hate. On those latter days, I was just a man... and men were her mortal enemy. How I hated not having any control of my life.



All in all, I lived on pins and needles, in continuous fear, the landlord to a ghost, wondering if/when the Swede would renege on our agreement. On any given night, I expected Susan to stage a home movie show like the New Year's Eve horror show at Abbey's. And, thus, whenever Susan asked if I wanted to watch a video, my blood pressure spiked.

The worst event occurred in early April. As had become our customary Friday night routine, Susan invited Abbey and Teddy for dinner. But on this night, as I finished dishes, Susan announced that she had a movie for us to watch.

"Goodie. Which one?" Jenn asked innocently enough.

"Actually, this is an adult movie," Susan replied. "You kids can play downstairs or watch a tape down there."

"But I want to watch your movie," Jenn whined.

"Well you can't. It's for adults only," Susan said sternly, flashing her patented 'that's final' look.

In my fearful mind, it sounded like New Year's Eve all over again... except there was no Tony. And when the movie was over, I was sure there would be no me. Sensing a set-up, I felt the grease from the burgers churning with the acid in my stomach. I wanted to scamper downstairs and join the kids.

"What movie is it?" Abbey asked almost on cue.

Susan smiled at her like a friend sharing a deep, dark secret. "It's that one with the girl and the home video camera... I'm not sure of the name, but it's supposed to be scary... and supposedly it was filmed here in this area."

My heart rate picked up. Girl... home video camera... filmed in this area... scary. Holy shit! Of course Susan knew. Now, she was torturing me, watching me twist and turn like a hopeless, hooked fish. I went numb. *Run Jeff, Run.*

"The Blair Witch Project?" Abbey asked as the two women made their way into the family room.

As if knowing my secret, Susan nodded. "I think that's the name of it." She seemed to be enjoying the suspense, just as Abbey had enjoyed New Year's Eve.

With guilt saturating my every thought, I sat down on the couch, sure that "GUILTY" was flashing in bright neon on my forehead. Jesus! The jig was up-- it was time to die. AIDS hadn't gotten me, but Susan surely would. I wondered which would have been least painful, least humiliating. I looked toward the sliding glass door to make a dash into the night.

Susan inserted the video into the VCR, turned out the lights, and hit the play button on the remote. In the darkened room, I braced, waiting for my naked ass to appear on the 54-inch screen. I think it was worse for me than Tony. After all, he never saw the truck that ran him over. But now, I was watching it barrel down on me in sick, slow-motion. And there was absolutely nothing I could do. Before the screen lit up, I came close to yelling out that I was sorry, that I didn't mean to do it, that the Swede had tricked me, and that I was buying Susan a beach house.

The FBI warning appeared, followed by previews, then "Featured Attraction." I was so sure I was the featured attraction, that I could almost hear Susan mocking me the way Abbey had mocked Tony. "Wasn't that whipped cream cold, honey?" And: "Abbey and I would like to have a threesome with you, too, honey... Abbey will be the judge, I'll be the prosecuting attorney, and you can be the defendant. How do you plead: guilty or very guilty? How would you like to die:

slowly or quickly?"

For two hours, I watched the Blair Witch Project in terror, certain that Susan had spliced Krista's home video somewhere inside. Indeed, at every turn of the camera, I was sure I'd show up next. All told, I must have sweated three pounds and put my heart through the worst stress test imaginable.

Unbelievably, I was wrong, and when it ended, Susan said, "That wasn't so scary."

I managed a feint nod as my heart slowed. *Scary? No. Terrifying? Hell yeah.*

*Help... please.*

# TWENTY

May was a brutal month. During the first week, the Dow took a nose dive, losing almost five percent. Anticipating a major correction in the works, I sold half my shares of Apple. Thankfully, my foresight was 20/20, and in the two weeks that followed, the Dow lost an additional twenty percent. High flying tech stocks took an even bigger dive, as investors cashed in profits. Apple fell from \$180 the day I sold half my holdings, to \$98 near the end of the month. Ouch.

Of course selling half my shares of Apple had been a good decision-- instead of losing \$164,000 on paper, I'd cut my paper losses to only \$82,000. And while an \$82,000 paper loss still sounds bad, I'd weathered enough of these corrections to know that this represented a new buying opportunity as much as anything. In fact, by selling, I had \$180,000 in real money to buy even more shares, now at sale prices. Indeed, for a man who had dropped \$82,000 in paper in just two and a half weeks, I was giddy. Unfortunately, nothing could have prepared me for what was about

to happen.

The date was Friday, May 21<sup>st</sup>. Susan was gone, away at a weekend, team-building exercise with her fellow AFPA workmates in Annapolis. She seemed to be away more and more, which was more than fine with me. Life was always better without Susan. At 5:30 that evening, I walked through the front door, anticipating a calm weekend without Susan. Seeing a light in the office, I ventured a peak and found Krista sitting in the leather swivel chair staring at the computer. Upon hearing me, she turned. Seeing her blue eyes red and puffy, I sensed immediate trouble for me. After all, her problems always translated into problems for me. That's the way it is between blackmailer and blackmailee.

I walked over to her. "What's the matter, Krista?"

"I'm in trouble," she said in a worried tone that I'd never heard from her before.

"Why? What happened?"

"I got a margin call today."

"A margin call?" I was surprised she knew the term, much less what the term meant. "For what?"

I bought some shares of Yahoo on my E\*Trade account and I don't have enough money to pay for them."

Yahoo... E\*Trade... Jesus. The Swede was trading on-line! Now I sensed doom. "How many shares did you buy and at what price?"

"A thousand shares... at \$74."

I was floored. That was \$74,000. What the hell was an 18 year-old Au Pair doing buying

\$74,000 worth of any stock? “What did Yahoo close at today?”

“Fifty-six.”

She was down \$18,000 on paper. “What are you doing buying \$74,000 worth of stock?” I finally asked.

“I thought it was a good investment. If it went up one point, I would have made \$1,000.”

“And when it went down eighteen, you lost \$18,000,” I shot back.

She began crying again. “I thought it wasn’t going any lower,” she sobbed, wiping her eyes. “I’ve been watching it go down every day this month. I thought it was at the bottom, so I bought it last week.”

“And it lost eighteen points since then,” I summed.

She nodded through tears.

“How much money do you have in your account?”

“Thirty thousand.”

“Where’d you get \$30,000?”

“You know me. I have ways.”

I nodded, figuring it was somehow connected with Tony... or some other poor sap she’d blackmailed.

“What am I going to do?” she asked.

“You got any naked videos of Yahoo’s CEO?”

She stared at me hard, not amused. “Serious, Jeff. What am I going to do?”

I let her stew.

“Will you help me?” she asked finally.

I was surprised she was even asking. I half expected her to tell me to fix her mess or she'd go straight to Susan with the video. "What's in it for me?" I asked.

"I'll be really grateful."

"What's that mean, you're going to let me live another month by not giving Susan the videotape?"

"Look Jeff, why does everything have to be about the video? Can't we just be friends?"

"It's kind of hard to be friends with someone who's spent the past nine months blackmailing you and threatening to ruin your life."

"I told you, Jeff, I never want to hurt you."

"I know, I know. You've said that. And I appreciate that you've stuck by our agreement. But where's it going to end? Do I have to bail you out every time you trip and fall? It's not my fault you bought Yahoo stock. Why should I pay for your mistake?"

She hesitated. "Because you're nice. And the nicer you are to me, the nicer I'll be to you."

I nodded, not impressed with that reasoning. Nice or not, \$18,000 was a lot of money. First, Susan with all her home improvements. Now, the stock-trading Swede. And it wasn't just \$18,000. The fact is, she actually needed \$44,000 to bring her account up to the amount owed. "Have you ever heard the expression, 'never try to catch a falling knife'?" I asked.

She shook her head no.

"Well, if you plan on continuing to invest in stock, you should learn what it means. When a stock is falling, it's kind of like a falling knife. You don't try to catch it. Right? If you do, you usually get stuck... and you end up bleeding. You always wait for the stock to stop falling, to start

moving sideways, maybe even a little higher, before you buy. That way you don't get stuck."

She stayed silent, clearly unhappy being lectured by her blackmailee.

I had to say something else. "Look, Krista, I can't bail you out every time something goes wrong in your life. You have to learn from your own mistakes."

"So you're not going to help me?"

"Not as long as you've got those tapes of me. I'll help you if you agree to end this blackmailing game of yours." I took a deep breath, wondering if I was doing the right thing. It was one thing to stand ground on principal; it was another thing to piss her off and screw myself. That's what Tony had done. And when the Swede didn't take kindly to that, Tony had lost... everything. I didn't like the situation. Why couldn't she just go quietly along? Why did she have to think she could day trade? Why did everyone with a computer and an Internet connection think they could beat the pros at their own game? What would she try next... online poker?

"If you're not going to help me, then I guess I have no choice," she said.

I didn't like her tone or her insinuation. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means what it means," she said, sounding lawyer-ish. And with that she stormed past me and ran into the first floor bathroom.

Reminding myself that I was still in no position to piss her off, I ran after her. "Wait, Krista," I said as I reached to open the door. It was locked. "Krista, open up."

"Go away, Jeff."

"Come on, open up, let's talk about it," I said, now backpedaling.

"No. Go away. I want to be alone." She whined like a 13-year-old.

"Look, I'm sorry." I was too close to the end to blow it now.



“Go away.” Her whining had turned to order-giving.

Although I didn’t like the situation, I decided to give her some time to think. When she came out, I’d fix everything. Hopefully, saying I was sorry had helped. *Respect and kindness*, I muttered to myself as I changed out of my whites in the master bedroom... *respect and kindness*. The mantra was getting old.

Ten minutes later, I knocked on the bathroom door again, hoping the immature brat with the killer body had finished her sulking. With Susan gone all weekend, I was thinking that maybe Krista and I could work in some make-up sex. "Krista?"

She didn’t answer.

“Krista?”

Still no answer.

“Krista?” I shouted.

Silence.

Now I thought the worst. Hopefully, she hadn’t done anything stupid. I didn’t want her dead... no matter that she was my blackmailer. My lust exceeded my fear. I ran into the garage, found a Phillips head, and began unscrewing the set of bolts holding the door knob. In a minute, the doorknob was off and I pushed the door open, expecting to find her slumped on the tile floor. Instead, I found the window open and Krista gone. Shit. Maybe I would have been better off if she had killed herself?

I ran to the end of Grove Street, hoping to find her before she drove away in the Saab. Unfortunately, when I got there, both she and the Saab were gone. I was shaking. Now what?

I ran home cursing my stupidity. I should have handled it differently... I should have just helped her out... I should have done anything but piss her off... damn it.

Back home, I dialed her cell phone, but got one of those stupid recordings: "The cellular customer you are attempting to reach is unavailable at this time." Evidently, the Swede had turned her phone off. God dammit, Krista. Talk to me... where are you and what are you doing?

We ordered Domino's and the kids watched t.v. while I continued to call Krista's cell phone. By ten, my mind was hearing this recording: "The cellular customer you are attempting to reach is in Annapolis giving your wife the X-rated video that will ruin your life. Start running while you still have the chance, you stupid shit."

Was Krista in Annapolis delivering the video to Susan? Or was she just playing mind games with me-- teaching me that she was still boss? If so, I'd learned my lesson.

Around midnight, I went to bed. Sadly, I missed her as much as she scared me.

# TWENTY ONE

The first ring of my cell phone interrupted the most wonderful dream ever. Krista and I were scuba diving from a 40-foot catamaran anchored off the coast of a secluded sandy beach somewhere in the Caribbean. Beneath the surface, huge schools of colorful tropical fish enveloped us, turning the crystal clear water into a gliding underwater rainbow. We were absorbed by the school, pulled along into an underwater cave. The further we swam into the cave, the deeper our love grew, and by the time we surfacing a few minutes later, we were perfect lovers in the midst of a lush tropical bar, under a canopy of huge ferns, banana plants, and palmettos. High above, in the treetops, parrots and toucans squawked, while below them a pair of monkeys jabbered and played chase, swinging from hanging vines. To one side of the open-air bar, a steel drum band beat out a rhythmic reggae tune. Sexily clad in a black string bikini, Krista smiled at me, "Do you like this place?"

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Without a worry in the world, I smiled back. "It's perfect."

"Good. Because you own it."

"Huh?"

"I bought it for you as a wedding present."

A smiling bartender with dread locks glided toward us. "Ah! Miss Krista, always a pleasure. Is dis our new boss man?"

Krista smiled at the barkeep, "Iggy, this is my husband Jeff. Jeff... Iggy"

"Hi."

"Ya mon, good to see you. How you like dis place?"

"It's heaven," I answered. And it really was.

On the second ring, my eyes opened and I found myself in my Falls Church bed, thrust back into my nightmarish real life: my blackmailing Au Pair was mad at me... and on the loose. I looked at the digital clock on the night stand: 1:50. Hopefully, Krista was on the other end, and not Susan. Either way, something was wrong. Not many good things happened at this hour. I picked up before the third ring. "Hello," I said, groggily.

"Jeff, I need your help." Krista's voice was frantic.

"What's the matter?"

"I got in an accident."

Shit. "Is anyone hurt?"

"No."

That was good news. "Where are you?"

"At a police station on M-street near Georgetown."

A police station? That was bad news. “What are you doing at a police station?”

“They said I was driving drunk.”

*They said...* “Jesus Christ.”

“I’m sorry,” she sobbed, out-of-control. “I didn’t mean for it to happen. I --”

“Okay. Just stay calm. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Thanks, Jeff.”

Click.

God dammit. Now what? Was I supposed to leave Jack and Jenn alone while I went to bail out the drunk-driving, blackmailing teenage Swede? Or should I waken them and bring them with me? That way they could give Susan a full report when she returned on Monday and quizzed them about their weekend. Or was I supposed to ask Abbey to come over and watch the kids? That way Susan could get a direct report. God, I hated the Swede for putting me in these situations. Knowing I had no choice, I decided to take the chance. The kids would be fine sleeping.

As the Camry and I raced east on I-66, my mind raced. I should have anticipated something like this happening. The Swede drank too much and thought nothing of driving afterwards. In truth, she laughed about American drunk driving laws. “We don’t have laws like that in Sweden,” she’d said once. “We let people go out and have fun.”

So much for fun. I was screwed. At least the car was still registered in my name and insured on a separate policy that Susan didn’t know about. I looked even further on the bright side: at least Krista wasn’t in Annapolis delivering the video to Susan.

Fifteen minutes later, I walked into the M-street police station and stood before a hulking

black officer sitting behind a high mahogany desk. A nameplate on the desk said, “Sargent Williams.” Behind him was a hallway leading to the rear of the building, probably to the holding cells. Krista was nowhere to be seen.

“Excuse me, sir,” I said, looking up at him, “I’m looking for a tall blonde girl that was brought in here.”

He sized me up with a Cheshire grin, as if happy to see me there at 2:30 in the morning. “The babysitter?” he asked, doing everything he could to keep from chuckling audibly.

I nodded, unamused.

“Hey Dre!” the Sargent yelled out over his shoulder. “The babysitter’s babysitter is here.” Sargent Williams smiled wide again, expecting me to be amused by his wit.

I maintained a straight face. Asshole D.C. cop.

A second black cop emerged from the rear hallway and walked toward us. He appeared more professional. “Good morning, sir. I’m Officer Purnell.”

I shook the hand he extended. “Jeff MacDonald,” I said. “Was anyone hurt?”

The officer shook his head sideways. “She was lucky. Nobody was in the cars she hit.”

“Carssss?”

Officer Purnell nodded. “She lost control of her vehicle on 35<sup>th</sup> Street, right near Visitation High School. She hit five parked cars.”

“Five? Jesus.”

“Un-huh. Probably totaled two of ‘em. The other three were just sideswiped.”

I calculated a minimum of \$50,000 in damage. Assuming my Saab was totaled, added another \$15,000.

“Her blood alcohol level was 0.15,” Officer Purnell added, handing me a copy of the police report.

I glanced at the three page report-- DUI, reckless driving, speeding, leaving the scene of an accident. Fuckin' Swede. “What happens next?”

“Once you pay her bail, she’s free to go. Her court date's next month.”

“How much is bail?”

“The magistrate just faxed us the form. It should be the last sheet there,” he said, motioning toward the police report I held in my hands.

I looked at the bail sheet: \$5,000. “Where can I pay?” I asked.

“Actually, you’re lucky. We take payments right here. It’s web-based.”

Web-based... of course... just like on-line stock trading. “I take it a credit card will work?”

“Yes sir.”

“Thanks,” I said, handing him my personal AMEX.

After completing the transaction the officer turned and walked down the hall into one of the back rooms. Two minutes later, he led Krista towards me, her eyes red and puffy from crying. First the margin call, now this. This was not her day.

Seeing me, she ran and threw her arms around my neck, hugging me like her lover, not her host father. As I patted her back, I glanced up to see Sargent Williams watching, his smile now contemptuous. I could almost read his mind: *you’re fucking that sweet babysitter ain’t you, white boy? You best be careful. You’re gonna get yourself in trouble. Ha! Ha!*

Little did he know it was way, way too late for that. I was already in trouble.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Krista sobbed into my shoulder. “I’m sorry.” Evidently, they taught that phrase in Swedish kindergarten, too.

“It’ll be okay,” I whispered back. “At least nobody was hurt.” I talked to her like a daughter, not a blackmailer.

We left the police station at 3:05.

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“What’s going to happen to me?” Krista asked as I pulled the Camry from the police station parking lot.

“You’ll probably be put in jail for at least five years,” I replied bluntly.

“Are you serious?” Her voice cracked.

Glancing out of the corner of my eye, I saw tears falling down her face. Maybe she’d cry herself into a state of decency, I thought as I nodded. “This is America, not Sweden. Drunk driving is a serious crime.” For the moment, I wanted to scare the shit right out of her sweet ass. Perhaps I could use her misfortunes to my advantage.

“But nobody was hurt.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I shot back. “They make examples out of drunk drivers to prevent other people from driving drunk. That’s why the penalty’s so stiff.”

She began sobbing loudly as I pulled onto I-66 west. “What am I going to do?”

“Maybe you can work a deal with the judge... maybe offer yourself to him. You seem to have an irresistible way with men.”



“Be serious, Jeff,” she said, her crying abating. “What am I going to do?”

I stayed silent, letting her think the worst. “If you want, I can help you,” I volunteered finally.

“Really?”

“Un-huh. With your margin call, too. But it’s gonna cost you.”

“What?”

I decided to go for it all. “I want the video back. And all the copies. And all the blackmailing to stop once and for all.”

She didn't hesitate. “Okay.”

I was surprised to see her give up so easily. She really was scared.

“What’s going to happen?”

“We’ll hire a lawyer, I’ll tell the judge that I’ll take full responsibility for your actions in the future, you’ll volunteer to surrender your driver’s license, and he’ll probably give you a fine and a warning.”

“What about the margin call?”

“I’ll give you the money to cover what you owe.”

“Really?”

“What about the cars I hit?”

“That’s what insurance is for.”

“So all I have to do is agree not to drive in America anymore?”

“And give me the tapes back, and not buy any stocks until you talk to me first” I replied,

nodding.

“That’s not so bad. I’ve only got three more months here.”

“You’re lucky. They might have given you the death penalty if you had hurt someone.”

“Really?”

I nodded. What she didn't know would never hurt her. The margin call and accident were turning out to be blessings in disguise.

By 3:35 we were back home and I ran upstairs to find Jack and Jenn sleeping safely. Afterwards, I walked down to her room. She was sitting on her bed in undies and a t-shirt. In her hand, she held two VCR tapes. "Here," she said, handing them to me.

As I took the tapes into my hands, freedom engulfed me. My life was back in my hands, in my control. Or was it? "You said there was another copy not at the house."

She smiled impishly. "I lied."

I didn't believe the Swede about the copy. After all, she had lied to Tony about copies... why not me, too? Was she too scared to lie now? Or perhaps my respect and kindness had paid off? "You're sure there's no other copy?"

"I swear to God, Jeff. I wouldn't lie to you now. I need you more than ever. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you now. I owe you as much as you ever owed me."

Something told me to believe her. "So, if I had just found these two tapes and destroyed them back in September, none of this would have happened?"

"Un-huh. Are you mad at me?"

I was mad at myself. Yet in some strange way, I was glad it had happened to me. The past nine months had taught me a lot about myself-- about life-- and I was sure my life would be better

as a result. In hindsight, the ordeal didn't seem so bad. I'd survived. I thought of the Swede's words during our drive home from Dulles in January: that which doesn't kill us makes us stronger. That silly platitude made perfect sense now. I was definitely stronger today.

"We better get some sleep," I said, turning to leave.

"Can you stay with me?" She actually pleaded.

"You don't have another secret camera going, do you?"

"No."

I smiled back, liking that she needed and wanted me for me, and we made love before falling asleep in each other's arms.

\*\*\*

Over the course of the next month I fixed the Swede's damages. The hard part was keeping it secret from Susan. Thankfully, by now, I was somewhat of an expert at keeping secrets. As for the accident, the Swede forfeited her Virginia driver's license, received a \$1,500 fine, and my insurance paid the damages. Although I didn't want to think what my future insurance rates would look like, it was a small price to pay for total freedom. As for the Yahoo debacle, I gave Krista \$44,000 from my Apple sale to cover her margin call, making her the rightful owner of 1,000 shares of Yahoo, and still leaving me with enough money to buy 1,500 more shares of Apple at \$98. Within a month, as the market rebounded, the cell phone maker's stock had crept back to \$160, and I'd recouped the \$44K. After such a tumultuous nine months as the Swede's bitch-boy,

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I was now riding high, seemingly invincible.

Krista's shares of Yahoo recovered, too. In fact, by the time July rolled around and her 1,000 shares had become worth \$90,000, she couldn't believe her luck. Indeed, she was so happy that she asked me to teach her about P/E ratios, market capitalization, and profit margins.

# TWENTY TWO

Spring finally turned to summer, which meant Krista's year as a blackmailing Au Pair was almost over. As twisted as it sounds, I was going to miss the blackmailing Swede when she returned to Sweden. And not just the sex, which, by now, I'd concluded had been worth every penny. The lies, the sneaking around, the lost money, the worries... it had all been worth it to spend the year with Krista. I'd learned so much about life and myself, and for the first time in eight years, I felt alive. Nothing was out of reach... the pig farmer's son was back!

"Guess what?" Krista announced happily after one of our morning workouts in late July.

"You want to give me back the \$44,000 because of the great sex we've had?"

She laughed. "No, silly. You're going on vacation with me."

I scrunched my face. "What are you talking about?"

"Next week. You and I are going camping to Yellowstone."

The Swede knew I wanted to camp in Yellowstone. Sadly, she knew more of my dreams than my own wife. "I wish," I replied with resignation. "But you know I'm going to Tampa with Susan and the kids to see her parents."

"No you're not. You're going with me." Even though Krista had nothing over me anymore, she sounded like she wouldn't take 'no' for an answer.

I thought about it. A week with Krista in hell would have been better than a week with Susan and her folks in heaven. And Yellowstone wasn't hell, and Tampa wasn't heaven. With Susan's dad a retired judge, and her mom a retired District Attorney, a week in Tampa always seemed like an eternity in lawyer hell. Days would be spent watching Court TV, and nights discussing emerging legal theories; in between, countless contemptuous looks would be shot my way, as if I didn't belong in the same condo, much less the same conversation, as the three lawyers. I made a mental note to add another item to teach my kids: never marry the offspring of two lawyers.

Krista continued, "You just need to tell Susan that something came up at work and you'll be on travel."

"You know how much I hate to lie."

"Your life's a lie," she shot back, smirking.

"Don't remind me. So why do you want to go camping with me?"

"Because I know you've always wanted to go to Yellowstone. It'll be the last chance for us to be together, and I want to be alone with just you. My treat. Yahoo was up another two points today."

Though touched, I wasn't sure how to respond. Krista had taken Tony on a vacation once,

and a month later, he was dead. I wondered what the Swede had up her sleeve. "The last time you took a married man from this street on vacation, he ended up dead," I said.

She squinted her face into a hard look, as if genuinely affronted.

Immediately, I regretted saying it... true or not. "I'm sorry," I said.

As she nodded, I thought of my next lie to tell Susan.

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Susan was unfazed when I told her I had to go to sea for an emergency trial of the new ASROC guidance system, and a week later, Krista and I were hiking in the forests of Yellowstone, fly-fishing on the Lamar River, and camping just south of Old Faithful. It was everything and more than I'd ever dreamed. In the still of the night, amidst the whoos of owls and the chirping of crickets, we were close enough to hear the geyser erupt.

"Let's play a game," Krista announced, as we cuddled in a tartan, down-stuffed sleeping bag on one of our last nights in the park. "Every time Old Faithful erupts, you have to erupt, too."

I laughed. "Sounds like fun... up to a point. How long does this game last?"

"Until you or Old Faithful can't go anymore."

Given that Old Faithful had been erupting every 35-120 minutes for centuries, I figured I'd be the first to give in. Still, it sounded like a game I couldn't lose. "You're gonna have to help me."

In the flickering light of the fire, she raised her eyebrows. "Have I ever failed you?"

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"No. You've done just about everything else to me, but I have to admit, you've never failed me."

Her eyes met mine. "I love you, Jeff."

*Whoa!* I never expected to hear that. "I love you, too," I whispered, overcome by the serenity of the moment. Out in the woods, there was no bitchy lawyer to tell me what a failure I was, and I felt deep inner peace. This was how I wanted to feel every day for the rest of my life.

"Really?"

"I swear," I said. "In spite of everything that's happened, this has been the best year of my life."

"Mine, too," she echoed.

Under the blanket of stars, we were true lovers now, and that night, Old Faithful erupted approximately every forty-five minutes. For three-and-a-half hours, I kept pace before finally passing out in Krista's arms. The next morning, she tagged me with a new nickname: Old Faithful.

I really did love her.

On our last night, we sat around a campfire.

"I have something for you," Krista said, rising to her feet. She walked to the tent and returned with a videotape in her hands. "Here's the other copy," she said, holding it out.

Confused, I took the tape into my hands. "I thought you said there wasn't another copy?"

She smiled impishly. "I lied."

I hated not being able to read her. Thankfully, her lies were behind me now. And so was the fear. I chuckled.

"What's so funny?" she asked.



"What's funny is that I can never tell when you're lying."

She shrugged. "I guess that's what makes a woman a woman."

"So why didn't you blackmail me again these last two months?" I asked facetiously.

"Oh come on, Jeff, you know I couldn't. You've been too good to me. I wanted us to be true to each other these last two months... no more games or tricks. It's been wonderful."

I smiled sweetly at her. "I knew you had a good heart down deep."

She shrugged again. "I hope you'll always think so. So what was the best thing about this year," she asked, changing the subject.

I rattled off a quick list, "Naked twister, the threesome, and erotic uses for Reddi Wip." I was smiling.

"Is that all... just sex?"

*No. I also learned there are no free lunches. Yes, I know I should have learned that in kindergarten, but I guess late is better than never, right?* I looked deeply into her eyes as the fire flickered. "I also learned what it feels like to be wanted." That was truer than anything.

She smiled tenderly and her eyes glazed, as if ready to cry, and at that moment, I found myself more in love with her than I thought possible. What began with blackmail, was ending with the truest, deepest love imaginable. Yet, while I was lucky to have spent the year with her, I knew this would be the end. We were of two different generations. And while I may have loved her [or lusted after her], this was the end. "Why are you crying?" I asked.

"That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me," she sobbed.

I took her into my arms and hugged her tightly. "Thank you," I whispered, taking in the

freshness of her hair. Somehow, she stayed fresh, even out here in the woods. "I meant it. You're really a wonderful girl. Any man would love to be yours." When I released her, I turned the question around. "What about you? Did you learn anything from me?"

"Truthfully?"

I nodded. "Unless it's going to hurt me. If that's the case, then I'd appreciate it if you lie. You know I just want to hear something that makes me feel good."

"I learned about P/E ratios, book value, momentum investing, and what I want in a husband someday."

That last part got my attention. "Is that last part really true?"

"What do you think?"

"I told you-- I never know if you're lying or telling the truth."

"Does that bother you?"

"Given that you've had my life in your hands this past year, it's been a little unnerving."

"Well, it's the truth," she said. "You're a great guy, Jeff. I'll never forget you. I hope I'm lucky enough to find someone as selfless and caring as you."

Part of me wanted to cry out for her to take me with her, but I didn't. Deep down, she was too high maintenance for me... and probably any other man. But that was *her* problem. As for me, a year had been enough. I was ready to move on... in so many ways. "If anyone should be able to find someone like that, it's you, Krista. You have a way of getting what you want."

"That's not such a bad thing."

"No. Not at all," I said as I tossed the tape into the fire, burning it as I'd done with the other tapes she'd given me two months earlier.

"You didn't want to keep that as a memento?"

"I'd rather remember you in my mind." We listened to the fire crackle and watched the plastic tape melt into the glowing embers. I was at complete peace, and would always remember the moment. "You'll always be the most beautiful girl in the world to me."

"Thanks." She hesitated. "So, could I have gotten more money out of you this year?"

Now I hesitated, unsure how to answer such a loaded, out-of-the-blue question. Where was she going with this? "I think we both got a fair deal," I said finally.

She nodded, seemingly in agreement.

"I'll never forget you," I added.

"Me neither. When I saw you and Susan at the Au Pair agency that first day, I really was hoping you were my host family."

"Why? Did I look like an easy mark for your blackmail scheme?"

"No. You looked cool... and nice... and sexy."

I winked. "You always know the right things to say... even if it's not always true."

"It's the truth, Jeff. You really deserve better than Susan."

"I know. Now that the tape's out of the way, I can finally divorce her."

"Really?" She sounded surprised.

"Yeah. Like I said, this past year with you really opened up my eyes. I always knew something was missing between me and Susan. You showed me it was passion. I need that. I can't live with Susan anymore. I need to feel wanted again... to feel that passion."

Tears began to fall down Krista's cheeks.

"Are you happy or sad?" I asked.

"I don't know. I feel like a home-wrecker or something."

I hugged her again and stroked her hair as she sobbed. "You're not a home-wrecker. This was inevitable. You weren't the cause of my problems with Susan... you were the sign."

"What about Jack and Jenn? They need you."

"I know. I'll get joint custody. They'll be okay. In fact, they'll be better off, because they won't have to deal with anymore fighting. And I'll be happier. A happy parent is always a better parent."

"I'm really going to miss Jenn. She's such a great little girl."

I pictured Jenn's always-smiling face. "She keeps saying she wants to be like you when she grows up."

"Really?"

"Un-huh. Maybe when she turns 18, I'll send her to Sweden to visit you. By that time you may own your own Au Pair training academy. You can teach her everything an Au Pair needs to know to be successful." I winked.

"In ten years, I aim to own the world," Krista stated.

I remembered seeing a clip of Madonna saying essentially the same thing when she'd burst upon the music scene. I nodded, thinking Krista might actually accomplish that goal... unless she messed with the wrong guy and died first. "What do you think you'll be doing in ten years?" I asked.

"I hope I'm modeling and building a media empire."

"Whatever you do, be careful, Krista. Don't fuck with the wrong guy."

“Don’t worry. I know how to handle myself.”

I didn’t doubt that. The Swede was light years ahead of other millennials.

"What about you?" she asked. "What do you think you'll be doing?"

I shrugged. "In ten years I'll probably be retired from the Navy, working for a defense contractor or something like that. Hopefully, I'll meet someone who makes me feel wanted, someone with half your passion. I don't really need much to be happy."

"Are you going to miss me?"

I smiled at her. "More than you'll ever know." I paused as I tried to think of just the right thing to say. "One thing's for sure: sex will never be the same. If I can find someone who's half as good as you in bed, I'll be the happiest man in America."

"Then we better make sure this last night is the best night of your life," she said, smiling. Throwing her arms around my neck, she pulled me down next to the fire and kissed me passionately. We made tender love under the stars, and I swore I really was in heaven. If the happiest moment of a person’s life comes just once, then this was mine.

# TWENTY THREE

August rolled around and on Sunday afternoon, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, we drove Krista to Dulles. At Dulles, the kids hugged Krista, Jenn cried, Susan smiled warmly and said she'd miss her, and I gave the Swede a fatherly hug. I wouldn't miss her high maintenance, but I'd definitely miss the passion, not to mention her killer body. As for poor Commander Squeaky, I hoped he had feasted, because the famine was now at hand.

"Bye," we called out, as she walked through the security checkpoint toward the people-mover that would take her to the International terminal.

"Adjö," she called back in Swedish.

As I watched her ass swing away for the last time, I couldn't help but think that two families in Falls Church, Virginia would never be the same because of that sweet Swedish ass. Tony had died because of it, leaving Abbey a widow and Teddy father-less. As for me, I was never more alive, never more sure of myself and where I wanted to go in life. I wanted someone who loved

me as I was.

By the time Krista was completely out of view, I felt my body completely uncoil. It reminded me of my Naval Academy graduation... once that midshipman cover flew into the blue sky, I was free. Not only had the Swede not killed me, but she'd made me stronger than ever. In fact, I felt so strong that I would surely carry out my plan to free myself from Susan and regain my life completely. Although I decided to wait a week before confronting Susan, I already had my speech planned: "Susan, I think we should get divorced. I don't think either of us loves the other anymore, and I think it would be best for both of us, and the kids, if we admit it now, rather than later. I'm willing to let you have the house. But I think joint custody would be best for the kids, with us alternating weeks. Even though we earn approximately the same amount of money, and would keep the kids equal amounts of time, I'm willing to pay you \$1,000 a month in child support. I think that's more than fair."

Susan's reaction was the big unknown. Would she agree with my measured assessment? Or would she break-down in tears and tell me that we could make it work, perhaps if we went to marriage counseling? Most likely, she'd get angry with me, for destroying her fairytale life. Little did I know, as we walked from the terminal to the Camry, that I would never get the chance to make this speech or see her reaction.

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The date was Friday, August 28<sup>th</sup>, and I was in the garage, underneath the Camry, changing

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the oil. Krista had been gone for five days, and by now, even the illegal downstairs bedroom had lost her sweet smell. That's when you know someone's really gone.

I'd taken the day off to run errands, including looking for a suitable three bedroom apartment. My plan was to confront Susan on Sunday night, after the weekend was over, after the kids were asleep. I was euphoric, as if my life was finally just beginning. At the same time, I felt as if I knew everything about life and living. I was sure my life was going to be great from now on. Sadly, I seemed to have forgotten about the damn 50-50-90 rule.

As I loosened the drain plug and watched the gooey black mixture run into the plastic catch pan, I heard a car coming up the driveway. Replacing the plug, I scooted out from under the Camry and saw Susan stepping out of her Beamer. What was she doing home early?

"I need to talk to you," she said, her tone curt, her look cold and serious.

"What's up?"

"Did you ever have sex with Krista?" she asked point-blank, her eyes on fire, piercing mine like red-hot daggers.

My heart took off, pounding in my chest like a runaway piston. *Jesus!* "No. Of course not," I stated firmly, shaking my head. I tried to look directly at her, but my eyes strayed.

"So you're saying you never had sex with Krista?"

Now I looked at her like she'd grown a second bitchy head. "No way." I was breathless.

"You'll swear on the Holy Bible that you never had sex with her?"

When she invoked the Holy Bible, I pretty much knew I was screwed. "I swear to God, Susan," I lied.

Susan shot me a final look of disgust and reached into the large black leather bag slung



over her shoulder. "Then how do you explain this tape?" she said, pulling out a videotape like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat.

My heart jumped out of my chest, my face went white, and the blood drained from my body as if someone had loosened my body's drain plug. *Oh, Jesus! No! Please... no. It couldn't be.* I didn't reply. I couldn't. I was too stunned... too dizzy. My expression said it all, and Susan knew.

"How could you?" she shrieked as hot, lava-like tears began to fall from her eyes.

Floored by the pain and anguish on her face, and not ready to believe that Krista had double-crossed me, I hesitated. Should I admit to it? Or should I keep lying even though it was clear that Susan knew? They never taught us about this in kindergarten... or the Naval Academy. "It wasn't my fault," I finally said, giving in, turning toward mercy. "Please, Susan, let me explain. She --"

"There's nothing to explain, you fucking asshole," Susan shrieked, her voice now so loud that I was sure Abbey could hear next door. "After everything I've done for you, how could you do something like that?"

Susan's face was bright red now, her eyes swelling, her mascara running down her cheeks in black rivers as her make-believe world fell down around her. Watching her, a part of me died. No matter what, I never intended for her to get hurt. She was never supposed to know. So much for intentions. Of course, I knew she'd never believe that. She'd never forget this pain. I also knew she'd do everything to hurt me... intentionally. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned... especially a woman scorned for the teenage Swedish Au Pair. I felt sick.

“How could you,” Susan shrieked again. “After all I’ve done for you.”

Despite the pain on her face, her self-serving words galled me, and with nothing to lose, I decided to fight back. “All you've done for me?” I barked. “What the hell are you talking about, Susan? You haven't done shit for me in years.” I was yelling now. “The only thing you do is put me down, tell me how average I am, remind me how we'll never be rich and famous, and tell me what a shitty husband I am. In case you haven't noticed, you haven't wanted me sexually in almost a year.”

“Well, that obviously hasn't stopped you from getting your fair share,” she shot back, obviously prepared for that one.

I said nothing.

“Have you seen this tape?” she yelled.

With the initial shock gone, I was thinking more clearly now, so I maintained my silence, neither admitting nor denying, figuring that was something they taught in law school. At this point, anything I may have learned in kindergarten or the Academy was meaningless. I just stared at Susan, pissed.

“I can't wait to show it to a judge,” Susan said with anger. “You're going to wish you never saw that Swedish Au Pair.”

I already wished that.

“I hope you had fun fucking her, because it's going to be the most expensive fuck you'll ever have.”

I remembered Abbey saying essentially the same words to Tony. They were also her last words to him, before he walked away and drove himself off a cliff. Fuck me. And fuck Krista. I

still couldn't believe the Swedish bitch had double-crossed me. Why? I was hyperventilating.

Without another word, Susan turned and stalked toward the front of the house.

I followed.

"Stay out of this house," she said, pointing her finger like a knife as I approached the front door. "You're not welcome here anymore."

"It's my house, too."

"Not for long."

"What's that mean?"

"It means my lawyer's filing a temporary restraining order and separation order against you as we speak. By six o'clock tonight, you're not going to be able to get within a thousand feet of me, Jack, Jenn, or this house."

She didn't waste any time. I felt my legs buckle. Now I understood how Tony had felt. Everything was going, going, gone. "Please, Susan, don't," I cried. "I'm sorry. Please."

With a smirk now filling her bright red, puffy, black tear-streaked face, she looked like the saddest clown imaginable. "You're sorry all right-- sorry you got caught. That's what you're sorry about."

"Please don't take the kids away from me," I pleaded, my eyes glazing over in stupor.

"You should have thought about that when you were fucking the babysitter... and her little Swedish friend. I was out in California, working, doing my best to earn money for this family, and you were at home fucking the babysitter and her friend. Well, I'll tell you one thing... now you are going to pay."

"Look, can't we work something out... peaceably."

"Peaceably?" She shouted the word with dripping disgust. "There will never be any peace between you and me. This is war."

I rolled my eyes. Jesus, she was melodramatic. She really should have been an actress.

"When I get done with you, you'll wish you *had* died on your submarine."

I thought back to the speech I was going to make on Sunday night. "You can have the house," I said, "free and clear. All I want is joint custody and alternating weeks with the kids."

"Ha!" Susan laughed in my face with unrestrained disdain. "That's never going to happen, *Mister I Fucked the Babysitter.*"

She didn't waste any time coming up with that one, and I sensed this would be my nickname for the remaining days of my life. "Come on, Susan. You know I'm a good dad."

"A good dad doesn't fuck the babysitter."

"The kids were always asleep," I said, trying to defend my fatherhood. No matter, I knew that didn't sound good.

"Tell it to the judge."

*Tell it to the judge, I mocked to myself... tell it to the judge. Fuck you, lawyer-bitch. If you had just spent three minutes a day taking care of me, I might have been able to resist the double-crossing Au Pair from hell. But you never gave a shit about me. Deep down, you're probably happy about all this...*

I wanted to hit Susan. As for Krista-- I wanted to kill her. Why had she done this? After all the respect and kindness, after she said she loved me in Yellowstone, after she said she wanted to find a husband like me... why? It just didn't make sense. Why? My numb head was spinning

as I picked up Susan's voice.

"I'm going to have custody of the kids," Susan stated unequivocally. "You can have visitation every other weekend, alternating holidays, and two weeks in the summer."

I knew I wouldn't have a leg to stand on in court. Susan was right: a man who fucks the Swedish babysitter could never get custody. "Okay," I nodded, wondering what the kids would eat when I wasn't there.

"And you're going to pay me \$3,000 in child support every month until the kids turn 18."

"Three thousand dollars a month? That's crazy, Susan. You know my take home pay is only \$5,400."

"It's either that, or I show this tape to your C.O. You know as well as I do, what the Navy will do to you."

"You wouldn't do that."

"Just try me, *Mister I Fucked the Babysitter.*"

"If I lose my job, you'll get nothing."

"I'll get by."

"You really want to hurt me, don't you?"

Susan's eyes blazed. "I want to hurt you as much as watching this tape hurt me. Do you have any idea how humiliating it is to watch your husband fucking the babysitter? Everyday I'd go off to work and you'd go downstairs and fuck that girl. Sometimes it was more than just her. I'll bet that threesome you had while you talked to me on the phone was a blast, wasn't it, Jeff?"

It was a good story to tell a fellow member of the brotherhood of unhappily married men,

not a boiling mad wife plotting revenge. I looked down, ashamed.

Susan continued, "I'll devote my life to ruining yours if that's what it comes to. I hate you."

"I didn't mean for you to get hurt. Really."

"Well you did hurt me... more than you'll ever know. Now it's my turn. And I intend to hurt you as much as I can, every chance I can. You can count on that."

Her fury reminded me of Father Kane's fire-and-brimstone homily. Hell's bottomless pit, burning fires, and wailing and gnashing of teeth was beginning to sound like a better alternative. No doubt Susan would carry out her threat. I had, after all, trashed Pleasantville. "Okay," I conceded, "I'll pay you \$3,000 a month."

"Adjusted for inflation every year," Susan added, slowly upping the stakes.

I nodded. At least I had my nest egg.

"And I want the money in your Waterhouse account," Susan said, "the account you used to pay-off Krista."

I let out a deep breath. The double-crossing Swede had told Susan everything.

"I guess you must not have satisfied her, Jeff, because she decided to fuck the hell out of you."

"She's an evil girl," I replied.

"You don't know what evil is... yet." Susan smiled wickedly.

I was sure I was going to find out. "Is there anything else you want, Susan? Maybe I should just live out of my car."

"I really don't care where you live. My goal is to leave you with just enough so you live meagerly. Meagerly. M-E-A-G-E-R-L-Y."

"Thanks for spelling it out," I said sarcastically.

"For the rest of your life, you can ask yourself whether your little Swedish fuckfest was worth it," she added as she reached into her black bag again and pulled out a wad of legal-sized papers. "Why look here, Jeff. I just happen to have a copy of the Separation Agreement all drawn up... with everything you just agreed to." She held it out.

I took the ten page document, sat down on the front stoop, and read through it. Except for the length and breadth, it reminded me of Krista's list from nearly a year ago. Today, I was signing away my life with a different devil. I turned to the last page. "After I sign this, I want that tape back."

Susan nodded. "I sure as hell don't want to watch it again. You'll get it back after the divorce is finalized."

With a trembling hand, I signed and dated the document.

Susan signed next to mine.

"What happens next?" I asked.

"You get your sorry ass off my property and go find a place to live. I'll take the kids this weekend. Next weekend is yours."

"What are you going to tell the kids?"

"What do you think I'm going to tell them? The truth of course. I'll tell them you fucked Krista everyday while they were sleeping, and now you can't live here anymore." Susan flashed that evil grin. She was almost gloating now. She reminded me of Abbey after Tony's funeral.

"No, really, what are you going to tell them?"

"I'll tell them you and I are going to live in separate houses from now on, and they can see you every other weekend."

"They won't understand. Let me talk to them," I pleaded.

"Fine." She walked into the house. "Jack, Jenn," she called out, "your daddy wants to talk to you."

Framed by the front door, I watched my innocent, loving kids walking toward the foyer. They were great kids and didn't deserve this. Please, God, have mercy on them, I thought. I especially never wanted them to be hurt by this.

"Outside," Susan said pointing, directing them to the front stoop. She closed the door and left me with them.

As best I could, I explained that I was leaving for a while and that I loved them very much. Before I was done, we were all crying. I hated myself for failing them. That was the worst.

"I don't want you to go, Daddy," Jenn sobbed.

"I don't want to go either, sweetie."

"Then why are you going?"

"Because I have to... your mom and I think it's best."

"Well I think it stinks," Jack injected.

I nodded. It stunk, it sucked, and there was nothing I could do about it. But the truth is, I had screwed the babysitter and gotten caught red-handed. And now, it was only fitting that I should get screwed by Susan. As much as I hated to admit it, she didn't deserve what I had done to her. Sure, she was a shitty wife. But that didn't give me the right to cheat on her. I should have never married her. I should have divorced her a long time earlier. I should have kept my wedding



vows. I should have... I should have... I should have... those three words, I knew now, would haunt me now until the day I died. And I had no one to blame but myself.

I hugged them, told them I loved them, kissed them good-bye, and drove away shaking. It wasn't until a half mile down the road that I remembered the Camry had no oil. In a teary blur I pulled onto the shoulder of the road. That's when the massive earthquake hit. First my chest heaved, then, I erupted, gushing hot lava-like tears from my eyes. For nearly ten minutes I wailed, my grief magnified by the echoes inside the Camry. This had to be the saddest moment in my life. My family was gone. Gone. Really. They were gone... forever. And nothing I could ever say or do would change that. It was too late. Oh, God.

This must have been how Tony had felt on New Year's, I remember thinking. No wonder he had gotten drunk and driven himself over a cliff. Why not? The only question for me was whether I would do the same...

# TWENTY FOUR

Time dragged, as it tends to for the hopeless, and for the first couple of months [or was it years?], I stayed with a Navy buddy, seeing Jack and Jenn every other weekend as I picked-up the pieces of my shattered life. My family hardship enabled me to switch out of the Navy's silent service into procurement. Although that meant a loss of sub pay, and meant I would never command my own sub, it allowed me to stay in the D.C. area and be a part-time father, which was better than the alternative: an absentee father. It wasn't the best career move, I knew, but I couldn't leave the kids behind with just Susan. They needed one good parent-- albeit part-time, albeit one who had screwed the babysitter and been screwed even worse by her.

In truth, my switching out of subs may have saved millions of lives. Given my state of mind, and my anger, giving me control of twenty-four Trident missiles might not have been the most prudent thing in the world. I could almost see myself out there under the Atlantic.

*"Officer of the Deck," I'd order, "make your depth one-four-zero feet."*

*“One-four-zero feet, aye, aye, Captain. Diving Officer, make you depth one-four-zero feet.”*

*“Make my depth one-four-zero feet, Dive aye. Ten degree up bubble.”*

*I’d look over at the crusty chief. “Chief of the Watch, sound the general alarm.”*

*“Aye, aye, Captain.”*

*“Officer of the Deck, prepare to launch missiles.”*

*“Huh, Captain?”*

*“Don’t look at me like I’m crazy. You heard me... prepare to launch missiles.”*

*“But Captain...”*

*“Don’t but me, Lieutenant Mathews. I am the Captain of this vessel and I have given you a lawful order. Now prepare... to... launch... missiles.”*

*“But Captain...”*

*I’d look at the fresh-faced Junior Officer of the Deck. “Ensign Fogerty, relieve Lieutenant Mathews at once.”*

*“But sir, I’m just an Ensign. I’m not even qualified as Officer of the Deck.”*

*“Relieve him now, Ensign.”*

*His eyes would glaze over. “Aye, aye, Captain-Christ. This is Ensign Fogerty, I have the Deck and the Conn.”*

*“Helmsman, aye.”*

*“Planesman, aye”*

*“Dive, aye.”*

*Master-at-Arms, escort Lieutenant Mathews to his stateroom and put him under armed guard.”*

*“Aye, aye, Captain.”*

*“Gentlemen,” I’d announce, “William Shakespeare once said, ‘first, kill all the lawyers.’ Well today, that’s just what I intend to do. And I intend to start with my ex-wife. Weapons Officer, target missiles one through twelve on Falls Church, Virginia.”*

*“But sir, that’ll kill everyone within a hundred-mile radius of Washington, D.C. We can’t do that.”*

*“Ensign Thompson, relieve Commander Jarabak as Weapons Officer.”*

*Like a good ensign, his eyes would also glaze over. “Aye, aye, Captain-Christ. This is Ensign Thompson, I have assumed control of the Weapons Officer functions.”*

*“Excellent, Ensign.”*

*“Captain-Christ, what about the other twelve missiles?”*

*“Are we within range of Sweden?” I’d ask.*

*“Yes, sir.”*

*A wry smile would come over my lips. “Excellent. Target missiles thirteen through twenty-four on every major city in Sweden.”*

*“Aye, aye, Captain-Christ.”*

Of course it could never happen. But what would life be without fantasies?

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Yet even with fantasies, my life was hell on earth. Needing every penny I could lay my hands on, I cashed in a whole-life insurance policy and some savings bonds I'd squirreled away, sold my coin collection, and auctioned off my Beatles memorabilia on EBAY. Along those same lines, I had a flashing thought to sell the video of Krista and me, but concluded it was barely worth the cost of the tape. There was, after all, a lot better porn on the market. All told, I was able to scrounge up \$22,000, enough for a down-payment on a run-down, two-bedroom brick rambler a few blocks from the kids. It wasn't much, but it was mine, and my pride swelled as I cut *my* grass for the first time. The \$1,600 mortgage was nearly all I had left after paying Susan her monthly \$3,000 and I lived meagerly at best. Not coincidentally, that's just what Susan wanted.

Although I shouldn't have been surprised, Susan hounded me as if I were a deadbeat. When the kids did anything bad, it was my fault. And when they did anything good, it was all because of her. She also made it a personal crusade to tell everyone I was the terrible infidel who screwed the babysitter and broke-up her fairy-book marriage. In everyone's scorebook that made Susan some sort of super-martyr-woman... and made me the irresponsible asshole who couldn't keep Commander Squeaky quiet. Not surprisingly, Susan and I grew to hate each other more, if that was possible. Yet at the same time, I felt intense sorrow for Susan. She lived life to spite me-- to hurt me with malicious intent at every possible chance-- and despite my own meager existence, her life seemed worse. Indeed, I couldn't imagine a sadder way to live. Feeling sorry for Susan actually made me feel better, as if my meager existence didn't prevent me from feeling emotionally superior, if that makes any sense. [I guess there really is a certain nobleness associated with pitying one's enemy.].

Eventually, we settled into a fairly stable routine and by the one-year anniversary of our divorce, time seemed to be moving a bit faster. In our final divorce decree, Susan had even granted me an additional night of visitation with the kids during the week. In return I had to offer an additional \$1,500 a year to pay for half of the kids' summer camps. Deep down, I think she really just wanted another night free of the kids, because without me she had to cook, clean, read, and put them to bed. And that wasn't her. That meant missing *Access Hollywood* and *Entertainment Tonight*, and cut into her time spent surfing the web for Internet bargains. But I didn't care about her motives. I just wanted to be with my kids.

Other aspects of my life changed, too. Old friends stopped calling, friends of Jenn and Jack weren't allowed to sleep-over at my house [I guess an affair with an eighteen-year-old makes you some sort of child molester], and I drew contemptuous stares at school concerts and soccer games. I was the poster-boy for adultery... the terrible man who screwed the teenage Swedish Au Pair and destroyed his family. I could all but hear the whispers: *can you believe he did that... what an asshole... poor Susan*. It was as if I'd cheated on everyone, not just Susan. Not surprisingly, every wife in Falls Church used me as an example to keep their husbands in-line: *'take a good look at him Bob [Steve/Bill/Rowland/etc] ... if you ever cheat on me, you'll end up living a meager existence just like Jeff MacDonald over there... so watch yourself'*. In response, those husbands kept the peace by keeping a safe distance from me. And so I was damned to live like a leper... adultery, it seemed, was my contagious disease.

In my own mind, I came to grips with the new world reality, and concluded that I got what I deserved, despite the unforgivable double-crossing. As Krista had said about Tony, nobody had put a gun to my head and forced me to screw her. As hard as it might have been, I very well could

have said, 'No.' Indeed, no amount of rationalization would change the fact that I was an adulterer. And so, in the end, I accepted my punishment and banishment like the stand-up guy Krista had once said I was.

I tried dating a couple times. The first time was a chance encounter at an after-work happy hour with a civilian co-worker from the Pentagon. She was about my age, a fellow divorcee, extremely fit, and, as I would learn, a completely bitter basket case. She spent the entire night ranting and raving about her ex-husband and all the rotten things he ever did. "I know he was cheating on me," she said at one point in the night, her eyes blazing with hatred, "I just couldn't prove it."

Too bad you didn't have a video tape, I thought, as I nodded and tried to appear interested and empathetic.

"Frank was such an asshole," she summed. "So how come you and your wife split?"

"Irreconcilable differences," I said simply, figuring an admission of an affair with an 18 year-old Swedish Au Pair wouldn't help secure some action for Commander Squeaky. With the famine on, he was wasting away. "There was no passion."

She sighed. "I know what you mean."

That sounded promising, I thought, and I perked up and envisioned her naked. No matter her caustic mouth and bitter attitude, she had a decent enough bod.

She continued, "Frank demanded sex almost every week. I just couldn't handle that."

Ouch! So much for promising. I took a big pull on my draft. The more she talked the less I liked her.

“Toward the end there, I got so sick of him pawing me every night that I started sleeping in the guest room.”

I looked at my watch. “Whoa! Is it 9:30 already? I should be getting home.”

“So soon?”

“Yeah. I’ve got to get up early to pick up my kids. I’m taking them fishing in the morning.”

“Well good for you. Frank never does anything with our kids. He just *blah... blah... blah...*”

*Deja vu.* And not the good kind of *deja vu*, either! I tuned her out as she went on and on. Finally, I cut her off. “Well, I had a real nice time, Kathy. We should get together again.”

“Okay. I’d like that. Good luck fishing tomorrow.”

“Thanks.” I smiled, waved, and made a quick getaway.

My only other “dating experience” occurred on a typical lonely Saturday night at *The Sign of the Whale*, a singles bar in downtown D.C. I was at the bar drinking a draft when the woman next to me glanced over and said, “Can I buy you a drink, sailor?”

Dressed in chinos and a polo shirt, I looked to my left with understandable curiosity. An attractive brunette, perhaps in her late thirties/early forties, was eyeing me with an inviting smile. “Do I know you?” I asked.

She nodded and extended her hand. “Hi. Lori Ricketts. My son’s Ben. He and your son Jack are in the same class at Nottingham Elementary.”

“Hi. I’m sorry. I didn’t recognize you.” In truth, I would’ve sworn I’d never been introduced to her in my life. But I did remember Jack mentioning a friend named Ben. I looked to see that she wasn’t wearing a wedding ring.



She sat down on the stool next to me. “That’s okay. I haven’t seen you around much lately. It’s Jeff, right?”

I nodded. “I’ve been laying low.”

She nodded in apparent understanding.

“So, what brings you to a place like this?” I asked, steering the conversation away from me and my problems.

“Probably the same thing that brings you,” she said without inhibition, raising her eyebrows invitingly.

I doubted that... unless she was a lesbian. “You’re single, too?” I asked.

“Un-huh. Two years now.”

“Let me guess, your husband had an affair, right?”

“Not exactly,” she said slyly. “I did,” she added with a wink. Clearly she didn’t like to waste time making her intentions known.

I perked up.

“My husband thought the only purpose of sex was to pro-create. The year after Ben was born he wouldn’t even get near me. Said he wanted to wait until Ben was two before thinking about having another kid. I live for passion. So, anyway, one thing led to another... and here I am... out looking for passion.”

The more she talked, the more I liked her. “I think maybe I should be buying you a drink,” I responded, my eyes now sparkling.

She raised her eyebrows and lifted her glass. “A double scotch, please” she said.

I quickly discovered that scotch and sex were Lori Rikett's two favorite things in the world. After an hour and a couple more doubles, she began stroking my leg with her stocking foot. Commander Squeaky stirred. "I think I may have a bottle of Chevas at my house," I offered.

"Ummm. Sounds great," she slurred.

Once back at my rambler, another double coaxed her out of her dress and into my new bed. Evidently I was no match for the scotch because she was barely semi-conscious when we did it, and compared to Krista, it was one of the worst lays of my life. But then again, I had come to the sad realization that every lay in my life would likely pale compared to Krista. American hamburger definitely loses its taste after you've been spoiled with Swedish filet mignon. But she was better than nothing, and Commander Squeaky enjoyed the brief respite. Hell, during a famine, hamburger tastes pretty damn good.

In the morning, I made her eggs benedict, drove her home, and watched her make the walk of shame up her driveway, into her house. God, how I missed Krista.

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Without the kids every day, I had too much time to think about my sad existence as a part-time father in a dead-end career. Thinking about my predicament, invariably led me to thinking of Krista. What ever happened to the double-crossing bitch, I wondered mostly. Was she scamming men in Sweden now? Or operating in another foreign country? If she was as smart as I'd always thought, she'd be interning at the White House or in Congress. I could only imagine the damage she could have caused in either of those male bastions...

No matter where she was, or what she was doing, I could never understand why she had turned on me. After the supposed deep, passionate love, after telling me I was the kind of man she wanted to marry, why had she double-crossed me? Why? The question would plague me forever.

Some nights I'd throw our tape into the VCR and watch the two of us go at it on my 19-inch t.v. To say my emotions were mixed was an understatement. The little bitch ruined my life, yet in my own bizarre way, I missed her even now. On several occasions, I came close to throwing the tape into the fireplace, but Commander Squeaky always stopped me. He would love the sweet Swede for all eternity.

Whatever she was doing, the last thing from my mind was that our paths would someday cross again. But, as I would come to learn first-hand, there really is a circle to this silly life... and what goes around, comes around. I just never expected it to come around so big... and so wonderfully.

# **PART THREE**

## **The Sweet Poetic Justice**

# TWENTY FIVE

The silly circle to my life began to close on Wednesday, February 4<sup>th</sup>. A year and a half had passed since the Swede had left, and riding home on the Metro I could feel the stares from every eye, as if the other commuters were amusing themselves studying my blank face and that unmistakable ‘I-hate-my-life’ look. Obviously, none of them had screwed a double-crossing Swedish Au Pair and ruined their own life. No wonder they were smiling and wondering what joy the coming night held. As for me, I was contemplating suicide.

With the wind chill in the single digits, I trudged home through the dusk and grey, leftover snow. God, how I hate February. What a sad month: cold, windy, dark, and seemingly never-ending... if any month warranted just 28 days, it was February. Anything more would have seemed like a return to the dark ages. I yearned for a warm beach, the sun in my face, and a real future.

Up the three steps to my front door, I scooped out my mail and slunk into my lonely brick rambler with the moldy basement. Leafing through the mail, I found the ubiquitous Pizza Hut and Domino's coupons, two low introductory rate VISA offers, a Lands End catalogue, and my one indulgence: the weekly Sports Illustrated. [Note to the editors of Sports Illustrated: don't take this wrong, but when SI becomes your reader's weekly indulgence, don't bank on them being around for next year's subscription renewal]. I quickly glanced at the cover to see the long-awaited swimsuit edition. Not even it would warm up this bleak day/month/winter/life, I thought, as I tossed the magazine down on the coffee table. Losing interest in the female physique was a sure sign the end was near.

*I'm coming, Tony... I'm coming.*

I had a pot of spicy chili in the crock pot and watched Brian Williams read the Evening News as I ate, the whole time wondering if this might be my last meal. At least Tony had dined on surf and turf. Of course the news did little to brighten things up. Indeed, except for the date, the news never seemed to change. Today could have been last week, last month, last year, even last decade-- a skirmish in one of the former Soviet republics, no progress on peace talks between the Israelis and the Arabs, prescription drugs that senior citizens couldn't afford, and the token heart-warming story of a pregnant woman who survived three days stranded in her car on the side of Interstate-80 during a blizzard. Was the world really so monotonous? Or was this the way the world was for those without a future? I swigged my Busch beer and chuckled at the futility: I couldn't afford Heineken anymore, much less Budweiser.

I finished the chili as Brian signed off and said he'd see me tomorrow. Sadly, unless I killed myself on this dark, cold day, Brian was probably right. Hopefully, they'll have a good

police chase, I thought, as I took my bowl into the kitchen. Thursdays were known for that. Now *that* was something to look forward to. If anything could keep me from driving my Camry off the GW Parkway into the Potomac, it was a good police chase...

Striding onto the linoleum floor, I slipped, fumbled the glass bowl, and watched it fall in sickening slow motion before shattering onto the floor. Shit. What else could possibly go wrong? Stepping carefully to retrieve the broom, I overlooked a shard of glass. Sharp pain shot through the bottom of my foot. "Owwww. Fuck. Jesus Christ."

I hopped to a safe spot on the dirty floor, wiped away the blood, and examined the wound. The good news: the cut was small and wouldn't need stitches. The bad news: my shattered life. From the kitchen floor, I did a quick survey: a lonely brick rambler, spilling red blood, and an overflowing garbage can. This was my life now, my own private hell on earth... all because the devil's Au Pair had double-crossed me. I wrapped the cut in a napkin, cleaned up the glass, and limped to the couch, defeated.

A glance down at the tight body of the sun-drenched blonde on the cover of the Sports Illustrated sent my mind off. What a life this chick had-- posing for pictures on some exotic sunny beach and making boatloads of money in the process. I bet she didn't have a clue what it was like to sit behind a desk in the basement of the Pentagon, where the sun doesn't shine, and examine a government contractor's billing invoices. I bet she didn't worry about child support, a bitchy ex, whispering neighbors, or a \$1,600 mortgage. She probably had a million friends, any man she wanted, nice flats in London, Paris and New York, and anything else she wanted... all by just

smiling for a camera with the sun in her face. God, life was just not fair. I tossed the magazine down again.

My thoughts turned to my Academy classmates. Stu Keaney, the dumb jock we thought would never graduate, was now the offensive coordinator for the Broncos, making \$500,000 a year. *Shipmate* magazine reported him in line for the Raiders head coaching job. Dave Bartlett, the nerdy geek who was scared of girls back at Canoe U, was CEO of a software firm, his net worth nearly half a billion. His yacht was challenging New Zealand for the America's Cup. And Bill Noonan, whom I spoon-fed Econ 101, was making seven figures as an investment banker on Wall Street. Today I wondered if he'd even take a call from me. Down the list I went, name after name-- everyone, it seemed, had made something special of themselves... except me. Relatively speaking, I was back on the farm, back to pig farming. Was divorce, a dead-end job, and a meager existence it for me, I wondered? Was death the only thing that could end my pain? If so, perhaps Tony had it right when he'd driven off the GW Parkway. Why prolong the inevitable agony? Why kid yourself?

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, liking the darkness and peaceful solitude.

Dozing off, I dreamed that wonderful dream of the Caribbean, the one from the night of Krista' DUI. As I swam amidst that magnificent school of tropical fish, peace engulfed me. This was supposed to be my life. In my mind, I saw Krista and myself emerge from the cave. Then we were standing together in that open-air Reggae bar. My eyes devoured her in that black string bikini. God, she was so beautiful... those plump, passionate lips and those dreamy curves... so sexy... as gorgeous as any model...



... *Model*. The word struck me like a bolt of lightning... *model*. Even in my sleep, I felt the chill down my spine. My eyes popped opened.

*No way. No friggin way. It couldn't be.*

I took a deep breath.

Reaching forward, I picked up the Sports Illustrated from the coffee table and stared at the face of the blonde in the black string bikini on the cover. Holy Mary, Mother of Joseph! My hands were shaking uncontrollably and I nearly dropped the magazine. There, staring seductively back at me from that exotic beach, was Krista... Krista Porsikovich... my Krista! It was her. It was really her! The sweet Swede was on the cover of the SI swimsuit edition! *She* was the *model*... the *featured model*.

Taking a deep breath and steadying myself, I quickly studied the photo-- her hair was longer and stringier, in those tight, cascading Nicole Kidman curls; and her facial features seemed elongated, more womanly, less cherubic; but her body was the same: those beautiful bronze tits, perfect long legs, and sweet Swedish ass. It was her... no doubt. Jesus H. Christ... it was her! I looked deeply into her eyes. How carefree and inviting they were on the cover of SI... a far cry from the eyes of a back-stabbing, blackmailing, double-crossing bitch who sport fucked and ruined men for kicks.

My mind caught fire and I thought back to our conversation around the campfire at Yellowstone, remembering her comment about becoming a model, building a media empire, and ruling the world. Was that just a year and a half ago? God, it seemed like another lifetime ago. And now here she was.

With a million thoughts whizzing through my head, I turned the pages as fast as my fingers could function. Inside, I found another six pictures of my ex-Au Pair in a variety of swim wear-- three strategically placed fig leaves; a tightly-meshed white fishnet; even a hand-painted body suit. One thing was sure-- she made quite a canvas.

Knowing I needed to find out as much as possible about her, I ran into the den, flipped on the computer, and got on-line. Typing 'Krista Porsikovich' on Google, I clicked on the 'Search' icon and received 112,000 hits in just seconds. Jesus! Deep down, I knew the Swede would amount to something, but I never envisioned 112,000 hits. Evidently, she was huge! Living the last year like an infectious hermit, I'd obviously missed a lot.

With another click, I went to KristaPorsikovich.com, her personal website. As I waited for the page to load, I continued to muse: I had a lonely brick rambler... Krista had her own web site. How fitting! When her homepage finally flashed open, Krista greeted me with a smile and a sleek, clingy, stylish black mini with pearl earrings and a matching pearl necklace. That pearl necklace elicited a memory that made me smile-- I gave her a pearl necklace once... only the pearls weren't from Mikimoto, they were from Jeff MacDonald, the titty-fucking truck driver who'd given the destitute hitchhiker a ride one fine morning! I laughed aloud. At least I still had a sense of humor.

A counter at the bottom of her web site showed that I was the 1,258,320th visitor. Wow... talk about feeling special! Immediately I wondered how many of the prior 1,258,319 visitors had screwed the sweet Swede? Or engaged in a threesome with her? Or played the MacDonald's game with her... or naked twister? Or possessed a video of all those things?! That last thought really made my mind jump. Yeah, baby! This might just be my lucky day!

Clicking again, I scanned her bio quickly. I guess her days as a blackmailing Au Pair weren't high on her list of accomplishments, because there was no mention of that... or of me. How soon they forget, I thought whimsically.

With a few more clicks, I found Krista modeling a variety of swimsuits, lingerie, and evening wear. She was regal, always showing just enough, but never too much... always leaving something to the imagination. Commander Squeaky perked up as we looked. He didn't need an imagination, of course. After all, he was the proud owner of a very, very rare X-rated video... undoubtedly a very, very *valuable* X-rated video!

My thoughts took me back to that fateful September day, when Krista had dropped Winnie the Pooh and changed my life forever. Back then, I was sure she would have made a helluva Playboy bunny. Then, after all of our wild sex, I reconsidered: she was a natural for the porno industry.

I continued to read her bio. She had started as a Björn Borg model and in just three months had gone from a relative nobody to one of the most highly sought after models in the world. That sounded like her-- after all, two years earlier, she'd gone from a heavenly Au Pair to a devilish blackmailer even more quickly. Had she blackmailed her way to the top, I wondered?

Krista was a mainstream model-- beautiful, seductive, and classy-- for the likes of high-class, well-respected designers such as Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, Benneton, and Yves St. Laurent. I wondered what they'd think about their classy supermodel if they saw my video.

Next, I read through her Frequently Asked Questions. One Q&A struck me directly:

Q: Is it true that Playboy magazine has offered you two million dollars to pose nude for them, and do you have any intention of posing for them?

A: Magazines like Playboy exploit females and perpetuate the stereotypical attitude that women are mere sex objects. I believe a woman's sexuality is sacred, and something that she should only share with the one she loves. While Playboy has offered me a considerable sum of money to pose for them (in excess of the figure you cited) I have refused that offer on principle.

*Love? Principle?* My heart swelled as I laughed aloud. Since when did love and principle matter to the blackmailing Swede? What was so sacred about her sexuality when she used it to entrap Tony and me? As for principle, how about blackmailing me and Tony? Exactly what principle was that? And what principle had she subscribed to when she gave Susan the videotape and reneged on our agreement? My brain was on fire: I'd show Miss Sacred Supermodel a thing or two about principle.

I clicked on the icon that said 'Send Krista an e-mail'. Why not, I figured? I'd given her a home-made pearl necklace once upon a time, why not send her an e-mail now? I typed:

Dear Krista,

I am a huge fan of yours, and also an old friend. I'm sure you remember me: Jeff MacDonald. I watch "our video" almost nightly. It brings back a lot of fond memories... naked twister, the threesome, all those fun games from days gone-by. We have a lot of catching up to do. Drop me a line and let me know how you're doing. I'd like to talk with you about principle... to see just how sacred sex really is to you. Gotta run... Big Mac...

P.S. I imagine a lot of your fans would love to see that video. What do you think?

I clicked on the 'send' icon and wondered if the bitch really read her e-mails. If so, she'd get more than just a kick out of this one. If not, she'd be smart to start reading.

I spent the rest of the night surfing on the web, finding out as much as I could about my ex-Au Pair. One web site stated that Krista commanded fees in excess of \$30,000 a day, plus expenses. Not too bad-- a few days on the beach netted her as much as a year in the Pentagon basement netted me. Not surprisingly, that got me to thinking what my tape might sell for on the open market. Or how much Krista would pay to have it back and keep it off the open market? At a minimum, I figured, the video was worth at least as much as a bunch of still life pictures in Playboy, right? And if Playboy was really willing to pay her \$2 million, that established my lowest acceptable figure. Sweeeeeet Jesus, I'd hit the lottery! I could probably even work a deal under the table... all cash and no taxes.

Of course, I didn't want to do anything *unprincipled*. *Hehehe*.

My mind was flying now as I remembered some of the things she'd said to me when she unveiled her secret video in the basement of my old Colonial. It wasn't anything personal, she had told me... I just want to have fun. Well, *me too!* [I guess, in a strange way, I was way ahead of the 'Me Too' Movement!]. And I didn't want to be greedy, either. I just wanted fair market value... whatever that might be. Ah, sweet payback time! I loved it. Who's the anti-Gump? Not me!

In bed on that glorious new world night, I tossed and turned for hours. Unable to sleep, I finally threw my golden video into the VCR and watched the world's most popular supermodel do everything imaginable with Commander Squeaky. The good Commander perked-up, as if sure

the real-life Swede would cross his path again in the near future. [At times, that Commander Squeaky was one smart wiener, and for once I was glad to have listened to him and not burned the video. I decided then and there to promote him to Captain Squeaky!].

# TWENTY SIX

Time rolled by quickly, as it tends to for one with infinite hope and an unlimited future, and I awoke the next morning feeling like a man with a couple million dollars in the bank. In fact, I could almost hear Regis calling out: “Who wants to be a millionaire?”

“I do! I do!” I heard myself scream out excitedly. *Ha.*

Based on my calculations, a million was roughly the amount the double-crossing Swede had cost me by giving Susan the videotape. And while I couldn’t put a price tag on the pain, suffering and loss of my kids, a second million would go a long way toward healing those wounds. [I know... money can’t buy happiness... but I’ve been rich (relatively), and I’ve been poor (absolutely), and rich is definitely better. Anyone who tells you otherwise has probably never been both]. Perhaps as important, the Swede needed to be taught a lesson... in principle. And this time,

I told myself confidently, the game would end differently. This time I'd play using her rules... and that meant *no* rules.

Four days passed without a response to my e-mail, and by Monday night, I figured the e-mail had never made it to Krista or she was blowing me off. If I were betting, I was sure it was the former and not the latter, for she had to know she was in no position to blow me off. Perhaps her PR person thought I was just a prankster. No doubt this kind of thing happened often. That's when I decided to up the stakes. I wrote a second e-mail, with a scanned picture from the video attached:

Dear Krista's PR person,

Obviously my last e-mail did not get your attention and you failed to pass my message on to Krista directly. While I am sure that there are many crackpots in the world who would do anything to communicate with Krista directly, perhaps the attached picture will convince you to pass my message on to her. In fact, if I don't hear back from Krista before midnight tonight, the attached picture will be posted on the Internet for all of Krista's fans to see. Gotta run... Big Mac...

P.S. Did I mention the video? Ask Krista... I'm sure she'll tell you about it. Adjö.

If this didn't get the desired attention, I was prepared to carry out my threat and up the stakes even further. In fact, that morning, I'd called my lawyer to verify I wasn't doing anything illegal. He assured me-- as much as a lawyer can-- that I was on firm legal ground, so long as I wasn't physically threatening, harassing, or blackmailing Krista. Being the non-lawyer, I asked if threatening to post a picture on the Internet could be considered blackmail.

“Not if the picture's legally yours,” he had responded.



I asked if a video given to me was legally mine.

“As long as you gave something of value in exchange.” *Consideration*, he called it.

Value? I sure as hell had given *something of value* in exchange. In fact, I still had the paper with Krista’s demands that I’d satisfied. As far as Susan's legal right to the tape, I'd given her my house, my kids, and all my Apple shares. Consideration? Hell yeah, I'd given consideration... no doubt.

"What about posting a picture of a naked girl on the Internet?" I asked.

“It depends,” he said, using the standard, starting phrase that seems to define every lawyer’s answer to a question. “Is she over 16?”

“Un-huh.”

“Well, then, there’s probably nothing illegal about that. As long as you obtained the picture legally.”

"Can I sell the video?"

"It depends. As long as you can prove that it’s yours or that you obtained it in a fair, arms-length transaction, then it's probably legally yours to do with as you please." He went on to cite Mr. Zapruder and the JFK assassination video.

I hung up feeling like a power hitter in the midst of free agency negotiations. If Playboy was willing to pay more than two million dollars for still-life pictures of Krista naked, I could only imagine what they'd pay for an X-rated video of her. "It's business, I'd tell Krista. Just like between you and me a couple years ago. It’s nothing personal. I'm not doing this to hurt you or to make your life a living hell." *Heh heh.*

While I waited for a response to my second e-mail, I thought about what I'd do with the money. First, I'd sell the rambler and buy a Colonial... maybe my old Colonial. Next, the Camry would be history. Then, I'd take the kids on a week-long vacation to Disney, and maybe even treat myself to a week in Vegas. One thing was certain: the days of living meagerly would be over! My thoughts turned to Susan. What an unbelievable twist in fate... all because she handed me that video on that God-awful day. God, I couldn't wait to throw this in her arrogant little face.

Still, as I thought about things, all was not right. The money would be nice-- I'd get my comfortable lifestyle back. But deep down, what I *really, really* wanted, couldn't be bought. That's when I began to wonder if it was possible to get my kids back, too? That's when things got really interesting. Perhaps I could offer Susan a couple hundred grand in exchange for joint custody. After all, nothing motivated Susan like money. Would she go for that?

Around ten that evening, the phone rang and I figured Susan was on the other end, primed to bitch about something. As *Mister I Fucked the Babysitter*, I was her outlet for venting all sorts of hostilities. If she got stuck in rush hour, it was my fault. If the hot water heater burst, it was my fault. If she put on thirty pounds, it was my fault.

"Hello," I answered unemotionally.

"Jeff?" The voice on the other end had an unmistakable Swedish accent.

I perked up and thought quickly. "One moment, please," I said, now in a formal, English butler-like tone, "I'll see if he's available. May I ask who's calling, please?"

"Tell him it's Krista."

"One moment, please, Madame." I held my hand over the handset, chuckled to myself, and waited for a few seconds to pass. I also set my mental attitude. This was the girl who had

lied, double-crossed, and taken my kids from me. This was also the girl who gave the best head ever and had once made life worth living. I uncovered the mouthpiece. "Krista?" I answered, my tone a mixture of disbelief and enthusiasm.

"Jeff?"

"Alive and kicking," I answered gleefully, purposefully trying to sound as upbeat as Krista had sounded the day she unveiled the videotape of me. But it was no act. Owning a priceless video was quite a kick! The Swede had to know that better than anyone.

"Who answered the phone?"

"My butler," I replied, lying.

"Your butler?"

"Un-huh. Now that I'm going to be rich, I thought I ought to have one. I'm even thinking of getting a PR person, too... maybe even starting my own web site. But I need to come up with a good name. I'm thinking *KristaPorsikovichNakedVideo.com* might be pretty good, you know? What do you think?"

"Fuck you, Jeff."

"No fuck for you," I barked back like the Soup Nazi, imitating the way she'd treated me in the basement of my Colonial a long year and a half earlier. I chuckled. "I'll bet you never thought you'd ever hear from me again, huh?"

"Why are you doing this to me?"

I was ready for this question, too. "Because I can," I answered coldly, again using her timeless words.

She didn't miss the fact. "Touché, Jeff."

Touché' indeed! And with all the right cards in my crafty hand, I sensed many more touches' in my future. "I don't want to hurt you," I responded, continuing our reversed positions. "I just want to have some fun. You know how that goes." I was really enjoying things on this side of the blackmailing relationship. I wondered how she liked being on the wrong end?

"This isn't going to work," she said, continuing the role reversal.

"Yes it will," I said with confidence, knowing I now held the winning hand. "This tape is money...pure gold. Playboy will pay at least two million for it. Maybe they'll even turn it into a movie. Remember that movie about those kids who ran around scared in the woods with a video camera? If memory serves me correctly, that piece of shit flick made over \$100 million. Kind of makes you wonder how much a porno flick starring the world's most sought-after supermodel would bring in, doesn't it? I can see it now, I'll take a video camera into the woods and film myself searching for the world's most beautiful supermodel, the elusive Krista Porsikovich. I'll search everywhere. And then, every time the camera catches a glimpse of you, I'll splice in a segment from our video. I'm thinking of calling it *The Krista Porsikovich Project*. What do you think?"

"You're really enjoying this aren't you?"

"Why shouldn't I. You sure enjoyed yourself at my expense a couple years ago. Or have you forgotten all about that?"

"I remember, Jeff. Everything. So you don't have to humor me." She paused. "So what do you want from me?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm not really sure." I paused. "Yet."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“It means what it means... I don’t know exactly what I want. Unlike you, I don’t have a big list all made out yet. I need to get some answers first.”

“Answers? What kind of answers?”

“Hopefully, truthful ones... to some very basic questions. Like why you sent Susan a copy of that tape after I did everything we agreed to. You said you weren't out to ruin my life, remember? You said you never wanted to hurt me.”

She didn't respond.

"Do you know I lost my kids because of that video?"

More silence.

“Answer me. I lost Jack and Jenn because of what you did. Do you realize that?”

“I’m sorry,” she said simply.

"Yeah, right... you’re sorry alright. What about all that bullshit you told me when we were camping in Yellowstone... about how you loved me... how I was the kind of man you wanted to marry... and how worried you were about Jack and Jenn when I told you I was divorcing Susan? You’re sorry alright. So why did you do it?" I asked directly. “That’s the first answer I want.”

I heard crying on the other end of the phone. "I don't know," she finally sobbed.

I didn’t believe her or her tears. The cold, calculating Swede knew why she did everything. And she only cried for herself, not others. "I treated you so well, Krista. And not just because you had that tape. I really loved being with you. You knew that. I know you knew that. You had to know that."

She let out a racking sob. "I know, I know... I’m sorry... I really am.”

I wasn't impressed with her act. In fact, it was wearing thin... very thin. "You remember the morning after you showed me the tape?" I asked.

"Un-huh," she responded, her crying now subsided.

"You called me crazy for still wanting you," I reminded her.

"I know, I know. I'm not stupid, Jeff. I told you, I remember. I remember everything. You begged to fuck me. And then you thanked me."

"I didn't want to lose you," I said. "You know how much I loved being with you. No matter what, in your crazy way, you always made me feel wanted."

"I loved being with you, too, Jeff. I really did."

"Oh yeah? Then tell me why you gave Susan that tape?"

"I guess a part of me wanted to make sure you wouldn't stay married to her," she offered tentatively.

The Swede was back-peddling, trying to use her charm and innocence to extract herself from an inescapable predicament. This time, however, I saw through her lies. "That's bullshit, Krista. I told you in Yellowstone that I was through with Susan. You knew that. I told you I wanted truthful answers, not more of that made-up bullshit that you're famous for. So don't lie to me. I'm tired of your lies. In fact, if I catch you lying to me again, that picture I sent will be on the Internet tonight. Guaran-fucking-teed."

"I'm willing to make you a fair offer for the tape," she said out-of-the-blue.

I laughed at her quick retreat.

"What's so funny?" she reacted.

“What's funny is how the tables have turned. Makes you wish you never screwed me, doesn't it? How's the saying go, 'Be careful who you step on going up, because you're liable to meet them on the way down'?”

“The past is the past,” she replied, as if that were her new outlook on life.

I didn't buy it. “You're scared, aren't you?”

“No I'm not.”

“Yes, you are... admit it, Krista. I know. I've been there. I lived in fear of you for almost a whole year. I know what it feels like.”

“Come on, Jeff, you've got an embarrassing video of me... that's all. It's not like I really have anything important to lose... like a husband or kids.”

“True. But you've got a reputation and a career and a lot of fans.”

“That tape might be good for my career,” she shot back. “In fact, my agent wants me to branch out... he thinks I *should* pose for Playboy. Strike while the iron's hot.”

“Maybe you should pose,” I agreed. “To tell you the truth, it doesn't really matter to me that much. All I know is that this tape of mine is worth a lot of money. If you could get two million to pose for Playboy, how much do you think this tape is worth?”

“Give me a break, Jeff. If I could get two million, I *would* pose for Playboy. Don't believe all that crap you read on my web site. That stuff's written by my PR people. They hype everything.”

I didn't believe her. Two million sounded more than reasonable. Playboy paid a million bucks to skanks whose only claim to fame was having slept with some sleazy politician. "So how much could you get from Playboy?"

"Half a million... tops."

"Okay. Then this tape is easily worth twice that."

"Is that what you want-- a million dollars?"

"This isn't just about money," I said. "I lost my kids, too."

"I said I was sorry."

"You know, sometimes sorry isn't enough, Krista. Sorry doesn't help when Jack and Jenn call me on the phone crying, telling me they want to come see me, telling me Susan's forcing them to eat burned fish sticks."

"I told you, I was wrong to give Susan the videotape."

I still didn't believe her. Something told me there was more to this. "Just tell me the truth, Krista. That's the first thing on my list. Why did you give Susan the video? I trusted you. In Yellowstone you told me you loved me. Remember? Why'd you do it? I want the truth."

The moment of silence spoke volumes and I figured she was trying to come up with a believable lie.

"Because I had to," Krista finally said.

Although I didn't understand her, something told me truth was embedded within her answer. I felt the hair on my neck stand. "What do you mean *you had to*?" I pressed.

"Just like I had to give Abbey the tape of Tony."



I played her answer over in my mind. What did this have to do with Abbey and Tony, too? It was beginning to sound like another convenient excuse for the lying Swede. "What are you talking about?"

"They made me."

"What do you mean, '*they made you?*' Who's *they*?" My mind had kicked into high gear. One thing was the same: the Swede seemed to fabricate lies as well as ever. I was intrigued, but even more cautious as I waited for her answer.

"Abbey and Susan."

*Abbey and Susan?* My heart shot forward. "Abbey and Susan?" I repeated aloud, still not sure what she meant.

"Un-huh. Abbey hired me to trap Tony, and Susan hired me to trap you. They paid me to get videos of you two."

I felt a chill run through me. Jesus! If it was a lie, it was a bold one-- an unbelievably bold one. Holy shit! Was I hearing correctly? Was it possible? Had Abbey and Susan set Tony and me up? Or was the Swede lying again? I remembered something I'd read years before: a big lie is more plausible than truth. Was this one of those whoppers? Or the truth? I knew but one thing: if it was the truth, then it changed everything. "Are you serious?"

"I couldn't make-up something like this, Jeff. The whole thing was their idea. There was never any Au Pair manual or anything like that. They made all that up and told me to tell you."

I was dizzy as I tried to make sense of her revelations. "Why? Why would they do that?"

“Simple. Abbey hated being married to Tony and Susan hated being married to you. They both wanted to be divorced. They told me a video of you and Tony fucking me would guarantee you two would get nothing and they’d get everything.”

"Susan told you she hated being married to me?"

"Ja. The first week I was there. She came down to my room and told me everything: that she was tired of being a Navy wife; tired of moving around and living in crummy Navy towns. She said you'd never amount to anything... never give her what she deserved. She wanted to go to Hollywood and be an actress. She said you ruined her life by getting her pregnant and she wanted to get back at you and make your life as hellish as you had made hers."

Now Krista's explanation sounded deadly accurate... except for the fact that it sounded like something from the back of a paperback fiction novel.

Krista continued, “Susan told me Abbey felt the same way about Tony. She asked me if I’d be willing to help them out. I asked her what she meant. She said she and Abbey would pay me if I got a video of you and Tony fucking me.”

I was shaking. Was it true? Had my own wife entrapped me? *Jesus Christ.*

“Jeff?” Krista said, noting the silence.

“Yeah, I’m here. I’m just trying to sort this out.”

“It’s true,” she repeated. “If you never believe me ever again, believe me this time. It’s true. Susan and Abbey did it.”

As it sunk in, I considered the explanation. Of course Susan could never blame herself for the way her life had turned out. She had to blame someone... me. Jesus! Was she that clever... that devious.... that much of a calculating, conniving bitch? Deep down, I knew the answer: Hell,

yes... Susan was all of those things, and more. If Krista was telling the truth, then my score to settle was with Susan, not the Swede. This changed everything. *Susan really was the devil.*

“So Susan knew the whole time what was going on between us?”

“I told you, Jeff, it was her idea from the start.”

“So why’d you do it?”

“I don’t know. I was 18. Plus, you know I had some issues with men back then. I guess I figured I’d be getting back at men for what my step-father did to me. And I wanted the money.”

"How much did Susan pay you?"

"Thirty thousand dollars."

"Jesus." The Judas bitch had sold me out for 30K.

"She said it was a good investment. She said she’d get back thirty times that much after she divorced you.”

And she had. And more. “How much did Abbey pay you?”

“The same. Thirty thousand. That’s where I got the money to buy stocks.”

“So why didn't you ever tell me about any of this?”

“It wouldn’t have made any difference. It was done. And after I left, I was never supposed to make contact with you.”

As much as it fit together, something didn’t seem right. I tried to put my finger on it. “When did Susan know about the tape?” I asked.

"I gave it to her in October, after she got back from that trip to San Diego, right after the threesome we had with Anna. Remember?"

Of course I remembered... no man forgets his one and only threesome. "If Susan knew about this in October, then why did she wait until the following August to nail me? Why didn't she nail me earlier, like Abbey did to Tony?"

"I asked her about that," Krista replied, as if ready for my question.

"And..." I said with a leading tone.

"Susan said she wanted to keep your income coming in for the rest of the year. She said she wanted to get as much out of you as possible."

That made sense... the addition to enlarge the family room, the new granite counters in the kitchen, the new couches and drapes, *blah...blah...blah*. No wonder the bitch had gone on such a spending spree that final year.

Krista continued. "Plus, she said you were good to have around... to take care of the kids at night and on the weekends."

Calculating, conniving bitch! Everything planned perfectly... she'd done everything but knock me cold, strap me into my SAAB, and drive me over a cliff. I was speechless.

Krista had more to say, "There were a million times I wanted to tell you that she knew, but I just couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Lots of reasons. I didn't want to see what was going to happen to you. And..." She paused.

"And what?" I said, leading her on.

"And I guess I wanted to keep our relationship going. I know that sounds awful." She started crying softly.

At this point, I wasn't sure how anything sounded. Deep down, though, the fact that the Swede wanted to keep our relationship going for the rest of that tumultuous year actually made me feel kind of good about myself... and her. Still, I didn't reply. What could I say? I was still trying to comprehend all that I had missed. I felt as clueless as a five-year old in kindergarten.

"I'm sorry, Jeff," she sobbed. "I was young and angry back then. You know why. You know what happened to me."

Great. So she took it out on Tony and me. "And now?"

"I'm different now... more mature. I don't blame every man for what my step-father did to me." She paused. "Please believe me, I wish I hadn't done that to you... or Tony. It kills me to think about it."

"Your change of heart is heartwarming. But actions speak louder than words, and from all that I've learned, you seemed to have managed to get on with your life without giving me another thought."

"Please believe me, Jeff. I wanted to tell you... after I got back to Sweden. But, after I got back home, I guess I didn't want to think about it. Then, I got busy with modeling and everything took off. It's been kind of crazy for me the past year."

"Crazy for you? What about crazy for me? I lost my kids, my house, my career, everything. In fact, I almost lost my life a couple times." I let out a deep breath. "I guess you figured the videotape would never come back to haunt you, right?"

"I thought you'd burn it like you did in Yellowstone. At least, that's what I hoped."

I smiled into the phone-- this time her ass really was mine. No matter any extenuating circumstance, she'd aided and abetted in my destruction and had to pay. Just as quickly, my thoughts shifted to Susan. Why had Susan set me up like that? And why didn't she just try and work everything out amicably?

Of course I knew those answers. It had to be my fault. Susan never failed. She couldn't fail. She was superwoman. And superwoman didn't divorce her husband. No way. Susan knew what she wanted: she wanted out, she wanted everything, and most importantly, she wanted everything to be my fault. And thus she came up with an ingenious plan to make that happen.

My mind was in over-drive, seeking a way to get revenge. There had to be a way, I told myself. I couldn't just sit back and let Susan get away with this; the world had to know the truth. Damn... I should have followed my impulses ten years earlier when Susan called and told me she was pregnant. My impulses said, 'don't marry her... be a good father to your baby, but don't marry her... you don't love her.'

"I need to think about all this," I said into the phone, "Give me a number where I can reach you and I'll give you a call back."

"When? What are you thinking?"

"I'll call you back," I said, ignoring her questions. "Just give me your number."

"Hold on, let me find it. Here it is. 212-534-6400. I'm at the Plaza in New York. Room 2500."

"I'll call you back," I said, and I hung up.

Not knowing what to do, I opted for a drink. Sipping a straight scotch, I asked myself one question: what would enable me to get my kids back and get back at Susan at the same time?

Surprising even myself, I came up with the answer quickly. Perhaps even more surprisingly, I also came up with a plan to make it happen. Whether it would work was the priceless question that only time could answer. But one thing was certain: I decided I had to give it a try. And good or bad, I needed the Swede to help me... to be on my team again.

Thirty minutes after hanging up on the world's most famous supermodel, I dialed the Plaza and spoke with a hotel operator. "Room 2500. Tell her it's Jeff."

"Thank you, sir."

A second later, Krista was on the phone. "Jeff?"

"Do you want to work out a deal?" I asked.

"What kind of deal?"

"A fair one... one that gets me my kids back."

"What's in it for me?"

Of course that was the Swede's first thought... me, me, me. There may not be an 'I' in 'team', but there's an 'M' and an 'E'. The Swede knew this as well as anyone.

I answered, "One, you get the video back at half of fair market value; and two, you get to help me get back at Susan and get my kids."

"What do I have to do?" she asked, unsure where I was going.

I explained the basics of my plan to her. The more I explained, the more excited I became. It sounded even better aloud than it had in my mind. It was brilliant... maybe even more brilliant than Susan's plan to entrap me using the Swede. The only problem was this: I, too, needed the

Swede's help. And that meant I would once again be at her mercy. That could ruin everything.

"What do you think?" I asked afterwards.

"It's crazy."

"Not crazier than Susan hiring you to entrap me."

"True. And afterwards I'll get the video back?"

"Plus all copies," I answered, even though there weren't any... yet.

"How can I trust you?"

"The same way I trusted you," I answered ambiguously.

She hesitated, probably wondering what that meant, wondering if I'd double-cross her, as she had me. But deep down, I sensed that she liked the plan. It was cool... way cool.

"You want to know something?" she said finally.

"What?"

"It will serve Susan right for what she did to you. She really is a first class bitch. You deserve revenge."

I laughed. This would be more than revenge. This would be the sweetest poetic justice imaginable. More importantly, this would be the best thing for Jack and Jenn. Still, I wasn't sure I trusted the Swede. "You sure you'll be okay hanging around with an old man like me for a while?"

"You mean old faithful," she responded playfully. "It'll be fun...just like old times."

That got Captain Squeaky's attention, and both he and I wondered if that's what she meant. "You sure all your other men won't be jealous?" I asked, fishing, wondering where I might fit in among her stable of men.



“Right,” she said laughing. “The men I hang out with are a bunch of super-conceited pretty boy models who try and look better than me-- play-toys at best, not real men.”

“Oh yeah? And what’s your definition of a real man these days?”

“A man who takes care of his kids, likes to camp, and knows how to satisfy me.”

“You’re just sucking up to me because I have the tape,” I answered. But that was okay-- I liked the Swede when she sucked up.

“That’s not true. I’ve always liked you, Jeff. I told you that. I was attracted to you the first time I saw you. That was never a lie.”

She lied so much, I wondered if I could ever believe her. *Women... can’t live with ‘em, can’t kill ‘em. Thankfully, perhaps you could get revenge and sweet poetic justice.* “Right,” I replied, not at all convinced.

“It’s true, Jeff. When I seduced you that first time, I wasn’t pretending. Why do you think I wanted it to continue even after I gave the video to Susan?” She paused. “I liked the way you made love to me.”

Whoa! Those were words every man wanted to hear... whether they came from a supermodel, wife, girlfriend, or blackmailing Au Pair. “Really?”

“Yeah. Jesus, Jeff, I think Susan put you down for so long that you don’t believe you’re a great guy. I saw that every day when I lived at your house. There were even times when I wished I were Susan.” She sounded genuine. But then again, she sounded genuine so many times, it was hard to tell. Truly, the Swede lied better than most people told the truth.

“You wanted to be a bitchy lawyer?”

“No. I wanted to be married to a man who would take care of me and my kids the way you did. You’re very self-less. I told you how I really felt in Yellowstone. I couldn't do anything about the fact that Susan had the video, so I told you the honest-to-God truth. Believe me, it almost killed me to know what was going to happen to you.”

If she was lying, she was doing it very well. “Well,” I said, “you could never be Susan.”

“Why not?”

“Because you have a great body and you actually like sex.”

“Lucky me, huh?” She changed the subject abruptly. “So when does this great plan of yours begin?”

“The sooner, the better. When can the world's most famous super-model begin?”

“Why don't you come meet me tomorrow?”

The suddenness struck me. “In New York?”

“Sure. Why not? I’ve got a shoot tomorrow morning until noon, but I'm free after that. And Wednesday night there's a modeling show I’m going to attend. That'll give us a chance to be seen around the town together... get people gossiping.”

That was the first part of my plan. “Okay. Where should I meet you?”

“Come to the Plaza Hotel... on 5th Avenue. I’ll leave a key for you at the desk.”

I figured I could take the shuttle up and be in New York by noon. “Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon.”

“And tell your butler to pack a tux, too,” she added.

“For what?”

“For the show Wednesday night. If you’re going to be my date, you’ll need to look good.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said, knowing I’d pale next to her, no matter what I wore.

"Bye, Jeffie."

“Bye.” I hung up, tingling all over. Jesus! This could actually be fun! Or stupid.

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I spent the rest of that Monday evening making flight reservations and packing. Although I don’t own a tux, per se’, I do own a set of Mess Dress Blues, which is what we Navy personnel wear to formal events in lieu thereof. I wondered if the world’s sexiest super-model want to be seen with a mere Navy Commander. If not, I figured I’d rent a tux in New York.

I left a message for my boss, Captain Faller, and said that I had a family emergency and needed to take leave the rest of the week. Hopefully, my gallivanting around with the world’s most famous supermodel wouldn’t get back to him. “That was some family emergency!” I could hear him saying, if it ever did.

At around midnight, I plopped into bed and let my mind go. Was I doing the right thing? Or was I out-of-my-league? Could I keep Krista from playing me the fool, as Susan had? Or would I be better off taking the money from Krista and getting on with my life? Maybe shopping the video around to the highest bidder was the best thing? Maybe getting involved with Krista wasn’t worth it? But the one overriding thought was this: revenge on Susan was just a small part of it; I really needed to get my kids back. And this could actually accomplish that.

My thoughts turned to Susan. She had known what was going on that entire year and not once had I seen through her. Was I that stupid, or was she that great an actress? And the day she nabbed me-- the hot tears, the pain, the anger-- what a performance that was! Evidently, the legal beagle had missed her true calling. Perhaps she *should* have been a famous actress in Hollywood?

Before drifting off to sleep, I called Susan's work and left this message on her voice mail: "Hi Susan. Listen, I just found out I've got to go on travel tomorrow morning, so I can't pick-up the kids after school tomorrow. I'm not sure how long I'm going to be out of town, but if I get back by Thursday afternoon, I'd like to take the kids, then. I'll call you Wednesday and let you know for sure. Okay, then. Bye." Smart as a whip, I didn't tell Susan I was working on a plan to exact revenge and to reclaim my kids. There was no sense in ruining the surprise I was planning for her; just as she didn't ruin the surprise by telling me that she'd hired Krista to obliterate my life.

# TWENTY SEVEN

Statistically, I know flying is the safest mode of transportation. But during periods of heavy turbulence, statistics provide little comfort, and I hate sitting passively as a passenger, without any control of the yoke and throttle. Whether that qualifies me as a control freak, I don't know. All I know is I'm scared to death of dying in one of those horrible plane crashes. The crash itself doesn't scare me. What does, however, is the thought of having my body parts scooped-up, intermixed with everyone else's in Glad garbage bags, and sent to some high school gymnasium-turned makeshift morgue for reconstruction...

*...Reconstruction--* that's what I fear. All those different body parts, from all those different passengers, laid out on the end-line of a basketball court... waiting to be put back together again. It conjured a sickening image, like some gross, real-life Mr. Potato-Head assembly process, and I could almost hear two of the pathologists in the gym:

*A: Hey man, you got any left legs over there?*

*B: How's this one look?*

*A: Nah, too short. I'm looking for about a 32-inch in-seam. But I can probably get by with a 31 or 33.*

*B: Here's a 33. Maybe you can cut off an inch?*

*A: Yeah, that one looks pretty good. Toss it on over here. I'll see if I can fit it up. Hey, if you need another ear for that one, I got a big bowl of 'em over here. Single lobe or double?*

*B: Whichever.*

*A: Hey! Nice job. That one looks pretty good... you got most of him... except for his penis.*

*B: Yeah. Do you know where we put 'em?*

*A: I don't know. Look over there, behind the elbows.*

*B: I can't find 'em.*

*A: That's okay. I had the same thing happen after TWA 800. Use one of the extra thumbs. For some reason, we're up to our ears in thumbs.*

*B: Like this?*

*A: Yeah... just suture it on. No, the other way. Turn it around... with the fingernail pointed inward. Yeah, like that.*

*B: That looks pretty good to me.*

*A: I'll say! Send in the next of kin and let's get a positive I.D.*

We roared down the runway, and as the plane left earth, I began a slow, silent count: one-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, three-one-thousand until I reached fifteen. A golfing partner had

once told me that after fifteen seconds, a plane had enough altitude to make it back to the runway in case of complete engine failure. True or not, I always felt more secure when I reached fifteen.

As the plane leveled off, I leaned back in my chair, leafed through a National Geographic, and tried to relax. I wasn't worrying that a half-inch of stainless steel separated me from the ground 30,000 feet below. Nor did I worry whether the fuselage riveter had been concentrating on his riveting or *his* blackmailing Au Pair. Unfortunately, I couldn't relax completely. There was always that one nagging question: why couldn't they make the entire plane out of the same material as that indestructible black box?

Statistics won out, as they tend to, and at 10:15 we landed safely at New York's LaGuardia Airport. Now, I was no longer on the safe side of statistics. I had New Yorkers to deal with... and Krista. Unsure which was worse, I hailed a cab and pulled up to The Plaza Hotel forty-five minutes later.

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At hotel registration, the female clerk handed me a message: "Jeffie-- shoot looks like it's going to last all day. Sorry! Come watch if you want. I'll be at 55 West 53<sup>rd</sup> Street, in the Penthouse. Adjö... K--"

"Can I leave my bag with you?"

"Yes, sir. I'll have it taken up to Ms. Porsikovich's room if you'd like."

"Thank you."

“Ms. Porsikovich has a car waiting for you,” the clerk said, motioning toward the hotel's revolving door. A black stretch waited outside.

I nodded. Not bad. The sweet Swede was doing well. I could get used to this. Minutes later, I was riding down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in a style that I never could have dreamed. Life sure could twist and turn on an old video! A week earlier, I was trudging through bitter cold grey snow to my brick rambler, hating life and my prospects for the future. Now, I was in a warm stretch on my way to see my new girlfriend-- the sexiest, most sought-after model on planet earth. That silly platitude is true: when God closes a door, He opens a window. And when you own an X-rated video of the most beautiful supermodel on God's great earth, He sends a stretch.

Fifteen minutes later, the limo driver opened my door in front of 55 West 53<sup>rd</sup> Street. I hesitated as I exited. Was I supposed to tip this man? I offered a five, but he shook his head and smiled. “No, sir. Ms. Porsikovich already took care of me.”

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome, sir.”

Minutes later, I was exiting a high-speed elevator on the 75<sup>th</sup> floor of 55 West 53<sup>rd</sup> Street. Nervously, I knocked on the door to the Penthouse suite. I didn't belong here, I told myself. I was just a 35-year-old Navy Commander.

A tall blonde with thick Norwegian facial features greeted me, "Jeff?" He didn't seem at all friendly and I disliked him immediately. Perhaps he was banging the Swede and felt threatened by me.

I nodded.



"Krista said for you to go in," he said, motioning down a hall that split the Penthouse in two.

"Down here?" I asked, pointing.

He nodded.

Walking down the hall, I heard disco music and enthusiastic shouts of encouragement from up ahead, "Go with it! You're on top of the world! Show me freedom! Fly away little butterfly."

Entering the room, I saw Krista dancing on a raised platform. A huge fan caused her hair and the flowing, flowery dress to dance in the air against the majestic backdrop of the New York City skyline. In front of Krista, a bearded man in jeans and a white, puffy shirt photographed her. The earring in his left ear completed the picture. "Show me love, buttercup!" he implored, snapping a series of shots.

Having forgotten how stunning Krista was in person, I smiled and gave her a quick wave.

She didn't wave back, but seemed to perk up when she saw me... or so the photo-man said. "Yes, wonderful, beautiful. Now show me that sexy side."

Krista flashed her patented naughty face, her lips pursed in invitation, her eyes squinting seductively. It was the same look she'd used to get me and Tony. Unfortunately, he was dead because of the Swede and that look... lucky me had only lost my kids, my house, and most of my money.

"Enrico," Krista whined, "I need a break." She walked toward me as Enrico stopped clicking.

"Hi Jeffie," she said beaming.

"Hi," I answered, unsure of myself.

As if the double-crossing had never happened, she threw her arms around me and hugged me tight. "I missed you."

"Right," I said, easing back, glaring at her in unmistakable disbelief.

She released. "You don't believe me?"

"You seem to be doing pretty well without me."

"That doesn't mean I didn't miss you."

I shrugged. "My phone hasn't been exactly ringing off the hook."

She laughed and turned to the photographer. "Enrico, this is my boyfriend Jeff."

Enrico looked deeply into my eyes... too deeply for my own comfort. "Hello Jeff."

I acknowledged him with a slight nod. He didn't hide his gayness, and I didn't hide my discomfort. I would never understand gay feelings. How could this man photograph such a beautiful girl and be more interested in me? Talk about foreign! Talk about warped!

"How's the shoot going?" I asked him, not knowing what else to say to this man who scared me so.

"Excellent. Your Krista is a doll."

My Krista... how true! "She is," I agreed...*as long as she doesn't have a dirty movie of you!*

"How much more, Enrico?"

"Maybe a half hour."

Krista flashed a pouty look my way. I loved that look two years ago, and I loved it more today. After all, today *I* owned a dirty movie of *her*. She was *my Krista!*

"Do you mind waiting?"

"Heck no, ma'am," I said in my best pig farmer's voice. "I like watching a good lookin' girl get her picture takin'."

She winked at me and returned to the platform. As I waited, I calculated how much money she made on an hourly basis. No lawyer made as much I concluded proudly.

A half hour and approximately \$2,000 in earnings later, she was done.

"Did you meet Lars?" she asked, stepping into a full-length mink.

"You mean the tall, mean man who greeted me at the door?"

"He's not mean."

"Maybe not to you. But I don't think he likes me."

"He's just very protective of me, that's all."

"What exactly does Lars do?"

"He's my bodyguard," she answered, "and my goffer."

I envisioned Lars breaking me in half sometime in the future. "What did you tell Lars about me?"

I told him we were old friends."

"Just friends?" I sounded disappointed.

"Lovers," she clarified.

"So where does that put me in Lars' book? If I put my arm around you, he's not going to break it, is he?"

"He will if I tell him to." She laughed a cute laugh.

"Oh, goodie," I said enthusiastically. "I'm at your mercy again."

"We're at each other's mercy this time... teammates... remember?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Except last time, you didn't tell me you were playing on Susan's team, too."

"This time I promise I'm just on your team."

I hated that I couldn't tell when she was lying. "So, what's next?" I asked, not wanting to go there with the conversation. The less she knew how much I feared her, the better.

"We eat."

"What do super-models eat?"

"Strawberries," she answered grinning mischievously.

"With whipped cream?"

"Too fattening. No more whipped cream... at least not on strawberries." Now, she winked. That got a rise out of Captain Squeaky.

We rode in the black stretch to Fountains, a trendy eatery on Park Avenue set amidst a man-made flowing stream and cascading water fountains. Krista ordered a Caesar salad and a fruit assortment. I ordered a thick, rare rib eye. Dining with the world's most beautiful super-model made me feel like a real man, and somehow, I hoped I'd need the red meat. I felt like I did after that first night with her, when I grilled that big sirloin on the Weber. That seemed like eons ago. Hopefully, today I wasn't quite so naive.

Having never eaten at a restaurant with a supermodel, it took a little while to get used to every eye in the place watching us. "Do people stare at you like this all the time?"

Her head bobbed as she chewed her romaine. "You get used to it after a while."

"Where are all the paparazzi?"

"This place does a good job of keeping them away," Krista explained. "That's why I come here whenever I'm in New York. Why?"

"Because I want my picture taken with you as often as I can."

"Don't worry, Jeff. There'll be enough pictures of the two of us to wallpaper Susan's bedroom."

I smiled and nodded. "Can I flip them off?"

"Who? The paparazzi?"

"Yeah. I want to do something outrageous, something that gets attention. I want to be known as your dark, enigmatic lover. The Johnny Depp/Sean Penn type."

Krista laughed. "You're still silly, Jeff."

"It's easy to be silly when you have an X-rated video of the worlds' top supermodel," I shot back, not mincing words. I liked not having to walk on eggshells. This time around, any respect and kindness around her would be by my own free will. God that felt good!

She didn't respond.

I thought of something else I wanted to tell her. "Oh, make sure Lars protects me, too."

"Why?"

"Because if anything happens to me, that video goes public... my lawyer has instructions in my will."

"Touché', Jeff. You don't miss a thing."

I shrugged. I missed a lot of things... I missed the fact that my wife hired our Swedish Au Pair to entrap me. I missed the fact that Krista lied to me more than she told the truth. "I just want

you to know where I'm coming from. I don't want there to be any misunderstandings. I was yours once, and now you're mine. As long as you understand that, we can both win."

"You know, I don't like your tone," she replied coolly.

"Look," I said eyeing her hard, "from now on, our relationship is pure business. You help me get back at Susan and get my kids back, and you'll get back the video at half the market value." I drew the line deep and clear. I didn't trust her. She'd screw me again if she could get away with it.

She looked at me with disdain. "You know, Jeff, if you're going to act like that I'm not going to play this little game of yours." She said it without reservation.

"It's not a little game," I shot back. "It's my life... and my kids' lives."

"I know that. And I told you I'd help you. But not if you keep acting all bossy... like a blackmailer." As the original blackmailer, she now eyed me hard.

"You mean the way you acted toward me?"

"Oh come on, Jeff, I wasn't so bad. You had fun with me and you know it."

"No, you weren't so bad," I mocked. "Except for double-crossing me and ruining my life you were friggin' great to me..."

"Look, I told you, I couldn't do anything about that. Once Susan had the tape, there wasn't anything else I could do. Right?"

"You could have told me."

"True. But Susan still would have screwed you."

She was right about that.

"I treated you pretty well the whole year," she added.

"I treated you even better," I shot back, remembering all the respect and kindness I had doled out, not to mention the money and all the aggravation.

"I know you did. That's why I'm willing to help you now. But it's not going to be as my blackmailer. It's going to be as my teammate. And if that's not good enough, then maybe you should just go ahead and sell your little video. It's not going to ruin my life." She sounded confident.

Her *laissez-faire* attitude floored me. This wasn't what I expected. Obviously I didn't have the right pressure point or the right amount of pressure. Either that, or she was bluffing. And if I decided to call her bluff, I'd have to lay everything on the line. Unfortunately, that wouldn't get my kids back. It might inflate my bank account, but that was it. And that's not what I wanted. And she knew it. Jesus H. Christ, I couldn't even blackmail her properly!

She sensed my struggle. "It's not quite as easy for you as it was for me, is it?"

I rolled my eyes and shook my head sideways.

"You don't have enough on me," she summed.

I nodded. She was still as sharp as ever.

"Look, like I said, I want to help you, Jeff. Believe me. But I'm not going to help you if you act all tough and bossy with me."

"I wish I could trust you," I replied.

"Maybe I can do something to gain your trust." She licked her lips seductively, reminding me how quickly she could turn on the charm. I guess charm never fatigues.

Captain Squeaky perked up quickly. There was just one problem with that: he didn't need her trust; he just needed her. "Trust takes time. Let's just take things slow and see where they go."

She raised her eyebrows and nodded. "How about if we go back to the hotel and work on things... slowly."

I had to find out what she had in mind. "Okay," I said, capitulating quickly to her charm and beauty. Even now, the Swede held the winning hand. The only difference was that this time, I didn't have to worry about a hidden video camera. In fact, Krista could make as many dirty movies as she wanted.

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Lars held the door and we stepped out of the stretch limo in front of a group of paparazzi lining the entrance to the Plaza Hotel. Krista turned to me and whispered, "If we want people to think we're really a couple, then we better act like it."

"What do you have in mind?"

Krista leaned into me, smiled brightly, and threw her arms around my neck, hugging me tightly. "Kiss me like you did the first time."

My lips found hers and we kissed passionately for the cameras. I hadn't forgotten what a great kisser she was. "It's a good thing I'm so used to being on film with you," I whispered in her ear afterwards.



She laughed for real this time, kissed me on the cheek, and waved to the cameras. Hand-in-hand, we walked inside the hotel lobby... the pig farmer's son and the devil's Au Pair... together again... teammates in a perverted game of revenge.

"Hopefully, those photos will make the Enquirer and Star this week," she said to me in the elevator.

I nodded, certain that Susan read both tabloids.

"I'll have my publicist Marie update the web site with some tidbits about you and me," Krista added.

Once in the room, Krista did everything but throw herself at me, and in that sense, it was like old times. But Krista was different-- less a teenager and more a woman, and I felt like we were actually making love rather than just having great sex. Afterwards, she began to cry.

"Jesus... was I that bad?" I asked, surprised by her tears.

She shook her head. "No. I just feel very happy right now. I feel like I'm doing the right thing... fixing something that I messed up."

I nodded, still wondering whether to trust her. She fooled me once, why not twice? Of course Captain Squeaky didn't care. The famine was over... it was feast time... like old times! Hopefully, she wouldn't screw me... like old times.

# TWENTY EIGHT

We spent the next day in the hotel room, ordered room service, watched movies, and made sweet love. Like a sorcerer, Krista's beauty and charm cast a quick, deep, and irresistible spell that made me hers again. If I wasn't having so much fun, I might have been scared. But the fact is, regardless of what happened in the end, I had little or nothing to lose. It's true-- starting with nothing, you got nothing to lose... right?

In the afternoon, I modeled the Mess Dress uniform that I intended to wear to the Modeling Awards ceremony that night.

"Work it, baby," Krista called out from the bed as I sauntered out of the bathroom. "Show me love, show me your sexy side."

I wobbled side-to-side mechanically like a penguin.

"That's your sexy side?"

"Sorry," I said shrugging. "I always feel like a penguin in a tux."

She grinned.

“What do you think? Is this okay, or should I rent a real tux?”

“I like it. You’ll stand out.”

“Right,” I said doubtfully as I laid down on the bed next to her. “I’ll just look like a penguin with gold stripes on his sleeves.”

“No, you’ll look like the man everyone else wants to be.”

It was hard to disagree with that. Indeed, at the moment, there weren’t too many men on earth who probably didn’t wish they were in my feet... in Krista's hotel room... in Krista’s bed... playing footsies. “You really like me, don’t you?” I asked as I caressed her foot with mine.

“Un-huh. I forgot how comfortable it is being around you, how at ease I feel. I like that.”

Her eyes sparkled.

“You sure you’re not just after the video?”

She shook her head. “Nah. I’ve already seen it.”

I laughed. “Seen it? You stared in it.” I changed the subject. “So, is this awards show going to be on t.v.?”

“No. But the trade shows will be there... *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood*. They’ll do interviews and probably show clips on their shows tomorrow. Why?”

“I’m hoping my boss doesn’t see me with you. I’m supposed to be attending to a family emergency.”

“If he gives you a hard time, tell him I’ll send him an autographed picture.”

I smiled. “That’s okay. I’ll just show him my video.”

Krista's smirk made me regret saying that.

Around six, we dressed for the show. With all the excitement, I'd forgotten to call Susan to let her know I'd be back in time to take the kids tomorrow afternoon. "I need to call Susan," I called out, trying to be heard over the whirl of Krista's blow-dryer.

She looked at me in the mirror. "What?"

I pulled the plug on the blow-dryer. "I need to call Susan," I repeated.

"Oh. Okay. Tell her I said 'hello.'"

I raised my eyebrows as she plugged the blow-dryer back in. In the sitting room of the suite, I punched out my old home phone number and set my mental attitude. This would be my first conversation with Susan since learning what she'd done to me.

"Hello," Susan barked, her voice harried. In the background, I could hear Jenn crying and shouting.

"Susan?" I said concerned.

"What?" she snapped.

"What's wrong with Jenn?"

"She won't eat her carrots and she's mad. Okay?" After a pause, I heard Susan scream out, "Sit down right now and eat your carrots."

I didn't miss that voice. But when Jenn wailed louder, I missed not being there for her. It would have been a lot different if I were there. I would have calmly sat Jenn down, told her to give them a try, and asked her to eat one for me, one for mom, one for Jack, and one for Jesus. Sadly, Susan wasn't like that. Susan was a dictator. Do as I say, or else...

"Did she try them?" I asked.

“No.”

“Can I talk to her?”

“No. You’ll only upset her.”

“She sounds upset already.”

“She’s fine. What do you want?”

“I’ll be home in time to take the kids tomorrow,” I said, getting to the reason for my call.

"Just because you missed your regular day with the kids doesn't mean you can take them a different day. If you're going to miss your weekday with the kids, you need to give me more notice than one night. You can't just... *blah, blah, blah*....

I held the phone away from my ear and let Susan go. Some while later, her voice trailed off. “Can I take the kids tomorrow night?” I asked.

“Didn’t you just hear a word I said?”

*Not really.* “Look, Susan, I left a message on Monday night as soon as I knew I wouldn’t be able to take the kids on Tuesday. That’s the best I could do. Now, I’ll ask again, can I take the kids tomorrow?”

“What time?”

“My flight gets in early, so I can pick them up right after school.”

“Okay.” Click.

Bitch.

Hearing Jenn crying took the cheer out of my mood. My poor kids were living with a monster. At the same time, it convinced me even more that I was doing the right thing. Revenge

would be sweet, but this was for Jack and Jenn more than anything. I knew they'd be happier with me. And although Susan would never admit it, she'd probably be happier if the kids were with me, too. But she could never give them up voluntarily. Superwoman would never voluntarily give up custody of her kids.

Seeing Krista walk out of the bathroom put a smile back on my face. I couldn't imagine a more beautiful woman. Evidently, many millions agreed with me. "Do I look alright?" she asked as she twirled in a sleek black strapless gown.

"Do stars twinkle?"

She lit up even brighter. "How's Susan?"

I rolled my eyes. "Don't ask. God, she's such a bitch."

"Wait 'til she sees you and me on the cover of *The National Enquirer* or on *Entertainment Tonight*. Then you'll see a real bitch."

I nodded, envisioning the image. I couldn't wait to see that day. "You look beautiful."

"We look good together, Commander."

"Thanks." I tried to remember the last time Susan had ever complimented me, but couldn't come up with one.

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As Lars opened the door of the stretch, Krista slid out and waved to the frenzied crowd lining the entrance to Radio City Music Hall. I followed her out, smiling like a man escorting the world's most beautiful woman. The air was saturated with excitement and flashing cameras. My

natural reaction was to turn my head away from the harsh lights, but I remembered Krista's coaching-- "smile and look past the lights"-- and I managed to keep my eyes focused ahead and stay smiling. Although I felt out of place next to Krista, I tried not to think about that. Indeed, the energy from the raucous crowd waving and yelling was amazing, and sent shivers down my spine.

"Krista!" several excited fans yelled out in unison. "Krista!"

She threw a quick wave and priceless smile to them. Then she turned to me. "Take my hand," she whispered.

Smiling, I did as ordered.

I'm about as un-Hollywood as there is, but even I had to admit it was exciting to walk hand-in-hand with the world's top supermodel across a royal red carpet. Half way down the carpet we paused for the official photo. Afterwards, Krista whirled around, taking me with her. I smiled and waved back at the crowd as a hundred more flashes popped off.

"This will make a good photo for the Enquirer," Krista whispered to me as we turned and went inside. A thousand minds probably wondered what she whispered to me.

An usher escorted us to our seats. "Scared?" she asked.

"Overwhelmed."

"You'll get used to it."

"I'm not sure I want to get used to it. This isn't exactly my style."

"I know, Jeff. But don't worry. Just be yourself. With your good looks and sharp wit, you come across well."

I shrugged. "I'm just trying to get my kids back."

“That’s all?” she responded, sounding genuinely disappointed.

“What else is there?”

She raised her eyebrows as if to say ‘her’, and we sat down. [I hoped I wasn't reading too much into things, because that always seemed to get me into trouble].

During the show, Krista received the award for the best newcomer to the modeling world, and during her acceptance speech, made a point to thank me by name, telling everyone she wouldn’t be where she is today if it weren't for me. I wondered if I was stupid to be falling in love with her... again. She wouldn’t screw me twice, would she?

After the show, Nancy O'Dell from *Access Hollywood* corralled Krista for an interview while I stood by her side. “Who’s the Navy hunk?” Nancy asked Krista off camera after the interview.

“Jeff MacDonald,” Krista said, winking. “An old friend.”

I smiled and tried to look brave as Nancy sized me up. She was taller in person than on the t.v.

She winked at me and spoke to Krista, “Just an old friend? Nothing more?”

Krista smiled. “Maybe more.”

“Maybe usually means yes,” Nancy stated. “Come on Krista, give me the scoop.”

“He’s a very dear friend,” Krista clarified as she squeezed my arm like a lover.

“He looks like a keeper,” Nancy injected, continuing to probe.

“Oh, he’s a keeper alright. So you stay away,” Krista teased.



I stood in the background of the two beauties, having never felt so wanted. It was hard to believe that just one week ago, I was sitting on the dirty linoleum kitchen floor of my lonely brick rambler with a bleeding foot, an overflowing garbage can, and thoughts of suicide.

We partied with a group of models until almost three a.m. Once back at the Plaza, we fell asleep in each other's arms. Less than six hours later, I kissed Krista on the forehead, whispered "good-bye", and made my way to the door.

"Bye Jeffie," Krista said groggily.

*Jeffie...* it sounded gay, but I liked the way Krista said it. I waved. "Bye."

"See you Saturday," she added.

I nodded. "Call me when you know what flight you're on." And then I was gone.

# TWENTY NINE

Things were going so well for me... too well. That meant one thing: the flight back to D.C. would crash. It *had* to. That would, I reasoned, make a fitting end to my anti-Gumpian life... wrong place, wrong time... even to the very end. But of course the flight back to Reagan National was uneventful. Unfortunately, for a pessimist like me, the possibility of dying on the drive home loomed large. When that didn't happen, I really began to worry.

Thankfully, Susan was at work when I picked the kids up, so I didn't have to face her or listen to her bitch. [Ah... the simple pleasures of divorced life!]. Jack and Jenn were in good spirits, happy to see me, happy to get away from the dictator they called 'mom.' Because of Jenn's carrot fiasco the night before, I decided to take the kids out for pizza at Suvio's. When I jokingly asked our waitress if we could top our pizza with carrots, she looked at me like I was crazy. "I guess... if you want to... are you sure?"

"It's a family joke," I said shaking my head sideways. "Pepperoni's fine."

Jenn smiled at me, which made me feel good.

“How’s your mom?” I asked while we ate.

“Bad,” Jack shot back.

“I hate her,” Jenn injected quickly.

“Don’t hate,” I said.

“Okay, I despise her.”

I shrugged. “Why do you ‘despise’ her?”

“All she does is make us clean the kitchen and clean our rooms,” Jenn answered.

“Yeah. And she won’t let us watch t.v. on weeknights either. She says we have to study,” Jack added. “She said if we don’t get good grades we won’t get scholarships and we can’t go to college.”

My jaw dropped. Was I that out of the loop? Were second and fifth grades the make-or-break years for college scholarships? God, Susan was warped. “Don’t worry about all that,” I said, trying to comfort the two stressed out grade-schoolers. “Just do your best at school, okay? You don’t need to worry about college or scholarships.”

They shrugged.

“And tonight, I guarantee you can watch t.v. In fact, there’s something I want you to watch.”

“What?” Jack asked.

I smiled proudly. “Me. I’m gonna be on t.v. tonight.”

“Really?” Jenn’s face was lit up with excitement.

“Un-huh.”

“For what?” Jack asked.

“You’ll see,” I said, not wanting to ruin the surprise.

Needless to say, we rushed home after dinner to watch *Access Hollywood*.

“Is that you, daddy?” Jenn asked, when she saw me standing next to Krista.

“Yep. That girl being interviewed there is a friend of mine-- Krista. You probably remember her, she was your babysitter two years ago.”

“I remember her,” Jack shouted excitedly. “She was from Sweden.”

"Oh yeah," Jenn echoed. "I really liked her."

*I did too! Unfortunately, that was why I lost you kids.* I nodded.

“Why is she on t.v.?” Jenn asked.

“She’s a model now. I went to an awards show with her.”

“She's pretty,” Jack said.

*You don't know the half of it, son... if you think she's beautiful there, you should see her in the video with her clothes off!* When the show ended, we went into the bedroom and tried reading books before bed, but my phone wouldn't stop ringing. Evidently, *somebody* saw me with Krista.

“Aren’t you going to answer it?” Jack asked.

“The answering machine can get it. Let’s keep reading.”

“You sure get a lot of calls, daddy,” Jenn remarked, as the calls continued fast and furious.

“Probably just telemarketers,” I said nonchalantly, even though I knew that was wrong. I expected calls from Susan at least, maybe my C.O., and some jealous rugby mates.

After tucking the kids into bed, I reviewed the messages: three from Susan, and one from a reporter with *The Washington Post*. Susan sounded increasingly pissed, and by the third message she was practically ordering me to return her call or she'd call the police. The Post reporter sounded nice, asking if I'd consider being interviewed. As I wrote down her number, I wondered how long it would take for Susan to call back. Before I could make it to the kitchen, the phone rang.

"Hello," I answered.

"What the hell were you doing in New York City with that whore?" Susan was fuming.

I had no intention of talking to her... yet. "Hello," I repeated, faking phone trouble.

"Jeff?"

"Hello?"

"Jeff?"

"Hello?"

"I hear you," Susan said, "Can you hear me?"

"Hello?" I said again before finally hanging up. I chuckled to myself... God, I can be a first-class ass hole. But at least I know that about myself.

I knew my phone would ring as soon as Susan hit her speed dial, and true to form, it did. This time, I let it ring. On the third ring, the answering machine kicked in: "Hi. This is Jeff. I can't come to the phone right now, but leave me a message and I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Thanks. Beeeep."

“Jeff, this is Susan. I don’t know what the hell you’re up to, but you better call me right back if you ever intend to see your kids again. Click.”

Really? If I didn’t call her right back I wouldn’t ever see my kids again?! Out of spite and in my own childish way, I walked down the hall and peeked in on the kids. I didn’t have to call the bitch back in order to see my kids-- they were with me! Retracing my steps back into the kitchen, I poured myself a Jack and Coke, and let Susan stew in the Colonial. Knowing how much she hated not being in control, I knew she’d call back. Looking out my back window, I could almost see the war clouds forming over her Colonial two streets over. Little did she know that she was dealing with a new and improved enemy this time around.

Less than two minutes later, the phone rang again. Now I had a dilemma: pick it up and work Susan up myself, or let the answering machine do the dirty work for me? It was one of life’s good dilemmas. Knowing she’d probably call the cops and say I’d kidnaped the kids or something [after all, it wasn’t my lawful visitation night], I decided to answer. “Hello,” I said heartily.

“Did you get my message?” Susan barked.

I thought about doing the ‘hello, I can’t hear you’ routine again, but decided against it. If you do that too often, people wise up to you. “I just finished reading to the kids,” I answered combatively, reminding myself that this woman entrapped me with our Au Pair, bled me dry for nearly a year, and took my kids from me. “Why?”

“I want to know what the hell you were doing in New York City with that whore.” There was fire and ice in Susan’s voice, as if she expected me to be intimidated.

“What whore?” I responded nonchalantly.

“You know what whore-- Krista.”

“She’s no whore... she’s a *supermodel*.” I said it with unrestrained glee.

“She’s a whore, and you know it.”

“No, she's not. A whore charges money when she fucks you. Krista always fucks me for free. Twice yesterday, in fact.”

“I want to know what you were doing in New York with her.”

“That's none of your business.”

“You said you were going on travel for work.”

“Yeah. So? What’s your point?”

“You shouldn’t lie to me. And you shouldn't miss your night with the kids when you can prevent it.”

*You shouldn't have hired Krista to entrap me.* “Look Susan, what I do with my time, is my business. I have visitation *rights* not requirements. This --”

“You should be spending time with your kids, not some teenage model.”

“This isn’t about who I spend my time with,” I countered. “Oh, and she’s not a teenager anymore... she’s 20 now. All grown up.”

“I want to know what the hell you were doing in New York City with that whore,” Susan insisted.

“I told you, I wasn’t with any whore.”

“All right then... with Krista.”

“She invited me,” I answered. "Said she missed me."

“Right, Jeff. I’m sure.”

I decided to get nasty. “It’s true... said she missed the pleasure of a good, hard, long Jeff MacDonald fuck. Surely you've seen the video showing how great Krista and I are in bed together.” I said it with spite and pride mixed together.

“You’re an asshole.”

“I know. And since you go out of your way telling everyone that, I've decided to act the part. How do you like me now?”

“I hate you. I always hated you. You’re such a nothing...”

“I’m a good father,” I countered.

“Right, Jeff... you just keep telling yourself that.

“It’s true. You know as well as I do that if it were up to the kids, they’d live with me, not you. You know they’d be happier with me. You just won’t admit it.”

“Happier with you? Right, Jeff. Those kids don’t even like going to your house. They say all they ever do is lie around and watch t.v.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I’m sure whatever they do here is better than having carrots shoved down their throats by a dictatorial bitch who uses them to clean-up after herself and tells them they have to get scholarships or they can’t go to college.”

“They need to eat vegetables, keep their rooms clean, and do well in school,” Susan responded, justifying herself.

“Yeah. But they don’t need to stress out about 2<sup>nd</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade.”

“You’re still the same, Jeff... no rules, no discipline. You know absolutely nothing about raising kids, do you?”

“I know they need to be loved and feel loved.”



Susan changed the subject quickly. “Did you forgive Krista for sending me the video and ruining your marriage... and ruining your life?”

I laughed in mock. “She didn’t ruin my life, Susan. You did. And by the way, our marriage was over way before anything happened between Krista and me. If we had any kind of a marriage, I never would have fucked her.”

“Just keep telling yourself that, Jeff.”

“Hey, it wasn’t my fault our 18 year-old Au Pair wanted me and you didn’t. How’s that saying go? If you don’t take care of our husband, somebody else will.”

“I hate you so much,” Susan replied.

“Yeah? So? Is that why you called?”

“I don’t think it’s appropriate for you to go out with the girl you had an affair with.”

“I don’t think it’s appropriate for you to do all the bad things to the kids that you do,” I countered quickly.

“This isn’t about the kids.”

“Then what’s it about? I should be able to go out with anyone I want to.”

“It’s a bad example for the kids,” Susan shot back, momentarily confused.

“I thought you said this wasn’t about the kids. Which is it, Susan? Is it about the kids or isn’t it?” I wanted to sound like an asshole.

“It’s about setting a good example.”

*Did you set a good example when you hired Krista to entrap me?* “Listen up, Miss Legal Beagle Smarty Pants. The fact is, you think everything I do is the wrong thing. I think you’re just mad because Krista still wants me.”

“She doesn’t want you, Jeff. She probably just wants the video back.”

“Really? She didn’t even know I had it. She gave it to *you*, remember? She thought you still had it. But she was somewhat relieved when I told her you gave it to me.”

“Whatever Jeff. She used you once, and she’ll use you again.”

“Oh yeah? I suppose she was using me when she begged me to fuck her twice yesterday, huh? And I suppose she’s visiting me this weekend so she can just use me, right?” I knew that would get a rise out of Susan.

“What do you mean she’s visiting you this weekend?”

“Just what I said. Why? You have a problem with that?”

“You’re not having the kids this weekend if she’s going to be there.”

“Oh yeah? Then you better have a restraining order. Because this is *my weekend* and *I will have those kids*. Mark my words, Counselor.”

“Did she ever tell you why she sent me that tape?” I could tell Susan was fishing, looking to learn whether I knew the truth that she had hired Krista to entrap me.

“Yeah. She said you were a bitch and she wanted to make sure we got divorced. That way she said she could have me.” Touché’, I beamed. I wasn’t ready to let Susan know that I knew she’d hired Krista to entrap me. Better to let her stew and wonder.

“She told you that?”

“No, I’m making all this up. I always told you I had a vivid imagination.”

I heard my call waiting buzz. “Hold on,” I said, “I’ve got another call.”

A reporter from *The Washington Times* called this time, and I took her number and said I’d call back. I clicked back onto the call with Susan.

“Sorry,” I said, not sorry at all, “that was another reporter.”

“For what?”

“They want to interview me.”

“You? Why?”

“Oh, you know... the typical questions: what’s it like to go out with a supermodel? Do we do it doggy style? Does Krista swallow? That kind of thing.” I was laughing my ass off.

“You’re such an asshole.”

“Yes, I know. You said that already. Now, let me say this one last time: Do you have anything new to say, or are you going to repeat everything you’ve already said?”

“Krista just wants that tape back, not you.”

“Whatever,” I conceded. “Face it, you’re just jealous.”

“Jealous? Jealous of what? You going out with a girl that’s young enough to be your daughter? You just can’t find a girl your own age who’ll go out with you.”

Her illogic made me laugh aloud. “So I settled for the goddam most beautiful supermodel on the planet, right? Boo hoo... I have to go out with a 20 year-old supermodel instead of an old hag like my bitchy ex-wife.” Glee saturated my voice.

“You really are an asshole.”

“There you go, repeating yourself again. The truth is, I’m a fucking wild animal when I’m with a real woman. You must know... you've seen the tape. Right? So, is there anything else you want to talk about?”

“I’m not going to let you see the kids as long as you’re going out with the girl who broke-up our marriage.”

*You mean the girl you hired to break-up our marriage.* “Oh yeah? Just try it,” I dared.

“I will. Just wait and see.”

“Ba bye,” I said. Click.

Trembling, I finished the Jack and Coke. That went well, I told myself. Law degree or not, I could hold my own with the super-bitch. I wondered what Susan was thinking and feeling right now. Besides being pissed, she had to be wondering what the hell was happening, what I was up to, what I knew. And that's just what I wanted her to feel and think.

I called Krista.

“Did Susan see us on *Access Hollywood*?” she asked.

“Yeah. She’s threatening to keep the kids from me.”

“Can she do that?”

“She can try. But she’ll lose. My lawyer said I could only lose visitation rights if she proves I’m causing physical, mental, or emotional harm to my kids. He said he didn’t know of any case where a man lost visitation rights because of who he is dating.”

“So she was pretty mad?”

“Mad? Ha. She was spinning like a top.”

“What’d she say?”

“She said I couldn’t find someone my own age to date, and you were just using me.”

“That makes no sense.”

“I know. I got her pretty confused.”

“I still think you should take her to court and let a judge hear what she did to you.”

“Nah. She’ll just deny it. And it would be my word against hers. A judge wouldn’t believe me.”

“What if I testified for you?”

“I don’t want you mixed-up in this any more than you already are.”

“Why not?”

“Because the publicity would be all negative, and you’d be viewed as a home-wrecker.”

“So you’re doing all this to protect me?”

“That, and it’ll be more fun this way, not to mention more effective. I want Susan’s blood to boil every time she sees you and me together... and every time my picture shows up on *Entertainment Tonight*, *The National Enquirer*, and the Style section of the Post.”

“My plane gets in Saturday morning at nine,” Krista said, changing the subject.

“We’ll be there to pick you up. Remember, Jenn has a soccer game at eleven.”

“I know. I can’t wait to see Susan’s face when I show up on the sideline cheering. Bye, Jeffie.”

“Bye, babe. Thanks.” I hung up happy with the way things were moving.

# THIRTY

Date a celebrity, and you become a de facto celebrity yourself. That was the basic premise of my plan... and the beauty. I didn't have to be an actor, a singer, or a model... it was enough that the world's most beautiful supermodel threw herself all over me. By itself, that made me the world's greatest lover, the world's sexiest man, or some combination thereof. Overnight, I'd go from Navy Commander Nobody to one of the world's most intriguing people. Everyone would want to know why Krista Porsikovich dated me-- ME-- when any man in the world was hers. Was it my magnificence in bed? My looks? My sense of humor? Or some combination thereof? Whatever they thought was fine with me... just as long as they didn't know it was my precious X-rated video.

While I was jet-setting with the stars and the rich and famous, Susan would be stuck in D.C. traffic battling forest policy. While I was taking the kids to Hollywood to meet the stars and sit court-side at Laker games, Susan's weekends would be spent stuffing carrots down their throats,

setting limits, and threatening them with chores and scholarship worries. Of course, I wasn't using the kids or trying to be a Disneyland Dad. In truth, I didn't want a life in the spotlight. Susan did. But I would be in the spotlight... and she never would. And I owed it all to her-- for hiring the babysitter to entrap me.

My plan was ingenious. And it would either kill Susan, or drive her mad. Either, was fine with me. Either would get my kids back... as long as Susan didn't kill me or them in the process.

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Surrounded by swarming media, the kids and I waited outside security for the Delta shuttle to taxi to the terminal at Reagan National. Judging by the rowdy crowd, Krista's publicist had done a great job putting out the word that the world's most famous supermodel would be flying into the Nation's capital.

"Why are all these cameras here?" Jenn asked.

"They want to take pictures of Krista," I explained.

Smiling and waving like royalty as she came through security, Krista made a beeline to me, kissing me like a lover, hugging the kids like family. After giving quick interviews to each of the affiliates, and agreeing to a longer, exclusive interview with the Style reporter from the Post later that afternoon at the Red Sage, she hurriedly announced that she had to leave. "I'm sorry I don't have more time," she said smiling, "but I've got a soccer game to attend. Right, Jenn?"

Awestruck, Jenn smiled up at her. "Un-huh."

As we drove away in my newly-leased SAAB 9000 convertible, I felt on top of the world.

“Are you really coming to watch my soccer game?” Jenn called up from the back seat.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Krista answered. “Do you remember when I used to take you to the park to play soccer?”

Jenn nodded.

Several photographers followed us to the soccer field, taking pictures of Krista at the game. This attracted a group of parents, and before long, Krista was posing for pictures and signing autographs for the people who treated me like a leper. Although I searched all over for Susan, she was conspicuously missing, which was actually okay. After all, she could read about it in the Post the next day!

After an appearance at the Tyson’s Corner mall, where Krista shared her make-up secrets with a group of fifty women and several girls, Jenn included, we met the reporter from the Post at the Red Sage. Jack couldn't believe the food was free, Jenn couldn't believe all the questions and pictures, and I couldn't believe this was all really happening. I was sure Susan would go ape-shit when she read the morning Post.

At one point during the interview, Jenn chimed in, asking, "Daddy, is Krista your girlfriend?"

I smiled, but said nothing, letting Krista field the question. "Would that be okay, if he was?" she answered my awestruck 8-year old.

Jenn lit up. "Yeah. I think you're great."

"Then, yes, I'm your father's girlfriend."



As the reporter took down the exchange, I envisioned the write-up in the morning paper... and Susan's reaction. Sweeeet!

"I've got a surprise," Krista announced after the reporter had left.

"What?" Jenn asked.

"We're flying to Disneyworld to shoot a commercial."

The kids lit up. "Really? Can we watch you make it?"

Krista laughed. "Watch me? You and Jack are gonna be in it with me... if that's okay?"

"Wow! That's way okay."

"What about clothes and stuff?" Jack asked.

"Don't worry. They'll have everything you'll need. All we have to do is show up and have fun."

I was sure we could do that.

An hour later, we roared down the runway at National in a private jet with Mickey Mouse painted on the tail. Good-bye D.C. and forty-five degrees, hello Disneyworld and seventy-five degree sunshine. Cameras filmed our every move as we met Mickey and Goofy and the rest of the characters; rode the Matterhorn, Space Mountain, Pirates of the Caribbean; and strolled through the park with smiles as bright as the sun. The day ended with a Parade and tremendous fireworks demonstration on Main Street.

"What a perfect day," I summed as we boarded the private jet back to D.C.

"This was the best day of my life," Jenn yawned.

"Me, too," Jack echoed. "I can't believe they paid us \$1,000 to be in a commercial."

I didn't tell the kids that Krista received \$50,000. "You guys can start a college fund," I said with a wink, "you know, in case you don't get a scholarship."

Both Jack and Jenn laughed.

By midnight, the kids were asleep in their beds, dreaming about the fairytale day. As for me, something told me tomorrow would be even better.

"Thank you," I said to Krista as we relaxed on the couch and sipped Merlot. "You were wonderful today. The kids really had a blast."

"It was fun for me, too. I felt like a real person for a change... not just a piece of meat being filmed."

"You were anything but a piece of meat, today. You were perfect in every way."

She smiled warmly at me. "Really?"

"Really. The kids loved being with you, today. And not just because you're a famous supermodel."

"How do you know?"

"I saw it in their faces. They really like you. You always had a way with them."

"I like your kids. They make me feel real. You, too."

I smiled at her warmly. "You're a much better girlfriend than a blackmailing Au Pair."

"And you're a much better boyfriend than a blackmailee seeking revenge."

Sitting there so happily, I couldn't help but wonder where our relationship was heading. Was I falling into another trap? Was she getting me to lower my guard so she could knock me out a second time? "Are you just pretending because of the tape," I asked finally, "or is this real?"

"What do you think?"

I shook my head in desperation. "God, I can never tell with you, Krista. I want to believe it's real, but I keep thinking back to two years ago. You fooled me then, and to tell you the truth, I'm afraid to let my guard down."

"So just relax and let things happen. You said it would take time... don't press. Enjoy the moment."

I laughed at her advice.

"What?" she asked.

"I enjoyed the moment two years ago, and I got screwed."

"Well maybe this time you're supposed to win."

*Maybe.* "Just don't hurt me again," I said, my voice almost cracking. "That's all I ask. I just want my kids back."

"I won't, Jeff. I swear. Believe me this time. It'll be different."

I found myself at her mercy again. Truly, I needed her more than she needed me. I kissed her on the cheek and turned toward the bedroom. "Let's get some sleep," I said.

"Let's make love," she countered.

The words made Captain Squeaky stir. I decided not to argue. After all, she and I were teammates in my perverted game of revenge.

# THIRTY ONE

Sunday morning is undoubtedly my favorite part of the week. I love sipping freshly ground coffee, making a big breakfast for the kids, and reading the Post. And on this Sunday morning, I especially loved reading the Post. While I normally skip the Style section, I've never skipped it when my picture is plastered on the front page, as it was today. I read the caption: *Supermodel Krista Porsikovich Enjoying Lunch with Falls Church Boyfriend Jeff MacDonald and Kids at the Red Sage*. Above the caption, the kids were laughing, I was smiling, and Krista looked like every man's dream girl. I couldn't wait until Krista and the kids woke so they could see. Mostly, though, I couldn't wait for Susan to read it.

As expected, the article chronicled Krista's meteoric rise up the modeling ladder. Truth be told, I couldn't have cared less about any of that. Rather, I cared what the article said about me. When Krista described me as a "self-less, thoughtful man who kept her grounded", my heart sang.

But my favorite quote was this one: “Jeff is the most passionate, satisfying man I’ve ever known.” Yeehaw! If dating a supermodel was every man’s dream, then I was living some far-off fantasy. This would surely get the phone ringing. Indeed, I could almost see Susan’s teeth clenching and her temples pulsing.

No sooner than finishing the article, the phone did ring. “Hello,” I answered heartily.

“You’re going to die,” Susan said slowly.

“Is that a threat?” I replied coolly, wishing I had hooked a tape recorder up to the phone.

“No. It’s a fact.”

“Everyone’s going to die someday, Counselor. What’s important is how many times we have sex with a supermodel while we’re alive.” Still nursing my first cup of java, my quick morning wit surprised even me.

"You're such an asshole."

"I know. And I owe it all to you. You made this pig farmer's son everything I am today... “the most passionate, satisfying man the world’s most famous supermodel ever knew.” [It hadn’t taken long to commit that quote to memory]. “Now then,” I continued with glee, “to what do I owe the pleasure of your call?”

“Cut the crap. I want to talk to the kids.”

“They’re still sleeping. We got home late from Disney world.”

“You took them to Disney?” Her voice was incredulous.

“Just a quick trip in one of Mickey’s private jets. The kids filmed a commercial with Krista. They used the money they earned to start a college fund in case they don’t get scholarships.” I said it a-matter-of-factly.

“You’re not supposed to take them out of state without informing me first.”

I rolled my eyes. “So sue me, Sue.” Susan hated being called Sue. [“It’s a verb, not a name,” she’d once said. I never cared.]. And now, I wanted to jerk her chain every chance I could. *This was war.*

“I’d rather kill you.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No, it’s another fact.”

“My, my, somebody certainly seems perturbed this morning. Did you perchance see the Style section yet?”

“Fuck you, Jeff.”

“No thanks. My supermodel already did that. Twice.” I laughed.

“I want the kids to call me when they wake up.”

“Aye aye, Captain,” I said sarcastically. “Hold on, let me write them a note... *Kids, call the mean lady known as Mom...* there, got it.”

Before I could hang up, Susan was talking again. “That reminds me. I talked to your C.O. yesterday. I told him you had an affair with Krista when she was our Au Pair, and that you should be kicked out of the Navy for adultery and conduct unbecoming.”

“So? Last time I checked, I was the sexiest, most self-less man on the planet. If I lose my Navy job, I’m sure I’ll be able to find work. According to Krista, sexy, self-less men are hard to

come by. And if I can't find work, then I guess I won't have to pay you all that money I do every month."

"You probably would deny your kids if you could."

"No. I'd deny you... no more new drapes, no more new couches."

"Go to hell, Jeff."

"Been there, done that-- did you forget our eight years of marriage?"

"How could I forget? You ruined my life."

"Maybe so. But not intentionally."

"I want the kids to call me."

"Sure thing, mean lady known as Mom. I'll give 'em the message."

Click. I was almost laughing. What a pleasant way to start the day.

A half hour later, the kids and Krista awoke to the smell of bacon, pancakes, and fresh-cut strawberries... of course. "Take a look at the paper there," I said pointing to the Style section on the table.

"Wow!"

"Holy cow! That's us."

The kids could barely contain themselves as they studied their picture in the newspaper.

"Sit down and have breakfast. I'll read you the article," I said.

"I can't wait to take this to school," Jenn said afterwards.

"Me, too," Jack echoed.

The phone rang incessantly during breakfast. After the third call, I turned off the ringer and let the calls go to the answering machine. I conveniently forgot to tell the kids that Susan called, and I stopped counting after her tenth message. Over the years, I'd learned that a passive-aggressive approach works best with type-A personalities like Susan.

As for Krista and the kids, we lived a second fairytale day, seeing "Cats" at the Kennedy Center, then ice skating at the outdoor rink next to the National Art Gallery. Krista taught the kids, and by the end of the day, they were zooming around the rink like little Swedes. After dinner at Morton's, the fairytale weekend came to an abrupt end, reality set back in, and we drove to Susan's for drop-off. As I pulled into my old driveway, the smell of a nasty confrontation filled the air. "Remember this place?" I said to Krista.

Krista rolled her eyes. "How could I forget?"

We got out of the car and kissed the kids good-bye just as Susan made a beeline for the car.

"Where have you been?" Susan shrieked, mad as a hornet. "You were supposed to have the kids call me this morning."

I hit my palm against my forehead in theatrical fashion. "Oh, geez, that's right. I'm sorry, Susan. I plum forgot." I sounded like a pig farmer's son for her benefit.

"You didn't forget," Susan screamed. "You did it on purpose." Her eyes shifted to Krista. "You whore," she said point-blank.

Krista's eyes lit up. "What did you just call me?" Her tone was hard and fast. No longer was she Susan's little Au Pair.

"You heard me, you little whore."



I intervened as Krista's eyes narrowed and her lips tightened into a war face. I'd never seen this look from her before. "I don't think the kids need to hear this," I said calmly. "Jack, you and Jenn go inside."

Jack and Jenn turned to walk inside, but Susan grabbed their shoulders and stopped them. "No," she shrieked. "They're going to hear this."

Seeing the fear in my kids' faces caused my blood to boil. Whatever she was going to do, Susan had no right to do it in front of them. "Kids," she said, looking down at them, "you should know that your father had sex with Krista when she was your babysitter. That's one of the worst sins in the world. That's why he and I got divorced. He's a bad man. And Krista's a bad girl... a very bad girl."

Although I wasn't sure they understood everything Susan said, the tears welling in their eyes were enough to make me want to kill Susan. "Your mother's not telling you all the facts," I said to the kids calmly. "What happened between your mom and me had nothing to do with you. I've always loved you and I always will. Nothing will ever change that."

Jack and Jenn nodded meekly as tears streamed down their faces.

Susan turned to the kids. "Go inside now and get ready for bed," she ordered. Without waving, Jenn and Jack ran into the house with their backpacks

My heart was in my throat. The kids didn't deserve this. None of it was their fault. With blazing eyes, I looked at Susan and spoke in a low tone, "If you ever do anything like this to those kids again, I swear to God you will never see them again."

“Go to hell,” she scoffed back at me. “I don’t know what the hell you two are up to, but I’m telling you right now, if you keep it up, you’re both going to die. And that’s not a threat, that’s a promise.”

She was falling right into my trap. “Let’s go,” I said, turning to Krista, “before she blows a gasket.” We got into the Saab. “You need some serious counseling, Counselor,” I shouted out the window to Susan as I backed out of the driveway. “Serious fucking counseling,” I yelled as I drove off. I was shaking.

It took a minute and some deep breaths before I regained my composure. “I hope the kids are okay,” I said finally as I turned onto Grove Street.

Krista’s eyes met mine. “Kids are tough. They’ll be okay.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Don’t worry. Things have a way of working out. They know you’re a great dad and you love them. You can see it in their eyes.”

“Thanks.” My mood improved. “You know something?” I asked.

“What?”

“I don’t think Susan likes you anymore,” I said sarcastically.

“I kind of figured that out when she called me a whore.”

I smiled. “You always were quick.”

“I don’t know why she doesn’t like me. I did everything she asked me to do.”

I nodded. “That’s what’s so great about this. She got everything she wanted.”

“Not everything. I think she was hoping you would kill yourself like Tony did.”

“I could never leave those kids alone with her. You know how she treats them.”

"I still can't believe she called me a whore."

I could see Krista remembering the days when her step-father used her as his private whore. If anyone took offense at the label, it was Krista. The fact that Krista had hired herself out to Susan and Abbey didn't matter. Two years ago, she hated men. Today, she was different. At least that's what I hoped. "She's so jealous she can't even think straight."

"Do you think she knows that I told you the truth about what happened?"

"Probably. I mean, why wouldn't you tell me the truth now? But it doesn't really matter. What matters is the fact that you and I are together, and that I'm becoming everything that Susan never could become... all because she used you to set me up."

Krista nodded. "She's put on a lot of weight," Krista remarked.

I smiled. "I think she eats a half gallon of ice cream every time she hears our names or sees our picture."

"If that's true, she'll be as big as the house by next month."

"That, or she'll work herself into a psychotic frenzy before that ever happens. But we better be careful," I added. "That's the second time she's told me I'm dead."

Krista nodded agreement. "You think she's serious?"

"I think she's starting to lose it a bit... seeing you and me together, watching as I become a de facto celebrity. It has to be eating her up... especially knowing that she started all this."

Krista nodded as we pulled into my driveway. "What should we do?"

"For now, nothing. We just need to stay cool and stay alert. I told you this could be dangerous." My words hung in the air inside the Saab and I looked over to see Krista lost in thought. "You okay?"

"I'm just thinking, about this becoming dangerous."

I turned the car off and looked over at Krista. "Are you scared?"

She hesitated to answer my question. "Yes... no... oh, I don't know."

"Now you're starting to sound like a lawyer," I commented, smiling. "Would you do me the favor and explain that to me?"

"Remember when I told you about my step-father?"

I nodded.

"For a long time after that, I didn't care about dying. In fact, if it wasn't for my mom, I probably would have killed myself."

"That which does not kill us makes us stronger," I said, echoing her mom's words.

Krista nodded. "Exactly."

"I'm still not following you," I said. "I mean, I can understand you being scared. Now that you're on top of the world, you've got a lot to lose. Being scared is normal."

Krista nodded.

"What I don't understand is why you wouldn't be scared."

"Because I know I'm doing the right thing," she said calmly. "And I trust you."

I was sure she was speaking the truth. "You think that's wise?" I responded, playing the devil's advocate.

She looked at me confused.

"I trusted you once and you know what happened to me."

"If that happens, then it happens," Krista said matter-of-factly. "But I know one thing, I'd rather die helping you than live and do nothing. I know you won't believe this, but for a long time after I got back to Sweden, I really hated myself when I thought about what was going to happen to you. Part of me wanted to die. I know you probably don't believe that, but it's true. I meant all the things I said in Yellowstone. I really love you."

If the sweet Swede was lying again, I was hooked. God Almighty, she was still as powerful as ever. "I love you, too," I said, leaning over to hug her. "And no matter what happens, I want you to know how much I appreciate you helping me now."

"I'm just sorry I got you into this mess in the first place. It was stupid. I should have told you after Susan knew... I should have done something to help you." She was crying.

"Everyone makes mistakes, Krista. Don't be too hard on yourself. I shouldn't have put myself in that position. I should have divorced Susan a long time before."

"I just hope I can make it up to you." She leaned over and kissed me softly at first, then hard. Once that started, I knew there was no stopping, and soon the windows were fogging.

"You're off to a pretty good start," I commented, pulling away slightly. I felt like a kid in high school, making out in front of the farm house.

Smiling, Krista reached down and began stroking Captain Squeaky. "Someone's excited."

"I think that's the gearshift."

"Then I should see if I can get it in fifth gear," Krista said smartly.

"If anyone can, you can."

She unbuckled my belt. "Have you ever done it in a Saab?"

"No."

"Good."

"Why?"

"Because I want to be your first time."

"I take it you have?"

She winked. "I'm Swedish, remember?"

I smiled.

"I love you, Jeffie."

Sure you do. I'd heard that one before. "I love you, too."

# THIRTY TWO

Krista flew to Paris the next morning and I returned to my desk at the Pentagon. Inside the five-sided building, I was now a full-fledged celebrity. "Hey sexy!" several fellow Navy Commanders greeted me as they passed by in the hall.

I shrugged, maintaining a low-key demeanor. Behind their eyes, I could read their jealous minds: they'd trade places with me in a heartbeat if they could.

When I walked into my office, my secretary Dawn smiled at me devilishly. "Captain Faller wants to see you ASAP," she said.

"Thanks," I said blushing.

"I need you to sign this, too." She thrust a blank piece of paper at me.

"What's this?"

"I want your autograph. Make it out to 'Dawn, my one true love', okay Commander Selfless?" She was laughing.

"Very funny." I signed my name on the paper. "Save it," I added. "It may be worth something someday."

She laughed.

I grabbed a cup of coffee and walked into my boss' office next door. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

Grim-faced, he looked up from the stack of papers in front of him. "Good morning, Commander Bond. I see Muddy-penny gave you my message." He broke into a wide grin.

I smiled with the man I'd known since our Academy days. As a second classman during my plebe year, Craig Faller had ridden me hard that first year. In spite of a three year difference, we became close friends the next year, sharing a love for James Bond films. I could tell he was enjoying my new-found fame as much as I was. "Yes, sir."

"You do know the divorce rate among sailors is going to skyrocket now that everyone thinks they can trade in their Navy wife for a supermodel?"

*Not unless they have an X-rated video of the supermodel.* I chuckled, unsure how to respond.

Captain Faller took on a sober look. "On a more serious note, Jeff, there's something I've got to ask you, and I want you to be perfectly honest with me, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"On Friday, Susan called me, alleging that you engaged in an extramarital affair with Krista while she was a babysitter at your house. Is there any truth to that?"

"I take it, this doesn't fall under the *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* policy, sir?"



Captain Faller smiled. "Not unless Krista's really a man. And after looking at my Sports Illustrated again, I seriously doubt that." But if necessary, I will conduct my own investigation into her sexuality... for the good of the nation, of course."

I smiled again. "Sir, what Susan told you is a complete lie. I never engaged in extramarital relations."

"That's what I hoped you'd say," the Captain said, winking.

I continued, "Our divorce was mutual and uncontested, based solely upon irreconcilable differences," I added. "There was no adultery. The court records will attest to that."

"Good."

"Why, sir?"

"Because the CNO would like to know if you and your supermodel girlfriend would be interested in making some recruiting ads. It wouldn't look too good if you were an adulterer."

I nodded.

"What do you think?"

"I'd have to check with Krista, Captain. But I don't see why she wouldn't do that for me."

"I don't see why not, either. Especially if you're half as good in bed as she made you out to be."

I rolled my eyes as my cheeks reddened. "Sir, if you're asking me to engage in sexual relations with Krista on camera in order to improve recruiting and retention, then I'm afraid I must respectfully decline."

Captain Faller laughed. "You're one of a kind, Jeff."

"I'll take that as a compliment, sir."

"Good. Now get back to work reviewing those General Dynamics' invoices."

"Aye aye, Captain." I turned to leave.

"And call me as soon as you know whether Krista will do the ads. The CNO wants to get these made before that girl comes to her senses and dumps you."

I turned around to face him. "I really doubt that's going to happen, sir."

"I always knew you'd amount to something special, Jeff. But I never thought *this* would be it."

"Thank you, sir."

"One last thing, Jeff. Would you mind getting Krista to autograph my copy of SI?"

I took the magazine he proffered. "I'll see what I can do, sir." I hesitated as a funny thought filled my head. I said it. "Is this going to affect my fitness report?"

"Only if you don't get me the autograph."

I left, wondering what kind of marks I'd receive if I gave him a few frames of the X-rated video.

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Of course Krista was more than glad to help with the Navy ad campaign, and by the time March roared in, the Navy Commander and the Supermodel-- the Pig Farmer's Son and the Devil's Au Pair-- seemed to be everywhere. Our faces adorned the sides of Metro buses, our voices filled the radio airwaves, and a television commercial ran nationwide during sporting events, targeted to

young males with this message: “Join the Navy, see the world, and date a supermodel.” There was no mention of killing people from foreign lands, standing watch on a Destroyer in the middle of the darkened ocean, or running a fire drill on a submarine with a Glad bag over your head to simulate the lack of visibility. All in all, I thought the ads were cheesy, even bordering on untruthfulness. After all, the Navy wasn't why I dated the world's most beautiful supermodel-- the X-rated tape was. But, I guess what recruits don't know, doesn't hurt, right?

I made sure the kids had posters to hang on the walls of their room, even though Susan ripped down anything to do with Krista or me from their walls. But that was okay. I gave them new ones every Tuesday!

# THIRTY THREE

The better my life became-- the more famous I became-- the madder Susan became. And with madness, desperation and self-destruction would surely follow. *That* was the plan. There was just one problem: Susan's madness was beginning to affect Jack and Jenn. And all I could do was sit back and hope they didn't get hurt in the process.

The date was Sunday April 4<sup>th</sup> and I was taking the kids home after another fairytale weekend. We'd spent two glorious days with Krista at Paradise Island in the Bahamas, at one of her shoots. The kids had a blast-- snorkeling with colorful tropical fish, riding wave runners, collecting shells, ordering room service and parasailing. I'd never seen them so happy. But now, as we pulled out of my driveway in Falls Church, I'd never seen them so unhappy. "What's the matter?" I asked.

They both hesitated, as if scared to tell me.

"You can tell me," I added. "I'm your dad."

Jack spoke, "We don't want to live with mom anymore. All she does is tell us how bad you are."

Jenn spoke up, "And she keeps calling Krista a whore." She paused. "Daddy, what's a whore?"

"She says that?"

"Un-huh," Jenn answered.

Jack said, "I'm scared of mom. She has pictures of you and Krista on the wall in her bedroom with bull's-eyes all over them."

"And red X's and the word, 'DIE'," Jenn injected.

I nodded. It was worse than I had thought. "You two don't worry. Everything will be okay. I promise."

"Do we have to go back?" Jenn asked.

When I nodded, Jenn started to cry and Jack quickly joined her. In minutes, they were both inconsolable, and I pulled over and stopped the Saab a few houses away from the Colonial. "I'm sorry," I said, handing them tissues, hating not being able to help them. But for now, that was the case. I couldn't kidnap them. We all just needed to be patient. "Just remember, if something doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger." I didn't know if they'd understand that, but it seemed appropriate. "Everything will work out," I added. "Just try and make the best of it with your mom. Be obedient and try and stay out of her way as much as you can. If you need someone to talk to, you can call me anytime, anyplace, okay? My cell phone is always on."

The kids nodded as they soaked up the tears from their faces.

"Do you want to live with me?" I asked.

Smiles came to their red, wet faces. "And Krista," Jenn chimed in.

I smiled at Jenn. "Krista's just a very good friend. She's not your mom."

"But why can't you marry her? Then she'll be our step-mom, at least."

"That's probably not going to happen," I said. "But I don't want you to worry about that or anything. I promise, one day you'll live with me, okay? For now, just keep your chins up and try not to worry. Everything will work out, I promise."

They nodded, but I wasn't sure they believed me.

I drove down to Susan's and kissed and hugged the kids good-bye. "I love you," I said to each of them.

"I love you, too, Dad."

I drove home wanting to do more. Even though I sensed my plan working, I wondered if it would come to fruition before Susan flipped out and my kids were irreparably harmed. If something didn't happen soon, I'd turn up the heat and force the issue.

# THIRTY FOUR

Nine days later, I was stepping out of a Washington Flyer taxi in front of my small brick rambler, returning from Dulles. Just twenty-four hours earlier, I was in L.A. at the Oscars, walking hand-in-hand down the royal red carpet with the world's most beautiful supermodel smiling for cameras and waving at screaming fans; pressing flesh with the likes of Jack Nicholson, Robert Redford, and Brad Pitt; and pecking the cheeks of Meg Ryan, Sela Ward, and Jennifer Anniston. Although I liked Jennifer's hair better when it was longer, I said nothing. Discretion is the better part of many things, and I decided there was no sense in starting a feud with a fellow celeb. All in all, I was living the life that Susan dreamed. I could only hope that she had watched the splendor on t.v.!

Still, as I handed the cabbie his fare and tip, I couldn't help wonder how many Oscar attendees lived in a three bedroom, one bath brick rambler? "Thanks," I said.

"Thank you, sir."

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It wasn't until I began walking toward the house that I noticed the Saab sitting lower than usual. In fact, the car was almost sitting on the rims. My heart pounded quickly as I walked up to the car. Bending down, I noted a deep slash on the left rear tire wall. Evidently, the other three tires had been slashed as well. Walking around, I noted other damage, too-- a deep screwdriver scratch over the hood, a shattered front windshield, and a lengthwise rip in the soft top. The damage was so extensive that I almost laughed aloud. What a stupid bitch. Did she think I was as stupid?

Rushing into the house, I could only hope that she had played into my hands. Thankfully, my house was in shambles, too-- drawers pulled from chests; contents dumped onto the floor; bookcases wiped clear; cushions tossed about; mattresses askew; and every videotape in the house gone. Obviously, someone had paid a surprise visit, most likely looking for my multi-million dollar video of Krista. When they hadn't found it, they'd had taken out their aggression on the Saab.

Logging onto my computer, I searched for nearly an hour before finding what I suspected. My heart pounded with unfettered excitement as I studied the monitor. What a stupid, wonderful bitch! I may have fallen into her trap years before, but now, she was falling right into *my* trap. God, I love it when a plan comes together!

A part of me wanted to pick-up the phone and drop the bomb on her. But of course I didn't. At most, it would be trespassing, breaking and entering, and destruction of property... flesh wounds at best. With no prior arrests, she'd plea bargain community service and probation. And that's not what I was after. I wanted more. I wanted to go thermonuclear. I wanted the kill. More importantly, I wanted the kids. So for now, in keeping with my passive-aggressive approach, I did



nothing... absolutely positively nothing. I'd have my day in the sun, I told myself. It was just a matter of being patient. At the same time, I sensed things coming to a head. Indeed, tomorrow had all the makings for a wonderful, exciting day!

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By mid-afternoon the next day, the Saab had been towed away for repairs, the house was cleaned up, and I was ready to make my move. Passivity was out. Aggressiveness was in. And Operation 'Take Back the Kids' was ready to get underway. With a surge of confidence, I dialed Susan at the AFPA.

"Susan MacDonald," she answered professionally.

"Susan, it's Jeff."

"What do you want?" she snapped.

"I want to talk to you about the kids."

"What about them?"

"It upsets Jenn when you refer to Krista as a whore, so I want you to stop that."

"Screw you. Jenn should know the truth about you and your little whore."

"So you don't care that it upsets Jenn?"

"What upsets her is the fact that her father's whoring around with a whore." There was no slack in Susan's answer.

"God, you're warped, Susan. She's 8 years-old for God's sake. What happened between us is between us... not Jenn. She doesn't need to be involved. She shouldn't have to hear all those nasty things you say about Krista and me.

"What would you like me to do, Jeff-- make every day a big, happy party for her, like you do? Jenn needs to know that her daddy is a slime-ball and Krista is the whore he fucked."

"Does that mean I should tell Jenn that you payed Krista \$30,000 to entrap me, too?" I asked point-blank, finally letting Susan in on the fact that I knew her dirty secret.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Susan responded nonplused.

I grunted a laugh. "Is that what they teach you in law school? Deny everything?"

No response.

"I'll tell you what, Susan, I'm willing to forgive you. All you have to do is tell me you're sorry."

"I'm not telling you I'm sorry. Ever. You're the one who cheated on me, you fucking asshole."

"Just admit what you did and tell me you're sorry."

"I didn't do anything."

If that's the way she wanted to play, so be it. I let my bomb go. "Look Susan, you can stop playing dumb. Krista told me everything... Monday night at the Oscars... right after I asked her to marry me... right after she said 'yes'." I said it slowly, making sure every word registered. Kablooeey.

"You're marrying her?" Susan erupted, not disappointing me.

“Yeah. Pretty wild, eh? You used her to entrap me, to take my kids and all my money, and now she and I are getting married. I guess I really should be calling to thank you, huh?”

I could almost feel Susan’s temper flaming through the phone line.

“I wanted you to hear it from me, rather than on *Access Hollywood*,” I added.

“You better not be marrying that whore.”

“I told you, she’s not a whore, Susan. She’s my fiancé. F-I-A-N-C-E.” I spelled it out for her just as she’d spelled “meagerly” the day she forced me to sign my life away. It was amazing how the tables had turned.

Silence.

"Now, I'll give you one more chance: tell me you're sorry. S-O-R-R-Y. If you do, you might get an invite to the wedding. There'll be lots of celebrities there. Maybe I can hook you up with some Hollywood masochist who likes bitchy female lawyers."

"Fuck you, asshole."

Her anger had me laughing to myself. It was time for another bomb. “You should also know we’re going to sue for custody of the kids.” Kablooey.

“The only way you’ll get those kids is over my dead body,” Susan barked back. Although she tried to sound confident, I liked the trembling of her voice.

If that’s what it came to, so be it. “Whatever, Sue,” I said, leaving her hanging.

“What makes you think any court would give you custody of the kids?”

“Because it’s in their best interests,” I shot back, using the buzz words my lawyer had told me. “A judge is going to hear how you hired Krista to entrap me, and all about the physical and verbal abuse you inflict on Jack and Jenn.”

“What abuse?”

“You call Krista a whore in front of their faces, you tell them I’m a terrible person, you slap Jenn when she doesn’t eat the shit you feed her, you’ve got pictures of Krista and me plastered all over your walls with bull’s-eyes and the word ‘Die’ written all over them, and the kids are scared to death of you. You’ve pretty much got all the bases covered: mental, physical, and emotional abuse. I’d say that’s enough, wouldn’t you, Sue?”

“Kids *should be* scared of their parents. That’s how you instill discipline.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “No, Sue, that’s how kids become suicidal. You instill discipline through unconditional love and mutual respect.”

“Whatever, Jeff. You’ll never be able to prove anything.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But I intend to try. And I intend to parade as many psychologists and social workers as possible.” I paused to let that sink in. “Isn’t that the way the system works... the more expert witnesses you parade on the stand, the better your chance of winning? As you can probably guess, now that Krista and I are engaged, money is no object. In fact, as we speak, my lawyer’s filing a motion to have a Guardian Ad Litem appointed for the kids. That way they’ll have someone representing them who’s only interest is their best interests. Sound fair?”

“Fuck you, Jeff. You’ll never get away with this.”

“I guess we’ll see won’t we? Either way, I intend to try. And I intend to do everything I can to get those kids away from you and your psychotic behavior. And if that forces you to spend

every dime you have, then so be it. You're the one who deserves to live meagerly. So stand by, bitch."

"I hate you... and your little whore."

I laughed. "Great. I'll tell Krista you said "hello" after we make love tonight."

"Fuck you, Jeff. You're gonna lose... big time."

I sensed fear in her voice, as if she really didn't believe that. I liked my chances. "I guess we'll find out, won't we, Sue?" Click.

As I set the phone down, I was sure Susan was shitting a brick. She had to know the kids would tell the Guardian Ad Litem all the terrible things she said about me and Krista. They'd tell about the pictures and the bullseyes and the threatening words. And she'd know that the kids would say how much they love being with Krista and me. It served the bitch right.

But I didn't gloat for long. It was time for my next precision bombing. I punched out Abbey's home phone number.

"Hello."

"Abbey, it's Jeff MacDonald."

"What do you want?" she shot back, using the identical words as Susan, and even the same arrogant, condescending tone. They really were clones. In fact, I was sure Abbey hated seeing me running around with Krista as much as Susan did.

I let go the bomb. "Krista told me how you set Tony up," I said, not mincing words. "I'm just calling to let you know that Krista and I are going to see Tony's dad tomorrow and tell him what you did. I'm betting he'll stop giving you money from the Mazza store. I'm also betting he'll

file a wrongful death civil suit against you. After that, we're going to see Tony's insurance agent. It's Allstate, right? They'll probably want to know you entrapped Tony and that he committed suicide. Something tells me they'll sue you for the insurance money they wrongfully paid you." Kablooney.

Silence.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she finally managed weakly.

"Whatever."

"You can't prove any of that."

"All I can do is try," I answered nonchalantly. "I will say this though: my lawyer thinks we have a pretty good case. And I also know that if Tony knew the truth about you, I think he would have wanted me to try and prove what happened. So that's what I intend to do... even if it takes the rest of my life. Stand by, because after today your life will never be the same. I guarantee it, you sick bitch." Click.

In my den, I smiled. The two bitches had to be hysterical. Indeed, I would have given almost anything to be a fly on the wall when Abbey called Susan. I could almost hear the conversation...

*"Jeff knows I set Tony up," Abbey would say.*

*"I know. He just called. Krista told him everything. They're engaged."*

*"Engaged? Jesus, are you serious?"*

*"Yeah. He said they're going to sue for custody."*

*"He told me they're going to tell Tony's dad and the insurance company about the video.*

*What are we going to do?"*

*"I don't know."*

*"Shit. I knew we shouldn't--"*

*"Stay calm, Abbey. We haven't broken any laws."*

*"Are you sure? What about insurance fraud?"*

*"Calm down. You're worried about insurance fraud? What about me? I could lose my kids."*

*"We've got to do something, Susan. And quick... tonight."*

*"I know, I know. Don't worry, I'll think of something. Meet me at my house in a half hour."*

*"Okay. Bye."*

The two bitches were backed into a corner with me standing between them and the only way out. They would have to do something. And when they did, I'd be ready. And afterwards, perhaps I'd forgive Susan completely. Forgiveness is always easier after revenge.

# THIRTY FIVE

I picked Krista up from National later that afternoon, and that night, we made love like endangered species. That seemed like an appropriate analogy-- after all, it might be the last time we ever made love. Afterwards, I was so exhausted I wanted to fall into a deep sleep. But, of course, I didn't. Not on this night. If any night deserved my full attention, this one did. The rest of my life, and my kids' lives, depended upon this night. I was sure of that.

As I lay in bed, I looked down on Krista sleeping so beautifully. I'd wrestled with the idea of telling her what I expected to happen on this night, but had decided against it. Although the sweet Swede had done everything and more that I'd asked during the past three months, I wasn't ready to trust her completely. There was still a chance she was just after the tape. Of course I could have been paranoid. But then again, it's not really paranoia if they're really out to get you, right? And once upon a time, the Swede had gotten me, and gotten me good. Today, I wasn't



willing to risk my life, or my kids' future, on her. So I kept quiet. When the shit hit the fan, I'd find out quickly enough where her allegiance lay.

At around one a.m., I logged onto my computer in the den and waited, primed and ready for action. If things happened as I expected, they'd come between two and four. I was both unique and lucky-- not many people know in advance if, when, and where someone is going to try and kill them. But based on my calculations, that was Susan and Abbey's only option. And tonight was their most likely chance.

Around two, I heard the dead bolt on the back door slide and the door eased open. With my heart booming in my chest, I made a single click with the mouse and hurried silently back into the bedroom. "Wake up," I whispered, shaking Krista.

"Huh?"

"Someone's in the house."

"Huh? What? Are you serious?"

I nodded and pulled Krista's naked body down from the bed onto the white rug. Although I didn't expect them to come into the bedroom with guns blazing, I wasn't willing to take the risk and remain in the bed. If nothing else, the sight of the two of us in bed might be the final straw that sent the bitches off. Plus, it might not be Susan and Abbey. They might have hired someone. Then again, even if it were Susan and Abbey, anything was possible. There's no telling what a terrified person will do. That was the obvious downside to my plan.

Soft, slow unmistakable footsteps made their way through the living room, down the hall, and toward the bedroom. I was hyperventilating, hoping I hadn't miscalculated.

"Who do you think it is?" Krista whispered in the dark.

"Susan and Abbey," I whispered back.

"Why?"

"I think they want to kill me."

I heard the hardwood floor in the hallway squeak, then heard it again, this time closer, then the squeaking stopped. Silence filled the house, which was better than the sound of gunshots.

"Stay calm," I whispered to Krista as I squeezed her hand. Although I couldn't see anyone in the darkness, I felt their presence at the bedroom doorway. "Who's there?" I called out, cracking the silence in the house.

"Don't move," a familiar female voice responded from the doorway. "Or I'll shoot."

For the first time in my years, I was happy to hear Susan's voice. My biggest fear was that she might have hired a killer to do her dirty work. That's why I'd sprung everything on her and Abbey earlier in the day-- in one fell swoop-- so they wouldn't have time to plot. I wanted it to be them and me. Now, as long as they didn't get scared and start gunning away, I'd be alright. My plan may have been ingenious, but it couldn't stop bullets.

As Susan's warning trailed off, the overhead light came on. It took a second for my eyes to adjust to the light, but when they did, I looked out from the side of the bed and saw Abbey and Susan in the doorway, dressed in black, like nocturnal cat-women. In their right hands, they held pistols aimed at our bed. I recognized the guns from Tony's collection.

"I said, 'don't move'," Susan repeated, spying us on the floor next to the bed.

"Nobody's moving," I answered, trying to remain calm.

"Bring your hands up where I can see them... slowly."

In super-slow motion, Krista and I brought our hands up and showed our palms.

"Now stand up."

We obeyed, me in shorts and a tee, Krista in her naked splendor.

"What do you want?" I asked, now eye-to-eye, some ten feet away from the two intruders.

"I want you... dead," Susan said directly.

"You'll never get away with it. You'll be the number one suspect."

"I doubt it. I'm out of town with Abbey and the kids at the beach. We checked into our hotel in Rehoboth four hours ago."

My mind engaged. So that's where they went when I saw them leave earlier that afternoon. That made sense. "That's not much of a cover," I shot back. "You know the Bay Bridge has cameras at the tolls... they'll have pictures of your car coming and going."

"I doubt it. We came back the long way, around Wilmington and down 95." Susan seemed proud of herself, as if she'd thought of everything. "And that's the way we're heading back after we're done with you two. By six a.m., we'll be back in our hotel room, waking up with the kids at the beach."

"Who's watching the kids?" I asked. I knew it was a dumb question, but I was buying time.

"Abbey and me."

"The police will still come after you," I said. "Nine times out of ten, it's the ex who kills the ex. It's the OJ legacy," I added.

Susan smiled with eerie confidence. "Then this is the tenth time. Because this time it's going to be the supermodel girlfriend who does it."

A deep chill went through me as I played her words over in my mind. Was Krista a party to their plan again? Had she double-crossed me twice? Was she that good? I glanced over to see Krista staring straight ahead, her expression not giving anything away. “What are you talking about?”

“When the police get here, Krista’s going to tell them you beat her and threatened to kill her. When they see her bloodied, beaten face they’ll agree-- self-defense. The fact that you’ve been blackmailing her with that tape of yours will only add more credibility. Nobody really thinks she’s with you on her own accord.” Susan looked at Krista directly. “That’s a lot better than dying, isn’t it Krista?”

Through my peripheral vision, I watched Krista, waiting for her answer. Even if Krista wasn't a party to the plan, she couldn't have liked her choices. If I weren't so well prepared, I certainly wouldn't have liked mine. The moment of truth was at hand.

“If you kill Jeff, you’re going to have to kill me, too,” Krista responded finally. Her words were bold and true, like something out of a Shakespearian play.

“Oh isn’t that cute,” Susan mocked, “she must really love you, Jeff, because she’s willing to die for you. All I have to say is I hope you two enjoyed yourselves, because now you're both going to die.”

“Now what’s your story gonna be?” I asked.

Susan seemed ready for the improvisation. “You and Krista had a lover’s quarrel, you shot her, set your house on fire, and then killed yourself. That’ll work. We’ll even write a nice suicide note for you.”

“Sounds a bit forced, doesn’t it? Me killing the woman I love, the woman I asked to marry me just a couple days ago? Is that the best you can do?” I sounded almost disappointed.

“I’m willing to take my chances. After all, I’ve got an alibi. Abbey, too.” Susan was smug... too smug.

I’d heard enough. Now it was my time. “You two are getting pretty good at breaking and entering,” I commented. “So how come you didn’t wear those ski masks tonight like you did Monday night after the Oscars?”

As I expected, my words hung in the air, and I enjoyed Susan’s puzzled reaction. Her mind had to be racing wildly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she finally said, reverting to denial.

“Really?” I drew the word out and paused. My eyes locked onto Abbey’s. “You remember, don’t you, Abbey? You two broke in and ransacked my house looking for the video of Krista. Then, when you didn’t find it, you destroyed my car.”

Abbey stayed silent, but I could see the gears in her head whirling.

“Oh come on, you two. You know exactly what I’m talking about. I know about those black ski masks you wore, just like I know everything. If you want, I’ll show you.” I set the hook.

“Show us what?”

“The tape,” I said, reeling slowly.

“What tape?”

“The one from my surveillance system.” The two bitch fish were next to the boat, gasping for air. And except for that gasping, it was so quiet that I could hear their panic set in.

“Bullshit, Jeff. You don’t have any surveillance system.”

“Oh contraire!” I gushed. "A couple weeks ago, after the kids told me about all the pictures and posters in your room with "Die" written on them, I got concerned that you might try something like this, so I had a real expensive system installed. I've got tiny hidden cameras and microphones mounted in every room of my house. You know the ones, don't you? They always advertise them on the Internet. Some people call them Nanny-Cams.”

The room was bursting with eerie silence. I was bursting with unrestrained glee. It’s a great feeling when you’re right and you know you’re right. “Cat got your tongue?” I said jokingly.

I could see the terror in their faces. "You're lying," Susan shot back.

“You wish I was lying. But you know I’m not, don’t you? You know I’ve got you." I could almost see the walls crashing down on the two bitches. “Pretty clever, eh? You two nabbed Tony and me with Krista and a hidden video, and now I'm nabbing you two the same way.” Despite staring at an ex-wife and her sick friend holding loaded guns aimed at me, I gloated.

"You're bluffing. You don't have any surveillance system."

“Oh yeah? Well look right up at that corner,” I said, pointing above the closet molding to my left. “See that tiny black dot... the one about the size of a quarter? That’s a camera. There’s one in every room of the house. Smile and wave. There's a mic up there, too. Can you say, 'Oh shit'?”

Susan walked over to the corner and looked up at the dark lens.

“Is it?” Abbey called out nervously to Susan.

“I can’t tell. It's something.”

“Amazing how small they make cameras, isn’t it? I’d be happy to show you the video output that’s on the web site, if you want. That’s the best part– the output from the cameras is sent to a remote web site that stores a week’s worth of video. You can’t lose it, change it, erase it... nothing. It’s much better than those VCR tapes you used on me. And right now, the web site has everything that’s happened tonight... breaking and entering, trespassing, conspiracy to commit murder, using a handgun while committing a felony. Now correct me if I’m wrong, Counselor, but that’s a minimum five year sentence just for that last one, isn’t it?”

I was sucking the life out of Susan and Abbey and loving every minute of it. Whoever said there is no bigger fool than a calculating woman who miscalculates had it right. At the same time, I knew nobody was more dangerous, either. That meant Krista and I were at real risk. Perhaps I shouldn’t have been so arrogant.

I spoke, “You know Susan, if you want to kill Krista and me, you still can. But if you do, I’m pretty confident you’ll be found guilty of first degree murder. Even if you shoot out every camera, what’s done is done. You broke in, threatened to kill me and Krista, and nothing can change that... no matter what you do. The cameras don’t lie. Kind of makes you wish Virginia wasn’t a death penalty state, doesn’t it?” I paused to let my words sink in. “Your other choices are to start running right now and hope you get away before the cops get here, or cut your losses and surrender peacefully when they do get here.” I looked at my watch and dropped the big nuke. “They should be here in another minute or so.”

"What?" Abbey mouthed, barely audible, visibly shaking.

"As soon as I heard you breaking in, I sent an Emergency message to the security web site. That's the other thing I like about the system: one simple click automatically sends a call to the local police. They guarantee a response within ten minutes." My words were punctuated by the sound of sirens wailing in the night, their pitch and intensity rising as they closed in. "Ah, here they are now," I added smiling, not thinking that my arrogance would come back to bite me.

"Shit Susan!" Abbey cried, horrified. She was shaking. "What do we do?"

Outside the house, I heard the sirens stop and car doors slam shut.

"The game's over, Susan" I said succinctly, expecting her to start crying and fall down to her knees in shame. True to the 50-50-90 rule, I was wrong... and it was too late to factor that into the equation.

"Not yet," Susan answered, training her gun on me, her face filled with deep hatred. Horrified and in disbelief, I looked at the barrel and watched her finger yank back on the trigger in rapid succession-- Pop! Pop! Pop! Oh my God, the bitch was going to kill me in cold blood... on camera. She'd gone over the edge and I was going to die.

Burrowing heat filled my left shoulder and I grabbed myself. My hand was soaked with blood and I felt my legs weaken. I collapsed onto the carpet as I heard Krista screamed out.

From the floor, I heard several more pops echo out. Then Krista toppled down next to me, her chest blanketed in bright red blood. My miscalculation would kill her, too, it appeared.

"Stop!" I heard a male voice shout out from the far end of the hall. I heard Susan and Abbey's guns fall onto the hardwood floor with a thud.

Cold and numb, I looked over at Krista one last time. Her red blood mixing with the white carpet reminded me of the Reddi Wip can, and in my blurring mind I relived my life with Krista.



So this was how it would finally end. At least I would die thinking of her. Then everything went black.

# THIRTY SIX

Filled to the brim with local, national, and international media, court room number two in the Fairfax County District Court House buzzed with whispers and anticipation. What should have been an open-shut case, had been dragging on for almost three weeks. The defense attorneys had argued everything— entrapment, temporary insanity, self-defense, contributory negligence, illegal wiretap, violation of civil rights, *blah, blah, blah*-- in an attempt to win their clients' freedom. But now, the mental masturbation was over and Judgement Day was at hand.

I sat in the first row of the court room, in the place reserved for family members. Directly in front of me, no more than three feet, Susan and Abbey sat, flanked by their attorneys. The two women's heads hung in low shame, as if even they knew they were defeated.

When the door behind the bench opened, the buzz subsided. "All rise," the bailiff called out.

The crowd rose as the Judge, clad in dark robe, black horned rim glasses and shocking white-hair, entered the room and took his seat behind the bench. With his hawk-like nose, he looked like a regal eagle.

“Hear ye, hear ye, the Fairfax District Court is now in session, Judge William Simmons presiding.”

“Be seated,” the Judge announced.

I sat and watched the bailiff exit through a different door behind the bench. A minute later, the door re-opened and twelve now-familiar-faced jurors filed into the court room, taking their accustomed seats in the jury box. I attempted to make eye contact with each of them, seeking an early answer to the coming question. All twelve stared directly ahead, as if following some instruction to do so.

Be patient, I told myself. You've made it this far. There's no way the jury would buy any of that crap that Susan and Abbey's lawyers spewed for the past three weeks. The tapes don't lie. She fired the gun. She tried to kill.

“Ladies and gentleman of the jury,” Judge Simmons said eyeing them, “have you reached a verdict?”

The jury foreman, a rotund, balding middle-aged man, stood promptly. “We have your honor.”

The bailiff retrieved the paper proffered by the foreman and handed it to the judge, who studied it for a moment. I tried to read his face, but it, too, gave nothing away.

The judge spoke, “Would the Defendants please rise.”

The two clones stood in unison. Soon, I figured, they would be sorority sisters in a new club known as the state prison. There's no way they were innocent.

"The bailiff will now read the verdict," Judge Simmons announced, handing the paper to the bailiff.

The court room held its collective breath, and the bailiff read, "In the case of the Commonwealth of Virginia versus Susan B. MacDonald and Abbey M. Bartolucci, criminal case number 12-2248, we the jury find the defendants *guilty* of counts one through five as outlined in the charge sheet ..."

As the bailiff continued reading, I stopped listening. 'Guilty of counts one through five' was enough for me. Based on Virginia's sentencing guidelines that translated into a minimum ten-year sentence for attempted murder and the use of a handgun while committing a felony. In ten years, Jack and Jenn would be in college. Until then, they were mine!

Fighting back tears, I focused my attention on Abbey and Susan. They were whimpering, clinging onto the sleeves of their attorneys to keep from falling to the ground. What a sight! All at once, I felt profound happiness and sorrow. They would reap what they had sowed. Even still, my predominant emotion was pride. I'd fought the devil using her own weapon and won.

Looking at the two convicted criminals, I felt Tony's presence inside the courtroom. I hoped he was seeing this. I hoped he was at peace now. They killed him. And they made me stronger than ever.

Shifting my thoughts to the future, I reminded myself that the sweet Swede had made all this possible. Holding her hand in mine as we watched the drama unfold, I now squeezed three

times in rapid succession-- I-Love-You. She returned our silent signature of affection, turned towards me, and whispered the same words.

I was so engrossed with Krista that I didn't see Susan turn around. "I hate you," she shrieked in a loud squawk.

I startled in time to see her charging at me like an angry, wounded animal. As Susan flung herself over the wood railing that separated us, every camera in the court flashed, capturing her utter and complete madness. I put my hands up to protect myself, but before she reached me, a Fairfax County police officer quickly interceded. In his choke-hold, she kicked and screamed as the bulbs flashed on and on. Jesus! This was perfect... front page material, for sure. I couldn't wait to see the papers. Surely, Susan was getting her fifteen minutes of fame. If she ever again complained about not being famous, I'd just send her a copy of these pictures.

I hugged Krista as another officer applied handcuffs and leg irons to Susan. A minute later, they guided the two women out.

*Ba bye, Susan,* I thought whimsically.

Collecting myself, I walked out of the courtroom with Krista on my arm. A swarming media surrounded us, sticking microphones at us like we'd just won the Super Bowl. It was a victory for every pig farmer's son, I wanted to shout from the granite steps of the courthouse. Instead, I kept my eyes low, my face taut, and said simply, "No comment."

# THIRTY SEVEN

Our catamaran was anchored near the Coast of Norman Island, one of many small islands that make up the U.S. Virgin Islands. Steadying myself on one of the pontoons, I leaped into the crystal clear azure water and found myself surrounded by huge schools of colorful tropical fish. Spying Krista in the midst of this underwater, gliding rainbow, we swam with the school for a while, then I motioned toward an underwater cave. Krista nodded and swam toward the dark opening. I followed. Surfacing some twenty feet into the cave, we pulled off our masks. “Can you believe how big that school was?” I said excitedly.

“It was incredible.”

No, Krista was incredible. The school of fish was merely big and beautiful. “This is so beautiful,” I remarked.

She nodded. “I knew you’d like it here. We had a shoot here last year and I thought of you.”

I leaned toward her and kissed her hard. “I really do love you,” I said.

“I love you, too, Jeff. You know that.”

“Will you marry me?” I asked, my voice breaking up.

Krista’s eyes lit up the cave. “Yes,” she yelled. Her answer echoed off the cave walls:  
yes...yeeees...yeeeeeesss.

“Really?”

“Uh huh. But on one condition.”

“What?”

“In ten years, when I’m done modeling, I want two kids of my own, a dog, two cats, and a house on the beach.”

“Just two?”

“What... kids?”

“No... cats. Of, course, kids.”

“Un-huh. Two girls... with blonde hair and blue eyes.”

“Ten years, huh? Let’s see that’ll put me at 45, almost 46.”

“And I’ll be 30... just approaching my sexual peak.” She was grinning.

“Now that’s a scary thought.”

She nodded. “I know. I can’t wait. You think you’ll be able to handle me?”

“No. But hopefully they’ll have some new super-Viagra drug on the market by then.” I looked deeply into her eyes. “Can we get an Au Pair?”

“Absolutely.”

“Really?”

“Sure. I’m envisioning a mid-western boy, maybe six foot two, 185 pounds, muscular, with washboard abs.”

I laughed and pushed my belly far out. “For a moment there, I thought you were talking about me.”

Her eyes twinkled. “I was.”

I sucked my gut back in. “You know I’d love to be *your* Au Pair.”

“I thought you might.”

“You won’t make me do housework, will you?”

She grinned and shook her head sideways. “The only work you’ll have to do is in the bedroom.”

“That will never be work.”

“Oh, and in the kitchen, too. You don’t mind cooking, do you?”

“I’ll stock up on Reddi Wip and strawberries.” I kissed her again. “Have you ever done it in a cave?”

“No. But I have a feeling I’m about to.”

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That night, on the island of St. John, we dined at a lush tropical bar under a canopy of huge ferns, banana plants, and palmettos. In the treetops, parrots and toucans squawked, and a pair of monkeys played chase, swinging from hanging vines. Off to one side of the open-air bar, a steel



drum band beat out a rhythmic reggae tune. I sipped my strawberry Daiquiri and Krista smiled at me. "Do you like this place?"

I smiled back without a worry in the world. "It's perfect."

"Good. Because you own it."

"Huh?"

"It's your wedding present."

"Huh? Are you serious?"

She was beaming. "Un-huh. I bought it after the trial last month. I was hoping you'd ask me to marry you."

"Does this mean we're going to live here?"

"Part of the year. We'll live in Paris and London, too. As long as you think that'll be okay with Jack and Jenn?"

"Okay? I think that'll be great with Jack and Jenn."

A smiling bartender with dread locks glided toward us. "Ah! Miss Krista, a pleasure as always. Is dis our new boss man?"

Krista smiled at the barkeep, "Ziggy, this is my husband-to-be Jeff. Jeff... Ziggy"

For some reason, I had expected him to be named Iggy. But what the hell! Dreams don't always come true exactly as we expect. "Hi," I said smiling like a man on top of the world.

"Ya mon, good to meet you. How you like dis place?"

"It's heaven." And it was... heaven on earth with the devil's Au Pair all grown up... and with no secret video cameras.