



Being John Bland

A novel by A.J. Church

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One

Like most great ideas, it all started in a bar.

This particular bar was Charlie's. Most of the time there was just the five of us—Randy, Alan, Sandra, Kenny, and myself. The Misfits, as Randy called us, but he had an annoying habit of sticking a title on everything. Despite the fact that he was the closest thing I had to a best friend, I pretty much thought he was full of shit.

We'd gather every Friday night, and after an hour or so of bitching about our bosses and wives and significant others, we'd wax philosophic about our banal world and life in general. There were a few intelligent thoughts bantered about during these drunken soirees, but mostly it was just the alcohol talking. Blowing off steam.

Every now and then, though, someone would actually stumble upon a topic that stirred our blood, and we'd all pounce on it like a pack of ravening wolves. That's how we got to talking about crime, and more particularly, *The Perfect Crime*. It was a subject that mixed well with discontent and beer.

"There's no such thing."

It was Randy who tossed that gauntlet into the ring, and the rest of us wasted no time on premeditation.

"Why do you say that? People get away with murder every day." This from Sandra, a person nearly as ungratified as myself. We often commiserated over the sad state of having a mind in a mindless world.

"Remember what Mickey Rourke said in *Body Heat*: 'If you commit a crime, you got fifty ways you can fuck it up. You think of twenty-five of them, you're a genius, and you ain't no genius.'"

Randy was always quoting movies; they were his bible. He even got close with the voices, which at times was entertainment in itself, if you were into that sort of thing. The invention of the VCR must have been a milestone in his childhood development.

"That's just a movie," Alan countered, unimpressed with the Mickey Rourke imitation. Alan was our pseudo-intellect. He prided himself on being morally and politically liberal about everything. Never mind that half the time he took the unpopular point of view just to stir up trouble. Sandra had once confided to me she thought Alan was really a closet Republican. At times I was inclined to agree, though I kind of liked having him around. At least he kept things interesting. On this particular evening, he was probably the least inebriated of us all, not knowing whether his wife Karen would show up to drive him home.

Randy shrugged. "Life imitates art."

"You know there are thousands of unsolved crimes committed every year."

Randy looked at Sandra. "Yes, but the perpetrators of those crimes eventually get caught, and do you know why?"

"Because they can't stop," I answered quietly. I reached for my beer, not wanting anyone to see how excited I was. They had hit upon my theory, the motivation that had driven me for the past six months. I was torn between joy and terror.

"Exactly," Randy continued. "Know why?"

"Because it feels so good!"

That was Kenny. Everyone laughed as he rolled his eyes and hugged himself. Kenny was as perverse a fellow as I had ever known, a truly warped mind in a sinister body. He should have been born a girl and he was determined to make up for the slight Nature had dealt him. I think we kept Kenny around to justify our own homophobic fears.

Randy glared at him. "No, because they're compulsive."

"Yes, but what if someone committed a crime just once for the hell of it; a random act of violence, say . . . a murder?" I wondered aloud.

"It never works that way," Randy countered.

"So what, you're a criminal psychologist now?" Alan shot back.

Now that they had opened the subject that had been so close to my heart these many months, I was not to be so easily deterred. "Say for instance, you, as an average person, go out and pick a victim completely at random. No motive, no connection to him or her whatsoever. You kill them then leave the body in some obscure place. No one would ever know."

"You are truly sick!" Kenny pretended to be horrified. "I can admire that in a person."

"Hell, stuff like that happens every day," Sandra agreed. "Look at all those babies they find in dumpsters."

Randy was watching me with a look that bordered on indignation—I had stolen his stage—though I wasn't really worried about pissing him off. Pissed off was Randy's natural state. I would have been worried if he wasn't mad, like maybe he was sick or something.

"Why the hell would you want to kill someone you didn't know?" he demanded.

"What about that guy who cut you off on the way over here?" Alan replied.

Randy ignored him, still focused on me. I smiled at him with what I hoped was the right amount of enigmatic innocence.

"As Nietzsche would say, to prove you could do it."

There was a momentary silence around the table during which I wondered if I'd overstepped my bounds. Alan was the first to break the spell.

"Here, drink up, Johnny boy. You're obviously too lucid."

That, as you have no doubt guessed, was me. John Bland—could it get any worse than that? And yes, I suppose I was aiming over their collective heads, but then, I prided myself on staying ahead of the pack. While most people were satisfied with the status quo, I knew there was always a better, more productive way of accomplishing things. I also knew that as soon as I started to slide down the path of least resistance and get comfortable with life the way it was, I'd become just like everyone else, stagnating in the same cesspool of mediocrity from which I was fighting so hard to rise.

Right now, however, I felt my most pressing need was a good dose of self-defense. I hoped I wasn't blushing. To cover up, I took a long swallow of beer and shrugged. Nobody ever believed the truth anyway. "It'd make a great story."

"Why, are you thinking of moonlighting for *The National Enquirer*?"

"Lighten up, Randy," Alan quipped. "Maybe you need another drink, too."

I smiled at Alan, whose face was beginning to take on a Rudolphian glow. Karen better hurry if she was going to salvage any of her evening with the man.

Randy waved off the pitcher and made an unsteady attempt to stand, nearly falling over his chair before threading his way through the tables to the bathroom amid a chorus of jeers. I joined in to cover my own unease, though my palms below the table were sweating.

I suppose I should probably explain the process that had birthed this theory. To put it bluntly, I was bored. I don't know when or how it had happened, but my life had become a tired cliché. I got up every morning at the same time, took the same drive to work in the same nondescript car, did the same pointless job, answered to the same dull-witted people, came home to the same cookie-cutter house, watched the same boring shows on television . . . blah, blah, blah. You get the picture.

Even the occasional bump in the road never provided enough of a distraction to alter the course, and sometimes I found myself almost wishing for a disaster, anything to inject a little variety into my otherwise vanilla existence. But like most closet visionaries, I wasn't strong enough or imaginative enough or, well, courageous enough to actually do anything about it. And that's where my Master Plan came in.

It was simple, actually. Nietzsche really did say it; in fact, he wrote entire volumes about it—the will to power—but I'd be willing to bet he stole it from Dostoevsky, that brilliant, unsavory Russian. I'd been introduced to him by a literature professor in my sophomore year of college and had fallen hopelessly in love. Well, not with him, *per se*; as I have stated, I am terrifyingly heterosexual. But the man *spoke* to me. He toed the line between sanity and madness like no one before or since.

Raskolnikov was his vehicle, but anyone with half a brain knew it was Dostoevsky himself who wondered, just as I wondered, if a man had the strength to overcome his own mediocrity to prove he was not a nobody. Raskolnikov failed; he allowed his own conscience to destroy him, but that's because he didn't plan his crime with enough care. Besides, didn't he know he'd be racked with guilt? That has to be planned as well.

No, my Master Plan held much more merit, not that I'm taking anything away from the Russian master. Believe me, he has my utmost respect. But you just can't leave important details to chance and expect to succeed. For one thing, the victim had to be selected at random—there could be nothing to tie him to his killer. And there could be no motive—not one thing should be taken from the victim. One quick strike, the body cut into pieces, stuffed into so many plastic garbage bags to be thrown away in a dozen anonymous dumpsters scattered throughout the city. It was brilliant. Mad, but brilliant, just like my mentor.

Now, you're probably asking yourself why I would waste so much energy on such a pointless mental diversion. Well, that was the beauty of it—it wouldn't *be* just a diversion. I intended to test it fully. Every detail, every nuance of feeling, of emotion, of sight, touch, and smell would be experienced firsthand. It was the stuff of the six o'clock news.

It was so perfect, and as I have said, so easy. No one believes the truth anymore. After all, who would believe that someone as dull and average as me could pull off the perfect crime? Could murder in cold blood and get away with it? All those clowns at work would hear about it on the news without ever knowing it was me. That I had actually done it and gotten away with it.

The conversation at the table began to drift to more mundane matters, and as my adrenalin level returned to normal, I found myself losing interest in the evening. The others must have felt the same because, after chugging down the remnants of the last pitcher, they started making going-home noises. Karen showed up to claim a now thoroughly-drunken Alan, and after trying unsuccessfully to convince us to accompany him to a local gay bar, Kenny disappeared, followed shortly by the still-pissed-off Randy. I said my own good nights and followed Sandra outside to her car.

"So, you're going home alone?"

She flashed a saccharin smile. "Gee, John, where's Krystal tonight?"

Krystal was my on-again, off-again, mostly neurotic and totally unnecessary girlfriend. I usually tried to stay away from her until I was either too drunk to care or could no longer stand the pleasure of my own company. I truly believe in her feeble brain she thought my hot and cold attitude had something to do with the fact that I might not be ready to marry her, so she didn't push; afraid to push me away. Hard to lose what you don't have.

"Why, you in the mood for a threesome?"

Sandra slugged me. "You're such a shit, you know that?"

I grinned, knowing she wouldn't be saying that if she knew. But she wouldn't know, and that was in itself worth the abuse.

"So does that mean you won't go home with me?"

I knew I'd get slugged again, even though we both knew I didn't mean it. That I was just saying what any normal guy was supposed to say in these situations. I was right. She even managed to find the same spot on my arm.

"You're drunk."

"That was original."

"Fuck you."

"That's what I'm talking about," I shouted as she slammed her car door and screeched out of the parking lot.

I knew she was trying not to smile as she pulled away.

Two

As I have stated, details were essential to the success of my Master Plan, though the acquisition of some required more effort than others. Take the dumpsters, for instance.

It took three hair-pulling encounters with a voice mail labyrinth to get a human being at the Department of Solid Waste who knew what was going on in his own company. Fortunately, I finally found one who didn't speak English like he'd just floated in on a raft; another of the joys of living in Florida. I explained to this paragon of administrative intelligence with straight-faced sincerity that I was a college student doing a paper on refuse disposal and recycling. I should add here that it is very important to include facial expressions when lying, even on the phone, because it makes you *feel* more convincing.

At any rate, after listening to five minutes of this Mr. Alberto's babbling about his daughter Maria who was also attending the university and did I know her—Maria Alberto?—because she had something or other to do with the student government (obviously to follow in her father's footsteps), I finally managed to steer him back to the subject at hand. After all, I was doing this on company time.

"I would like to know what happens to the trash after it's picked up, particularly trash from commercial dumpsters."

"You are a science major, no?"

"Environmental biology." I'd looked it up—it was a genuine field of study.

He laughed—I don't know why—and began to recite what was obviously the company line. "All the trucks come back and dump their refuse in large bins which then are transferred to the incinerator to be burned as fuel for electricity and other important needs. We pride ourselves on the fact that our incinerator offers no adverse effects to the environment."

"How long does this take?" Spare me the propaganda; I once paid for a one-year membership to Greenpeace.

"About two days."

"From the time it's picked up until it's burned?"

"Yes. Two days . . . or three, depending on what time of day the trucks return. We do not allow the garbage to sit around polluting our ground water."

I wondered how many years it had taken to erase Mr. Alberto's social conscience, and if, after all this, his daughter Maria even had one. Ah yes, the future leaders of the world.

"Thank you, Mr. Alberto. You sound like quite an expert. You must have worked there a long time."

"Nineteen years I have worked for the county," he assured me with pride.

Poor schmuck, I thought as I hung up the phone. He'd probably go to his grave thinking he'd done a great service to mankind.

But back to the business at hand. Two to three days, which meant my bags would risk exposure for that amount of time; no problem providing I made sure they were closed tight. I decided I'd better use the heavy duty lawn and garden bags, just in case of bloating. I'd read somewhere that the body swelled up with gases after death, and while I didn't know if that applied to body parts as well, I figured it'd be safer to take no chances. I made a note of that, to be entered into the locked file on my home computer where I kept all my research.

I glanced up and caught sight of my boss, Dickhead Baxter, as he was fondly known, approaching just in time to pretend to be engrossed in my latest assigned mind-fuck until I was sure he had passed. I had just resumed some form of continuity in my thinking when Sandra popped her head over the wall of my cubicle.

"Did you hear about Angela down in Accounting?" Without waiting for an answer, she dipped around the corner and slid into the spare chair in my cubicle. I set down my pen and prepared for the dumping of the latest corporate dirt.

"Angie Cha-Cha-Boombahs?"

Not much of a face, even fewer brains, but her frontal endowments mercifully erased any consideration of these minor flaws. I'd never spoken more than a few words to her myself, although whenever I passed her in the hall she was quick to flash that blank smile she saved for all her loyal subjects. Funny the things that can give one fame.

"What about her?"

"You'll never believe who she caught her husband coming out of El Toro with on Saturday night." Again she didn't wait for me to guess. "Joe Townsend!"

I knew that El Toro was an upscale gay bar popular with the Young and Restless professional crowd. I also knew that Joe Townsend was one of the new managers installed by the latest regime of suits in the front office; a favor to somebody-or-other's wife or nephew or cousin. I'd sooner explain quantum physics to a three-year old than try to decipher the intricacies of corporate nepotism. I'd seen Townsend around a few times, perpetually on his way out to lunch.

"Did they know each other?"

"I guess they do now. Kenny says he's seen Joe in there at least three other times, though you didn't hear that from me. Joe didn't know Kenny worked here, and Kenny didn't want his business getting around."

"Why, is Kenny interested in Joe?"

I found myself becoming fascinated with the conversation despite an unwillingness to be pulled into this sordid rumor-mongering. I hate gossip, though it never failed to amaze me how fast the company grapevine could move. It made email look like the Pony Express. Still, I figured I owed it to myself to delve into any matters connected with the perversions of the human psyche as research for my work.

Sandra pooh-poohed my last question. "They all stick together." "They," as I understood it, meaning gays. I found this comment interesting in light of Sandra's vaunted open-mindedness. "Besides, you know he's seeing Carlos."

"So what is Cha-Cha-Boombahs going to do?"

"I hear she moved out—took the kids and went to her sister's house to stay. She's a wreck. She didn't want anyone to know, but Lily Ramirez lives next door to her, and you know what a big mouth she has. She told everyone in Accounting, and now it's all over the building. I swear, you can't keep a secret in this place."

I thought about that and reminded myself to be more careful with what I said to people from now on, even if they were drunk.

"So, is she here today?"

I suddenly wanted to see her, to witness what effect such a revelation could have on that blank smile. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more obsessed I became with the notion. I even considered trying to talk to her, say something like, "Sorry to hear about your husband," just to see what she might do. Would she still offer that mindless smile and thank me, or would she just slap me in the face and burst into tears?

Interesting.

"Yes, believe it or not," Sandra was saying. "I'd be too embarrassed to come to work after that, especially knowing that everyone knows. It's a shame, too, because her husband is gorgeous."

"Obviously Joe Townsend thought so."

Didn't Angie usually eat downstairs in the company cafeteria? I wondered if she would be brave enough to show her face in there today. After all, she had come to work.

"What are you doing for lunch today?"

One thing I liked about Sandra was the ease with which she shifted gears. I preferred to think it was because her mind worked very similarly to my own—perpetual motion. "I don't know—probably just grab a bite in the cafeteria. Why?" She skewered me with a narrow-eyed glance as the lightbulb went on in her head. "You really are a shit."

* * *

I never got a chance to confront Angie Cha-Cha-Boombahs at lunch; her courage had deserted her about the same time Sandra was illuminating me to her predicament. Of course, that just left everyone more free to talk about her, which we did as if it was our sworn duty. After all, such subjects don't often avail themselves to our insightful scrutiny.

Inevitably, the whole thing turned into a dirty joke; it was the only way most of us guys could respond to it. I noticed Kenny was conspicuously absent from the gathering.

I can assure you my interest was purely clinical. I felt no need to pass judgement on the unsavory implications of the act, only to be present while those around me did so. I'd like to say their reactions were enlightening, when in fact they were, at best, tolerable. Human nature being what it is, I suppose I could really hope for little more.

It took us just over half an hour to exhaust the subject, and we would have been done with it entirely had new people not kept dropping by the table to stir the pot. Mark Daniels was the most prosaic of these. Personally, I had no use for the man; one of those holier-than-thou types who thinks he knows everything. Add to that politics that ran to right-wing extremism—I wouldn't be surprised to find a white hood in the back of his closet—and you had the makings of a first-class asshole. But as he and Alan were a volatile combination, I found a certain entertainment value in the match-up.

"What do you think, Mark?" I ventured. "If they were actually in love—not Joe Townsend and Angie's husband, but gays in general—do you think they should be allowed to marry?"

Sandra kicked me under the table. It was like setting the cocks loose in the ring. Mark didn't disappoint me.

"People like that are sick. They belong in an institution, or worse."

"Give me a break," Alan shot back. "They're human beings, just like us. Of course, maybe not like you."

"I'm more of a human being than you are if you support that kind of deviant behavior. The Bible says--"

"Don't start preaching to us, Mark. And, in case you've forgotten, there were whores and homosexuals and murderers and thieves in the Bible, too."

"Yes, as examples of how *not* to behave. The moral fiber of this country is being destroyed by sex."

"A little frustration talking there?" Sandra needled. "The wife out of town again?"

"There—you see? That's exactly what I'm talking about. Everything is a dirty joke with you people. Not one of you has a shred of moral fiber."

"I suppose we should all emulate you as our moral compass," Randy pressed.

I loved to watch them in action. They would pick away mercilessly at a quarry until they had him on the ropes, then gang up for the kill. Those who survived were welcomed back; the rest stayed away until the memory had faded. Obviously, Mark had forgotten his last encounter; his self-respect was in imminent jeopardy. I couldn't resist prolonging the ordeal.

"So what would you offer as an alternative? Say you're president for the day, how would you restore the moral fiber of society?"

Alan snickered at me from across the table. "You're an evil son of a bitch," he muttered under his breath. If he only knew.

"Well, since you asked." As if we actually cared, but he forged ahead anyway. "I'd ban all this sex and violence on our televisions and at the movies. Then I would outlaw homosexuality and--"

Here it comes—I could feel it. Sandra's trigger. Everyone has one—that pet peeve that sets their teeth on edge. Those of us who knew Sandra knew better than to even broach the subject, and now Mark was stumbling into it headlong. It couldn't have been planned any better.

"--abortion."

Yes! Target acquired. I could have sworn I saw the hair on the back of her neck rise. Mark had sealed his fate.

"You fucking pig!" she snarled, slamming her fist on the table. "What right have you to say anything about abortion? You're not a woman! You make me sick! You call yourselves humanists, and yet you bomb abortion clinics and kill innocent people to save a fetus that doesn't even have a soul yet!"

Oh, this was even better than I had hoped. Now she had brought religion into it too, and as everyone knew, Mark was a diehard Southern Baptist.

"How do you know the fetus has no soul?"

"How do you know it does?" she shot back.

They both had raised their voices so everyone in the cafeteria had stopped their own conversations to listen to ours. I glanced at Alan and Randy; their eyes had glazed over like two kids on Christmas morning.

"You're just like them—a heathen."

"Heathen? I'll have you know I'm a better Catholic than you'll ever be a Baptist, you hypocritical son of a bitch! Don't you dare accuse me of being a heathen!"

"Well, you're certainly no Catholic if you believe in that!"

She shoved her finger in Mark's chest, nearly pushing him back over his chair. "Don't you preach morals to me, you little worm!"

Somewhere in the hallway the factory bell had rung to signal the end of the lunch hour, but no one in the cafeteria seemed to have heard it. The two adversaries stood across from each other at the table, teeth barred, ready to pounce on the other's jugular. The tension was ecstatic; I could barely breathe. We were all salivating for the inevitable final blow.

Mark glanced around the table; everyone was watching him, and I could see in his eyes the moment he realized he was in over his head. His only hope was to save face and live to fight another day, preferably with a more merciful, or at least, sympathetic crowd.

"Well, I have a meeting to go to." And like that he was gone. *Impactus interruptous*. Randy sighed, crestfallen.

"Chickenshit."

"Well, time to get back to work," Alan announced. We had forgotten all about little Angie Cha-Cha-Boombahs.

Three

I wanted the best money could buy, so I went to the best store: Jacob's Sporting Goods, family owned and operated since 1934. There wasn't much of a crowd so I had the salesman's undivided attention.

"I'd like to look at your hunting knives. I want something strong—you know, something that can cut through bone."

The salesman, James, didn't seem at all surprised by this request. He probably heard stuff like that everyday. He produced a large ring of keys from behind the counter and unlocked the display case, pulling out a tray of knives.

They were magnificent, all of them. One in particular stood out, a thick, cruel-looking blade with a plain black handle. James intercepted my gaze and picked up the knife.

"This is our best knife—one piece construction, twelve-inch blade, serrated edge, forged steel handle. Perfectly balanced." He shifted it in his hand as if to demonstrate how a knife could be perfectly balanced. "Would you like to take a look at it?"

I hoped my palms weren't sweating as I accepted the weapon from him. It was heavier than it looked, and well . . . perfectly balanced. I touched my finger to the blade. A sound like steam escaped the salesman's lips.

"Careful there, it's very sharp. It has a perpetual edge."

"Never needs sharpening?" I asked, as if I would be using it for many years.

"Well, of course it will, but it holds an edge extremely well."

I turned it over in my hand; I liked the feel of the handle. It was thick and sturdy, without any decorative carvings. No cracks or crevices where blood could hide.

"Yes, it's easy to clean," he agreed, interpreting my gaze. "Just exactly what is it you'll be hunting?"

"Hmm? Oh . . . deer, mostly." I watched his expression from beneath my lids, hoping this was what he wanted to hear. He didn't bat an eye, and I was thankful I had come to a sporting goods store instead of a culinary supplier as I originally had planned.

"Well, this knife would be perfect for deer. It would slice through the hide without a problem, as well as cartilage, and the serrated edge should take care of all but the biggest bones." He glanced down at the tray. "Of course, if you can't spend that much, we have some less expensive pieces."

I noticed the little tag dangling from the handle, wondering if I could deduct the price from my taxes as a business expense. Research—I almost laughed.

"No, I'll take this one. My father taught me to always use the best tools available."

"Your father was a very wise man," James the Salesman replied, his eyes dancing with visions of the commission he would make.

What James didn't know was that crap about my father was just whitewash. The only thing I knew about my old man was that he was some loser beach bum from Australia that my mom had hooked up with in California during one of the many drunken binges of her "wild and impetuous youth," as she liked to call it. He'd run off before I was born, which was just fine with me; one less guilt trip in my life. I hadn't seen the ol' lady herself in over five years, not since my grandmother's funeral. I still got a Christmas card from her every year, though. I guess old habits die hard.

I waited patiently while James located the proper box for the knife, listening to his rendition of a hunting trip he had once taken with his own father. Like most of his breed, he had grown more chummy now that the sale was a reality. Another five minutes and we'd be best buddies.

"If you'll just follow me to the register up front," he said now, carrying the knife himself. Did he take me for a common thief? Oh well, times being what they were, I guess I couldn't fault him. After all, one can never tell from appearances.

* * *

Once safely back in my own home, I unwrapped the knife and took a better look at it. Yes, it was more than adequate. I felt a little sad that I wouldn't be able to keep it, but using it would be a supreme pleasure.

I thought about that for awhile, about what I intended to do with the knife. I visualized plunging it into the flesh of a man—I had already determined it would be a man. People tended to become more unreasonable when women and children turn up missing, whereas they almost expect a man to develop wanderlust and vanish without a trace.

I wondered if I would be able to do it when the time came. Could I stick that blade into a man and hack off his arms and legs like a Sunday chicken? The thought had really started to bother me. So much so that I had begun to practice. Not on people, but meat. I started to buy my meat whole from a butcher so I could bring it home and carve it myself. I learned just the right places to cut between the joints, how to slice with the grain of the muscle, how to sever cleanly instead of tearing the tissue.

Even I would admit this all sounded kind of gruesome, but I knew it was important that I consider these things. I had to be prepared because there would be no time for delays once the wheels were set in motion. I'd hate to be forced to leave the job half done, because all that would prove was that I was just another bumbling fool, and God knows there already were enough of them running around.

I had just decided to go buy an big slab of ribs to break in my new knife when the doorbell rang. Great, I was in no mood for unexpected company. I wrapped the knife in a clean towel and tucked it in the back of my desk drawer before answering the door.

"Johnny! Are you surprised to see me?"

Surprised was not the word that came to mind. I could do nothing but gape in silent rage as Krystal pecked me on the cheek and swept into the house like a conquering queen. She was carrying a brown paper bag that smelled like food.

"I brought us dinner."

I followed helplessly as she made her way to the kitchen. Dinner?

"Did we have plans?"

She was already combing through the cabinets for plates. "No, that's the beauty of it." She turned to me, her face scrunched into that little chipmunk smile she persisted in thinking was so irresistible. I could have strangled her right then, and to be honest, my mind was racing to think of a way out of the whole unpleasant predicament. Dinner with Krystal was not the way I wanted to spend my evening.

"I did all of this out of the goodness of my heart. Aren't you lucky?"

She went back to her foraging as if I weren't there, all the while continuing her mindless babbling.

"I suddenly realized we hadn't seen each other in ages, and I know how involved you get in your work. You probably felt too embarrassed to call me after ignoring me for so long, so I saved you the trouble. Male pride and all that--" she turned to me, pausing for air, "but one of us has to be willing to give in. Really, I don't mind. You just go sit down and let Krystal take care of everything. I promise I won't be a minute. Have you got any wine? If not, it's no big deal, I just thought wine would be nice. I should have thought of it before now, but I was so excited about surprising you I guess it just slipped my mind."

Listening to Krystal always made me feel like I'd just been shocked into a catatonic state. I glanced at the desk drawer and the image that crossed my mind almost made me smile, but no, I wouldn't let even Krystal interfere with my plans.

"Why are you here?" I finally managed to sputter.

She stopped and turned to me, and I could tell the tears were just over the horizon. "What do you mean? I'm here because I love you. I brought you dinner."

"I already ate," I lied.

She stood there like one of those old-fashioned dunking ducks people used to sit in the window next to a glass of water; should I drink or should I stand? I should have said something sympathetic then, but I didn't feel like it. I felt like hurting her, like making her cry and watching her run from the house, hopefully never to return, though I knew she would. She always did. It was as if she actually liked the abuse; ate it up like candy. I suppose that said something about her childhood, though I didn't care enough to worry about what further damage I might be doing to her psyche. It seemed the nastier I was to her, the more she loved me. How could she ever expect me to care about her?

"Why are you doing this?" she sobbed now.

I shrugged. "I told you, I already ate. Maybe you could save it for tomorrow—take it to work for lunch or something."

"But it's your favorite."

I didn't remember having a favorite. I certainly didn't remember telling her about it. Even now I wondered how I had ever gotten involved with this woman. We were complete opposites. As I recall, we somehow fell into bed together one night after a party at someone's house. I was drunk—very drunk—and she practically threw herself at me. I realize that doesn't excuse it—I'm not an oaf. I am sensitive to women's rights in these things. But I wasn't the one who continued the liaison. She somehow got my phone number and kept calling me. She got lucky one night and caught me drunk again, and well, things just sort of snowballed from there. After that, I began staying away from home when I was that drunk, just in case my libido overcame my common sense, but by that time it was too late. Like a wood tick, Krystal was firmly entrenched.

She did hold one weapon over me—she knew I was at least enough of a man to need sex occasionally, even with someone I didn't care about. But I didn't even like Krystal a little bit. I could only tolerate her when I was drinking—a lot—and then only in small doses.

Oh sure, she was good-looking, in a pixie-ish, kewpie doll sort of way. And everyone else seemed to think she was just as sweet as molasses in January or one of those old wives' clichés, and that I was a total jerk for the way I treated her, but I didn't give a damn about what they thought. Let them date her.

For the moment, however, she was my problem, and I had to find a way to get rid of her. She had begun to cry in earnest.

"Why are you so mean?" she sniffled. "I came over here trying to surprise you, to do something special for you--"

"I don't like surprises."

That shut her up for a nanosecond. "But . . . I thought everyone liked surprises. I do."

"I'm not everyone, Krystal, and I'm certainly not you."

I turned away from her and crossed to my desk, fully intending to sit down and start working again. She could either stay or leave, but I wasn't giving her the satisfaction of my attention.

I have to admit, what she did next totally surprised me. In fact, I almost respected her as a person for that one moment. Of course, it was a short-lived phenomenon, sort of like temporary insanity.

She marched back into the kitchen and shoved the entire dinner, plates and all, onto the floor. It landed on the tile with a thundering crash.

"I hate you!" she screamed, running from the house. "I hope I never see you again!"

I stared at the mess for several minutes, letting the proportion of the episode sink into my head. The most tragic part about the whole thing, other than the disaster on the floor, was that she didn't mean it. I knew she'd be calling to apologize before the night was through. I had half a mind to unplug the phone and leave the house, but that would have meant letting her win. Besides, I had work to do.

* * *

It took the better part of an hour to clean up the mess in the kitchen, which gave me time to do some much-needed brainstorming about my Master Plan. I had made a list of some thirty dumpsters around the city and had started staking them out to determine when they were emptied. Most were on a twice-a-week schedule, similar to that of residential pick-ups. That gave me two to three days a week per dumpster from which to choose.

Like everything else in my Master Plan, these details were important to my success. I had decided on one of five days—Sunday through Thursday. Fridays and Saturdays were too risky; there were too many people running around at all hours of the day and night, so those two days were quickly eliminated from the equation. Besides, there was no trash pick-up on Sundays, which would leave the dumpsters full an extra day.

I also decided it should be raining, and the harder, the better. Rain would wash away any evidence—blood, tire tracks, footprints. It would also make the wearing of a plastic raincoat less conspicuous, and the raincoat was necessary to keep the blood off my clothes.

The time was another consideration. After driving around at various times of the night, I had settled on the hours of midnight to two a.m.—late enough to eliminate unnecessary witnesses but not too late to appear suspicious.

With these decisions made, the next job was to complete my stake-out of the dumpsters, pick an area where the killing and dismembering could be safely carried out, and plan the method of death, a detail that had given me no end of sleepless nights.

Guns had been eliminated from the start—too easy to trace, too noisy, and too impersonal. Any fool could kill someone with a gun. Hell, even three-year-old kids were doing it. Stabbing had the advantage of being quiet, but it was messy. And what if the victim didn't die right away? What if it took several tries? Would I have the strength and the stomach to continue? No, there was too much risk there.

I finally settled on strangulation, and my weapon would be a guitar string. One nice, neat tug across the jugular. I found a pair of heavy duty leather gloves in the gardening department of a local hardware store to protect my hands from the string. Of course I knew I would have to pick someone I felt I could overpower on the first try, since I was pretty sure I wouldn't get a second chance.

There was another important reason for choosing this method, and once I thought about it, I had to admit it was the only way it could be done. To choke the life out of another human being with my bare hands would be the ultimate display of power, an accomplishment that would absolutely confirm my superiority.

I was enjoying a satisfying chew on these details when the phone rang. Not Krystal already? I checked the caller id and blew out a sigh.

"Randy? What's up?"

"What are you doing right now?"

I glanced at the kitchen floor, finally restored to order. "It's a long story."

"Yeah, I can guess. Barbara's been on the phone with Krystal for the last twenty minutes. I think you'd better lay low for awhile."

I remembered then; the party had been at Randy's house. Krystal was a friend of Randy's girlfriend.

"I'm screening my calls."

"Not good enough. Get your ass out of there and meet me at Charlie's."

"What about Barbara?"

"I'll pick a fight. I don't feel like sitting here listening to her bitch at me for your stupidity anyway. We'll shoot some pool and get shit-faced."

It wasn't what I had in mind, but it was better than dealing with a female posse.

Four

Randy had given up on the pool table and the shots and just asked Charlie for the whole damn bottle. He wasn't kidding when he suggested we get shit-faced. At this rate, we'd need a wheelbarrow to get home.

He'd been pissed at me at first; he'd ordered some skin flick pay-per-view and iced a bottle of champagne, hoping for a little private porn show. Things were just getting warmed up when Krystal called.

"There's no way I'd get into bed with her the way she's feeling right now," he slurred, shaking his head. "No telling what I'd lose."

"Tracherous," I agreed. "We're better off without 'em." I reached for the bottle, draining it into my glass. Charlie eyed us both behind a nasty stump of cigar and shook his head.

"Well, hiding in a bottle's one solution. Then again, you could do something 'bout it, like this guy over in Lauderdale. All he wanted was to be left alone on a Sunday afternoon to watch the Dolphins game, but his ol' lady hid the remote from him."

"That's cold."

"I know, can you believe it? Know what her excuse was? She wanted him to trim the orange tree next to their house, something about it getting so big the branches were growing through the kitchen window.

"Anyway, the guy knows she's not going to let him watch the game till he gets it done, so he goes out there and starts whacking off branches and feeding 'em into the chipper, and he gets himself this idea. He calls his wife out there to show her what he done, and when she comes around the corner, he conks her over the head with a shovel and starts hacking off her arms and legs with the chain saw and feeding 'em into the chipper. I mean, can you imagine the mess that made?"

"Yuck," Randy burped.

"Exactly. Apparently one of the neighbors heard the racket and called the cops, cause you can bet she didn't go quiet-like--"

"They never do."

"Right, so anyway, the guy finishes his business and heads back inside to finally watch the game in peace. He'd just settled back in his favorite chair with a cold one and his remote when the cops showed up. He never did get to watch the game."

We were both respectfully quiet, as though offering a moment of silence for the man's loss. Finally Randy looked up from his glass and asked with dead seriousness, "They at least let him keep the remote?"

I wanted to laugh, but I was afraid of how it might look until Charlie laid back his head and erupted with a hearty bellow that was too contagious to deny. Pretty soon people who didn't even know why were joining in the frivolity.

"You ever think about doin' something like that?" Charlie asked Randy when the merriment had ebbed. I noticed he didn't ask me, which was probably for the best, since I'm not much of a liar when I'm drinking.

"I don't even own a chipper," Randy protested, looking at me for confirmation.

"He's telling the truth. I don't even think he has a weed whacker."

Charlie had to think about that one for a minute. "Hard to kill someone with a weed whacker, though I knew a guy who ran over his cat with a lawnmower. Wasn't a pretty sight."

The couple sitting next to us at the bar had taken that as their cue to leave. Charlie gathered their glasses and shrugged. "Lousy tippers anyway."

I must admit, I was feeling slightly schizophrenic about the conversation. On the one hand, the subject provided an outlet for my own subversive turn of mind, but I was afraid too much encouragement would expose feelings I preferred to keep to myself.

Charlie had turned his beady eyes on me, chewing away at the ragged butt in his mouth. "What about you? You ever feel like killin' anyone?"

I hoped my face didn't betray me. "Passion isn't a good enough reason to commit murder."

Charlie chuckled. "Hell, boy, it's the best reason. The only reason. I remember the first time my daddy took me hunting. Had that deer lined up right in my sights, but I couldn't pull the trigger. My daddy didn't speak to me for a week; had to beg him to take me with him the next time he went out. This raccoon got into our camp the first night, tore up everything we had. I was the first one up, caught the son of a bitch red-handed. I was so pissed I chased him down to the river and blew his fucking brains out all over the shore. My daddy dressed him out, saved me the tail. I still got it."

Randy looked like he was going to be sick. "You're a morbid son of a bitch," he muttered, sliding off the stool and feeling his way to the john. We both watched him go, following his progress until he disappeared behind the scarred door that said STEERS. Charlie once had painted COWS on the other door, raising a groundswell of protest from the female clientele. One even relayed the slur to the entertainment reporter with the local paper, who made mention of it in her weekly column. While the woman's intent had been to punish him, the publicity had actually been good for business. Charlie finally gave in to pressure and changed the sign to WOMEN, but time had worn through the paint until you could see the outline of the old letters. Charlie liked to say it was symbolic of what lay beneath the mask of all women.

"So, your woman's turning your life to shit?"

"She's not my woman," I corrected, slamming back the rest of my drink.

The bartender nodded. "I know what you mean. Had me a wife like that, the fourth—no, fifth. Carrie-Lynn was her name. I think."

I looked at him. "How many times you been married?"

He ticked off his fingers. "Ni-eight. Can't really count the ninth cause I married the same woman twice. Polly." He shook his head. "Dumber'n a stick, but she sure could cook—if you know what I mean. Stupid bitch never set foot in a kitchen." He laughed at his own joke.

"Why'd you marry her twice?" I didn't really care about Charlie's perverse marital adventures. I had heard snatches here and there, enough to know the man wasn't operating with a full deck when it came to women. But I figured if I got him talking about himself he'd forget about me.

"I told you, she was good in bed. What a hellcat."

"So why'd you divorce her?"

He looked at me like I was an idiot child. "Goddamn, boy, you still think you can keep it up all night? There's more to life than fucking, ya know? I want a woman with brains."

"Well, I assume since you're still single, you haven't found one yet." One stupid enough to marry you, I didn't add.

"Guess not. Maybe I've just gotten pickier in my old age, which is the whole point of this lesson. You gotta take charge, Johnny. Be a man."

"Like you and the guy over in Lauderdale?"

"See there? This is the whole reason I got into bartending. Help guys like you out with your problems."

Randy rejoined us, looking considerably paler than when he'd left. He indicated for Charlie to refill his glass. "John'll let you have his."

Charlie looked from one of us to the other. "His what?"

"Woman. From what I hear, she can cook, though I doubt he could offer any testimony to how good she is in bed, since the only time he's fucked her is when he's shit-faced drunk."

What the hell had brought that on? It was as if Randy had opened his mouth and Barbara's voice had come out. "You feeling okay?"

He gave me a screwy-eyed grin. "I dunno. Can't feel nothin' right now." He punctuated the statement with a loud burp.

"I think maybe you need something to eat, boy," Charlie barked. "How about a nice, greasy burger? Just the way your mama made 'em."

Randy made a face. "Just give me another drink."

"You, too?" Charlie asked, shifting his attention back to me.

"I might take one of those burgers."

"I thought you already ate," Randy accused.

"Well, I guess all this drinking has caused me to work up an appetite."

"That'll do it, that's for sure," Charlie agreed. He turned and yelled back over his shoulder to the kitchen. "Hey Rosy, gimme one of those burgers. Deluxe, right John?" I nodded. "And some fries. Got a special today—double order."

I guess the alcohol had me feeling kind of reckless; normally I knew better than to eat at Charlie's. Whenever the health inspector came by, Charlie just told them the kitchen was there for his personal use only. They'd have shut him down years ago if they knew he was selling food to his customers. Of course, he wasn't actually selling the food. If you wanted something to eat,

he just charged more for the drinks. It was a technicality, but it had kept his ass out of jail more than once. That, and an alcoholic lawyer who worked for trade. It all came down to selective exploitation.

* * *

It was late—or should I say early?—when I finally stumbled home from Charlie's. The red message light on the phone was flashing like a three-alarm fire. I hit DELETE and shoved the phone into a drawer. Randy was right about one thing—I had to find a way to tell Krystal to hit the road. What kind of real man could I claim to be? A guy who had the guts to kill another man with his bare hands yet cowered in fear from a woman with the I.Q. of parsley? It was a pathetic statement, to say the least, and one I didn't care to add to my resume.

Just thinking about her pushed me to the brink of depression. I should have gone to sleep, let the booze mercifully haze the day, but my brain refused to power down. I kept thinking about that guy with the chipper. A bit sloppy, not to mention spontaneous, for my taste, but you had to give the guy credit for being innovative. He didn't bother deliberating the consequences, freezing up under indecision. And he obviously wasn't overcome with guilt. I mean, the guy came right back inside after the deed was done and just went about his business as though nothing in the world had happened. That showed a healthy dose of intestinal fortitude. I'll bet he wouldn't be hiding in a bar from some pain-in-the-ass girlfriend.

It was a shame the guy was in prison; he'd make an educational drinking partner. Tip a few to loosen his tongue, kind of root around inside his head and find out what was going on up there while his wife's limbs were being consumed by those mechanical jaws. Definitely food for thought.

Damn Charlie. Here I had everything all worked out nice and neat and he goes and throws this teaser into my lap. Then again, maybe that was for the best. If there were any doubts about my plan, now was the time to expose and work them out, even if they were only mental.

Not that I was having second thoughts. On the contrary, I was more determined than ever to meet my objectives. How else was I ever going to rise above the mediocrity around me?

Five

I think women have some psychic link between them. Something they all inherit at birth, like menstruation. How else could you explain Sandra's reaction to me the minute I stepped into the building the next morning?

"You're a fucking pig."

I dropped my lunch bag on the desk and reached over to turn on my computer, hoping if I ignored her, she'd go away. Fat chance. If anything, the way my head was still ringing from last night, she'd start screaming like a cat with her tail caught in a Cuisinart.

"Good morning to you, too."

"Damn it, John, she brought you dinner!"

I was fishing through the plastic game cases in my desk, trying to decide what I felt like blowing up today. I had fifteen minutes before I had to look like I was working, and Sandra was seriously cutting into my recreational time. Why the hell did she all of a sudden care about Krystal anyway? She barely knew the girl; had as much as agreed with me that she was dumber than a box of rocks. "What do you see in her?" she'd asked me one day. "Besides the obvious?" How could I argue with that?

I finally stopped my foraging and looked up at her. "Did you wait here all night to be the first one to jump my shit?"

Sandra glanced around, adopting her confidential persona, though, of course, I knew better, having worked here for ten years. As she herself had pointed out, there was no such thing as a secret in these hallowed halls.

"Did you hear what that jerk Winston did now?"

"Who, Karl?"

"No, stupid. Ryan."

Karl and Ryan Winston were the latest poster children for company nepotism. Karl was one of the old-timers in the company, been working downstairs in Manufacturing since Christ was a corporal. He'd brought his son in during the past summer, got him a job in the Wiring department, though the kid didn't know his ass from a wall socket. He'd been mixed up in crime and drugs, the usual teenage past times, and Karl wanted to set him straight, show him how the other half lived. I can imagine the moral dilemma that must have presented for the kid—work your ass off like your old man for sixty hours a week in exchange for a paycheck that was worth less than the paper it was printed on, or run around joyriding with your friends, breaking into houses and selling dope for a king's ransom.

But you couldn't fault Karl. His heart was in the right place, even if his head wasn't. Unfortunately, Karl, like most of his generation, suffered from what I called RCI—Rectal Cranial

Inversion. Burying their heads up their asses waiting for the world's problems to disappear. It was just more proof of the ineptitude of mankind, and one more reason why I had to rise above it.

Karl figured making his kid suffer an honest day's work was going to reform him, but I knew for a fact the younger Winston had been pilfering parts from the stock room since he'd gotten here, and we're not talking the cheap stuff: digital recorders, portable hard drives. Stuff he could cash in for a quick buck.

You had to hand it to the kid, he was quite the entrepreneur. Also had a nice side business going supplying every receptive party in the company with their recreational medications. Yeah, he was finding out how the other half lived all right, and profiting quite nicely from it.

So nothing Sandra could tell me about Ryan Winston, short of total reformation, would surprise me.

"So?" I prompted, sliding the game drawer shut. Mercenary maiming would have to wait for now.

"He set the R&D lab on fire last night."

"Arson?" And just when you thought you knew somebody.

"Apparently he was trying to snag some boards out of that new development computer down there. Something must have shorted out." She shrugged. "He tried to make a run for it, get out of the building before anyone noticed, but Harry chased him down. Tackled him out by his car and held him while Bill called the cops."

I was laughing hysterically. The picture of Harry, who took old and heavy among security guards to a whole new level, running down and tackling a nineteen-year-old kid was like a scene straight out of the Three Stooges. "No way!" I finally managed to sputter.

"The lab is totally trashed," Sandra continued somberly, as though this would impress me. "It's a miracle the whole place didn't burn down."

Randy swung by about that time, poking his head in my cube. "Did someone have a barbecue down in the R&D lab?"

"The younger Winston was burning the midnight oil."

He glanced at Sandra for confirmation.

"Ryan tried to rip off some computer boards and set the place on fire."

"No shit? How the hell did he manage that?"

"Beginner's luck?" I offered.

Randy sneered at me. "If he'd had any luck, he'd have burned the whole damned building down. So where's the chef now?"

"Cooking for the county inmates, I'd imagine."

Sandra stood, pushing past Randy. "You guys are hopeless."

Well, at least her opinion of me was improving.

"Heard from Krystal?" Randy asked when Sandra was out of earshot.

"What the hell are you trying to do, ruin a perfectly good day?"

"Well, for your information, she and Barbara are going shopping today."

"Yeah . . . so?"

"So by this afternoon, I'll probably have to mortgage my house to Victoria's Secret, thanks to you."

"Hey, maybe you'll get lucky and she'll bring you one of the models."

Six

This whole Krystal Situation was really starting to eat at me. As if I didn't have enough real problems to occupy my mind, there were seven new messages on my voice mail when I got home from work that afternoon. From what I could gather, the purpose of the shopping trip with Barbara was to "win back my heart."

Back?

Randy was right about one thing—the girls had apparently hit every lingerie store in town and now Krystal was fishing for an invitation to come by and show me how a real woman treats her man. I shuddered; for me, the thought of Krystal in a negligee and four-inch heels only conjured visions of bad kiddie porn.

Since I couldn't spend every night eating at Charlie's—at least, not if I wanted to see my next birthday—I realized it was time to bite the bullet and settle this once and for all.

I had to Talk To Her.

This decision, once made, caused me no end of anxiety. Should I call her on the phone, should I go to her apartment? Invite her to lunch? Send her an email? Of course, there was the very real possibility that she didn't own a computer or even know how to read, and even if she did, I didn't know her email address and refused to ask.

I wrestled with the problem throughout dinner, ruining perfectly good Mexican take-out from Miguel's, and later, while watching Monday Night Football, found it still running interference on my concentration. Three beers didn't bring so much as a stutter to its step. This was getting serious. Like it or not, it had to get resolved, and the sooner, the better. I had too many more important things to think about than Krystal's lack of self-respect. Time to face the music.

* * *

Krystal's apartment was located in one of those sterile, yuppie-style complexes; the ones with the color-coordinated flower beds lining the entrance and spandex-coated Barbie and Ken clones flitting between the buildings. She lived on the second floor, across from the clubhouse. Standard one bedroom with a den. She answered the door in a pink negligee, spiked heels, and a smile. This already had the makings of a cheesy horror flick.

And then I walked inside.

Krystal had elevated the color pink to a religious conviction. I didn't even know they made TVs that color. There were pink pillows and cushions scattered across the white wicker furniture, pink lace curtains at the sliding glass doors, and fuzzy pink throw rugs on the floor.

Every horizontal surface was clogged with tablecloths, candles, doilies, vases, stuffed animals and little figurines of some kind of forest animal—all pink. If I didn't know better, I'd swear the air itself was tinted pink. I felt like I'd been dropped into a Pepto Bismol commercial.

"You like my place?" she asked, twirling around like a demented ballerina.

I turned to her, nodding woodenly. "Yeah, it's . . . ah . . . pink."

"Bet you'd never guess it's my favorite color." Silly giggle. "Now you just sit down and relax and I'll get us something to drink."

I stared warily at the couch, where a white ball of fluff had its head buried in some nether region of its body, and opted for the matching chair. Krystal spotted the animal and let out a childish squeal.

"Oh, you haven't met Miss Buttons!" She scooped the unsuspecting fluff ball into her arms and plopped it on my lap. "Miss Buttons, meet Johnny. He's going to be your new daddy."

I cringed, alarm bells clanging in my head.

"Now you two get acquainted while I get us some drinks."

Krystal danced into the tiny kitchen, trailing a stream of chatter behind her. The cat and I mutually agreed to part company, with Miss Buttons reclaiming the couch and resuming her preening, occasionally interrupting long enough to throw me a suspicious glare. "You'll never come between us," her eyes seemed to say.

Maybe it was some Egyptian Land of the Dead thing left over from a former life, but I've never trusted cats. Instinct must have told this one I saw her as something I'd throw on the bathroom floor to dry my feet. I smiled as visions of Miss Buttons dangling out the second-floor window flitted across my brain. Do cats *always* land on their feet?

"You haven't said a word about my outfit," Krystal pouted as she reappeared with two glasses of wine. Rosé. In pink crystal glasses, I swear to god.

I took my glass from her, even though I personally hate wine, and took a sip before setting the glass on a precarious-looking wicker table. I waited for her to swallow her own sip, then lifted her glass from her hands and placed it beside mine. And then I pulled her down onto my lap.

"Come here, sexy."

She giggled like a two-year-old as she snuggled into my arms and kissed me on the cheek.

"Johnny! You're such an animal!"

"Arrgh!" I growled, going for her throat.

Wait! Stop! What the hell is going on here?

"I'm so glad you came over, Johnny," she purred into my ear. "I bought some new strawberry-flavored bubble bath for us."

"Yum," I slurped.

She giggled again and sighed. "You love me, don't you, Johnny?"

"Hmm?" I murmured, my mouth finding hers. I slipped my tongue inside and pulled her closer, my hands moving under the filmy pink nylon. She moaned and slumped against me, allowing my explorations.

"Johnny?" she prompted again.

“Um-hmm.”

“Say it, Johnny. I want to hear you say it.”

I pulled my lips away and smiled at her. “Come on, Honeycakes, you know how I feel. I love you.”

* * *

I bolted up in a cold sweat and stared around the room. My couch. My house. My TV droning out some generic infomercial. I glanced at the clock on the DVR: 2:38.

Holy shit, it was just a dream!

What had brought that on, I wondered shakily as I stumbled off the couch and into the kitchen. The cold glow of fluorescent light restored some sense of reality. I reached for a mega bottle of antacids and dumped a handful of pills into my hand, crunching them into a chalky paste in my mouth before draining the remnants of a two-liter Coke. My hands were still shaking. What a fucking nightmare.

I decided then and there that avoidance was definitely the lesser of two evils where Krystal was concerned. No sense tempting fate. I shuddered and tried to steer my thoughts towards more pleasant things, but the image of Krystal’s lips on mine wouldn’t let go of my brain.

I switched on the computer and pulled up my secret files. After awhile, the issues of garbage bags and body parts calmed my jangled nerves, but I still could feel it there, just beyond the fringes of my consciousness, haunting me like some demonic Hare Krishna chant.

Honeycakes. Honeycakes. Honeycakes.

Christ, I had to get this show on the road before I lost my mind. As luck would have it, they were calling for rain on Thursday night. It was time to put the Master Plan into action.