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THE FINAL SONG

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B. CAMERON LEE

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This copy is the third editing of the original handwritten version which was written during the period from June to Sept. 2003.

All characters in this story are fictitious.

THE FINAL SONG.

B. Cameron Lee

THE 'A' SIDE.

Chapter 1.

A disgraced Angel.
 The first one created.
 Banished from the Kingdom of Heaven.
 Antithesis.

Sent Down, so there was an Up.
 Given into Darkness so Light could be so much brighter.
 Made Evil so the Good would be pure.
 Full of all suffering.
 Unwanted by the Creator in his shiny Kingdom.
 The Prince of Liars.

As a vocation it sucked but He would not quit, could not quit. God ruled and it was not allowed, not part of the job description. He had never had a holiday, ever.
 Pain? Always.

In His own evil way He had honour though and stuck to the rules, which lately He had started exploring in detail. There were loopholes.
 He was allowed children. He had four, never more at any one time. Begat willingly on human women, two boys and two girls. They and He together made Five, a powerfull number. In the near future they would become his Generals, riding out to command an army of discontented souls that would soon rise up and smite, such a lovely word, the Kingdom of Heaven.
 Only problem was, recruitment was too damn slow.

The tall, dark figure stood motionless in the pool of shadow, under the tree where he was patiently waiting, across the avenue from Tonies Coffee Shop. Although strangely dressed for the middle of summer in a three quarter-length black coat and black wide-brimmed Stetson, none of the passersby seemed to notice the strangeness of him. He was staring off down the Boulevard, with an intensely concentrated gaze and a slight smile just twitching his thin, cruel lips. That smile did not reach the slitted, reddened eyes.

Steve grinned again, "Need a loan my friend?"
 "No. I'll be fine for now thanks but you could pay for the coffees." Chris sighed, as he leaned backward in his seat. He could not help thinking about the predicament he was in, girlfriend gone, no job and the trusted, old car broken beyond repair. Plus the fact that he had to move out of his apartment in two weeks. Life was becoming a real bitch.

“Sure. No problem, anything to help. You’ve got it pretty rough at the moment.” Steve signaled the waiter and made scribbling motions in the air, requesting the bill. They both sat back in the comfortable aluminium and black vinyl chairs, enjoying their coffee at Tonies. The sunlight playing through the trees of the Boulevard shone dappled light onto the white umbrella rising from the centre of the glass-topped table in front of them. Around them, fellow patrons enjoyed their lunchtime break at the other tables spread in front of the cafe, while across the road, shoppers filled the sidewalk with bright summer clothing and movement as they wandered from store to store, consuming, in the music that quietly drifted around them. The traffic was busy but relatively light, no trucks were allowed through the Boulevard during the day. The low hubbub of background noise lent a tranquil atmosphere to the scene in front of them. It was perfect, the moment and their bond of friendship.

The sound rose faintly into Chris’ conscious mind. At first, it was subliminal, then his ears registered a regular thud, thud, thud. He looked for the source and far off down the avenue, spotted a colored guy, walking along with a huge ghetto blaster perched on his shoulder. The rhythm became clearer and Chris recognized the intriguing, rhythmical, base beat of rap/hip hop music. As the colored guy drew closer, Chris was able to see that he was expensively dressed but shabby. Like the guy had been through hard times recently. His eyes had dark circles under them and a three-day growth of stubble on his face reinforced that impression. The music was quite loud now, clear enough for Chris to pick up some of the lyrics, which he found a little disturbing.

“.....Pain and fear and killin’ without license.”

As if the music had cued it, Chris’ perceptions changed. Everything slowed to a syrupy slow-motion crawl. The light through the trees dimmed. The surrounding street noise vanished into silence. Only the song remained, slowed down to such a degree that he could not understand the words.

He saw. On the wide grass verge that bordered the Boulevard, a little boy lose his bouncing ball and swimmingly career after it, running away from his mother, unwittingly dodging between two parked cars and into the traffic. Intent only on retrieving his recalcitrant toy.

He saw. The big, dark blue Chevy, swerving to miss the child, miraculously finding the only gap between the vehicles parked along the street, hit the kerb and become airborne.

He saw. In the slow motion ballet unfolding before him, the colored guy being hit and split by the flying car. The boom box was launched from his shoulder with the force of the impact, flying ever higher into the air, spinning lazily.

Then, he saw a ghostly, red-scaled hand materialize out of thin air and press the STOP button. The slowed down music stopped abruptly and the red-scaled hand took the CD from the machine and sent it spinning towards the spot where he was sitting, defying reason with the distance it traveled.

Everything returned to normal time.

Suddenly!

There was screaming. The car crashed to the ground on its side and ground to a halt, sparks flying as tortured metal ground on concrete, people of all descriptions scattering from its path. There was an extremely loud thud, followed by a second thud as the body, bouncing of a tree, smacked into the sidewalk, limp. The boom box topped its arc then spiraled down onto the road, ending its brief aerial flight and smashing into myriad pieces.

The CD finished its long, lazy flight and skittered to a halt at Chris' feet. A moment's stunned silence. Then people were running to the scene of the accident, the screaming resuming from somewhere. Somehow, Chris knew the colored guy was dead. He hadn't really seen that ghostly hand materialize, had he? Mechanically, without thinking about what he was doing, he bent down and retrieved the night-black CD, slipping it into the inside breast pocket of his business suit jacket as he straightened up. It was icy cold to the touch. He shivered at the contact.

"Shee-it!" Steve was out of his seat and running towards the body on the footpath while Chris was pocketing the CD.

"Come on Chris" he yelled over his shoulder, "We have to help."

"Same old Steve, always ready to jump in and help someone." Chris thought to himself as he strode over to join his friend, who was trying to check for a pulse on what was definitely a body. He saw that his original estimate was accurate, this guy was definitely deceased. Dead was dead. Brains were meant to be on the inside, not scattered across the footpath from the remains of a shattered skull.

It all caught up with Chris at that moment. The first dead person he had ever seen in his life. Turning aside, he vomited violently, emptying his stomach and retching noisily again and again as his body reacted to the sight before him.

Leaning against a tree, hands on the rough bark and out of breath from vomiting, his guts still churning and with a vile taste in his mouth, Chris surveyed the scene. The big, blue Chevy lying on its side on the footpath, the front all stove in, radiator steaming, the upper front wheel still spinning tiredly with nowhere to go. Steve, up on the side of the Chevy with the passenger door open, helping the badly shaken but otherwise unharmed driver out of the car. The little boy clutching his ball, safe in his mother's arms, crying at the shock of it all, his little face white and tear stained. The boom box in a million pieces on the road.

Traffic backing up, horns honking. Confusion.

A police car arrived with its lights flashing and two uniforms got out, putting on their hats. They came over and checked the body then asked after the driver of the car, who was now standing unsteadily beside Steve. One of the officers returned to the police car to radio in for a morgue van and a tow truck before opening the boot and removing some red traffic cones. He stepped onto the road, setting out the cones to direct traffic and create a space for the morgue truck, which would shortly arrive in response to his call. After putting a black plastic sheet over the body, the other officer headed over to where Chris and Steve were standing, taking a notebook out of his pocket as he came. Shoppers, across the street, were beginning to move off, now that the excitement was over.

"Getting back to their normal lives". Chris thought as he turned his head and forced himself to look where the body lay under its plastic sheet. His life would never be normal again. From what was left of the face, the colored guy hadn't looked very old and the clothes he wore on his well built body, spoke of money, lots of money. Much good it would do him now. Chris felt weird, one minute the guy had been walking along the footpath and then the next minute he was dead. Probably never saw it coming. For the first time in his relatively short life, Chris considered his own mortality and shuddered at the thought of how fleeting life could be. He resolved then and there to stop pussyfooting around and grasp opportunities that came his way.

Life was meant to be lived to the full.

He immediately felt better and drawing a deep breath, let go of the tree and stood tall. He was damned if he was going to go that way, before he'd had a chance to live. That was pretty much the end of Chris' and Steve's meeting that Friday. After making a statement to the police, Chris excused himself, as he had to leave to attend yet another job interview, which left Steve to do whatever it was that Steve did with his time. Funny though, Chris never mentioned anything about the CD to either Steve or the police, nor did anyone else. None of the eyewitnesses reported a flying CD or the fact that Chris had pocketed it. In fact, the instant the CD was in his pocket, Chris had also forgotten all about it. Steve slowly wandered back to the table that they had shared until recently and sat down. His gaze was fixed on his friend's retreating back and never left it, until Chris got into a cab. Steve then ordered another coffee and leaned back, the late July sunshine, shadow dappling the footpath and table through the trees, feeling warm and pleasant on his skin. This had been their favourite spot for meeting each other. Sitting at a table outside of Tonies Coffee Shop, the shady boulevard stretching away in both directions, drinking coffee and talking, or not. Since the redevelopment of Uptown and the construction of a flyover three blocks away, judicious planning had resulted in many streets in the area becoming pedestrian malls and retailers and shoppers had flocked to the area. Traffic had to thread around a complicated one-way system, which slowed it down. The Boulevard in front of Tonies Coffee Shop was the only through road in the area. Really, the only place this accident could have happened. The coffee arrived and Steve sat up, shivering as a chill ran down his spine. 'Why hadn't Chris mentioned the CD he had pocketed,' he wondered.

The tall dark figure, still in the shadow of the tree across the road, smiled wickedly then vanished.

Chapter 2.

Surprisingly, in the days following the accident, Chris had no recollection of the CD. The accident engraved itself on his memory, replaying repeatedly. In slow motion, he saw the body lifted and thrown, to smash into the tree and then thud onto the pavement. Absent from these memories was the ghostly hand ejecting the CD from the boom box.

It was as if it had never existed.

He stared down at the newspaper in his lap, open at the employment section. The apartment listing section had already been circled and underlined over a number of its pages and cast aside. No luck in that department. Now he was getting a bit worried about his lack of employment, no job equated to no apartment. Shared accommodation was now

looking to be the only option available, unless he went to stay with Steve. That would be admitting defeat and his ego would not permit it. Going home was not an option either, as his Grandmother couldn't take him in. There was not enough room in the retirement villa she had bought when she sold the big house after Gramps died. The employment section swam back into focus. Here it was, Wednesday already and his money was running out, he had to get a job soon. If things did not turn around within the next couple of days, a loan from Steve would be his only salvation.

"Damn Angela, taking off with the furniture," he thought. Deep down he still missed her, they had been an item since college. Just because he had been unemployed for so long was no reason for her to leave. Especially to move in with another guy he vaguely knew from where she worked.

Fed up with the job hunting, Chris rose from the only chair in the room and went to tidy himself up and have a shave. He might as well use time constructively to keep himself looking smart, ready for the next possible interview. Ten minutes later, as he applied the aftershave, he considered the reflection regarding him from the bathroom mirror. It was not too ugly. Some people even considered him handsome with his open face, wide set hazel eyes, generous mouth and dark brown hair. He still looked the same as he did in the Final Year book picture from University. Youthfull.

"What a waste of time University was," he groaned. "Three years studying graphic design, computer animation and advertising, yet I still can't get a full time position." Chris didn't realize that walking the walk and talking the talk was also an essential prerequisite in the advertising game. He was a little naïve sometimes.

Back in the lounge with a fresh cup of coffee, Chris sat down with the newspaper again, determined to find some form of employment. As he relaxed back into the only lounge chair, in the drab featureless room with curtainless windows, sunlight angling in onto the bare floor, the only other piece of furniture in the room, the stereo system, caught his eye. Angela had left it because it was his. 'Time for a break,' he decided. "I'll put some music on." As he stared at the stereo, memories of a ghostly red hand, ejecting a CD from the dead, colored guy's boom-box, filtered into his consciousness.

The CD!

Of course! The CD. Where was it? He tried to remember what he had been wearing last Friday, five days ago. The dark blue business suit. His only suit. That was it! Rising, he went into his bedroom and walked over to the closet. As his hand closed on the closet door handle, a shiver went down his spine. Opening the door slowly, he looked inside at the rack of dated clothes to locate his only suit and checked the inside breast pocket. The cold plastic of the CD met his touch and he drew it out into the light of day. It was black, very black. Both sides. A hole in reality. How could plastic be so black? How could it play?

Returning to the lounge, Chris sat down and examined the CD, turning it this way and that in his hands. It was cold and the black seemed to be a holographic effect. A red label was attached to the centre of both sides of the CD, identifying the 'A' and 'B' sides respectively.

The labels also carried a warning; **18 years and over only. Lyrics may be harmful when listened to.**

"Yeah right," Chris said to himself scornfully, more censorship. Sticks and stones..... His curiosity aroused, he crossed to the stereo and switching it on, inserted the CD so the 'A' side would play. Chris liked to start at the beginning. Picking up the remote, he pointed it at the stereo system.

The strange syrupy feeling that he'd previously experienced at the accident scene stole into the room. Traffic noise through the open window of his apartment diminished into nothingness and the stereo seemed to grow and completely fill Chris' visual field.

"Jesus," mumbled Chris and the temperature in the room decreased, as he fell back slowly onto the lounge chair. On the remote, his finger reached out in slow motion to press the PLAY button. There was a very faint hiss as the CD began, more like an intake of breath than an electrical sound. It vanished into silence. Then the noise began. It was very faint at first then became gradually louder, just before the drums began. It sounded to Chris like a multitude of people screaming but the sound became lost in the funky beat and the electronic music at the start of a D.J.'d mix.

It's hard these days just to get ahead,
 Because whatever you want, there's another debt.
 The job you asked for just ain't there
 And the girl in your mind with the golden hair
 Turns into the depths of your despair,
 As your life drags by in the dirty air
 Of a factory floor and it just ain't fair.
 The compact car got stolen again
 There's no spare money to suck off your friends.
 This is the world your God gave to you-
 Welcome inmate, to the human zoo.

But don't despair, salvation's on the way
 Oh yes my friend, this is your lucky day.
 "An' how does it work?" I hear you say,
 Just listen up close. This is how you play.
 Use me wisely and use me well
 You may not believe in Heaven or Hell
 But you got something, if yer willin' to sell
 Don't ask me what- I ain't about to tell.
 So don't just sit there on yer sorry arse waitin',
 Play the next track without hesitatin'.

Chris listened to the song with a mixture of fascination and repulsion. It was amazing what people were singing about these days, anything and everything. The music had a strange compulsion to it though. The rhythm and the rhymes were great. He really liked the artists, whoever they were. Before the next song started, he lifted the remote and pressed the STOP button. Levering himself out of the comfortable chair he crossed to the stereo and removed the black CD. Looking for the artists' name and any other information, he reread the labels on both sides. However, the only information visible was the warning, **18 years and over only. Lyrics may be harmful when listened to!** The exclamation mark at the end of the warning stood out. He could not remember seeing it previously but that was silly, it must have been there.

The syrupy feeling had gone from the room, the temperature was slightly warmer and Chris felt really marvelous. Despite all his troubles, the music, even with its downbeat lyrics, had helped him feel a lot better.

“This is ridiculous,” his mind told him but his eyes strayed back to the CD in his hand. For the third time he read the warning, **18 years and over only. Lyrics will be harmful when listened to!**

‘Was that another change in the statement on the label? Couldn’t be. His mind must be playing tricks on him. Who cares,’ he thought, as he reinserted the CD and hit the **PLAY** button on the remote once again. After a short pause, music filled the air. How the hell did the machine know to go to the next song? he thought as a strong beat kicked in and another song began.

Addman, fadman, gonna be a bad man
Need some money to get you started?
Sadman, addman, gotta get a job now
Your soul and you are gonna be parted.

Gifted, lifted, time to make some income,
Everything comes to those who wait.
Havin’ a life you only dreamed of
But most of the time it’s a twist of fate.

Addman, fadman, gonna be a bad man?
Need some money to get you started?
Sadman, adman, gotta get a job now
Your soul and you are gonna be parted.

You can have it now, if only you take it.
Jump the queue and get a good start.
Hold out your hand and grasp the opportunity,
You can be a star if you play your part.

Addman, fadman, gonna be a bad man?
Need some money to get you started?
Sadman, addman, gotta get a job now,
Your soul and you are about to be parted.

As the end of the song was fading into silence, the telephone suddenly rang loudly, jarring Chris from his dazed reverie. Finding himself sitting on the floor in front of the stereo, he leapt to his feet and immediately pressed the **STOP** button on the remote before heading over to pick up the telephone.

“Hello. Is that Mr. Christopher Wilkins?” purred a beautiful, well modulated female voice.
“Er, yes, that’s me,” responded Chris lamely, wondering what the hell was going on.
“My name is Louise Goodman. I work for the Fleeting Image Advertising Agency. You came for an interview here last week.”

"Er, yes" Chris replied, trying to remember that particular place from amongst the many establishments he had been to for interviews in the last fortnight.

"We have a slight problem," the voice continued. "One of our senior partners has just arrived in town this afternoon, in transit from Europe to our Western Branch. He has just looked over some of the applications for the position we advertised and has decided he would like to interview you. Would it be possible for you to come over here about three this afternoon?"

Chris' mind was racing. "Fleeting Image. Where the hell were they? When did he go for the interview?" He checked his watch, 2.00pm.

"Yeah sure, no problem," he replied absently, his mind racing in circles; clothes, taxis, expense!

"Very good," came back the silken reply. "Because it is such short notice, we will be sending a car over for you. Same address as on the job application?"

"Yeah. I mean, yes," Chris responded.

"See you shortly Mr. Wilkins. Goodbye."

It was the dial tone that got him moving, send a car.....Shit, shit, shit! Luckily he'd already shaved and only needed to take a quick shower, jump into his only suit and polish his shoes. The next thirty minutes passed in a blur of activity as Chris raced around getting ready. Just as he finished tying his shoes and before carrying out a final inspection in the mirror on his closet door, there came the sound of a horn from the street below. Gazing down from his apartment window, he saw a long, black, stretch limousine. Surely not, not for him, not a limo that size. As he stood looking down, the chauffeur stepped out of the vehicle and strode toward Chris' apartment building. Chris grabbed his always loaded briefcase, hit the stairs running and managed the single flight quickly enough to reach the front door while the chauffeur was still checking the mailboxes.

"Mr. Wilkins sir?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Your car sir." The driver tipped his hat, winked at Chris, then went over to the limo and held the rear door open for Chris to enter.

"Make yourself comfortable sir."

The chauffeur went around the large vehicle, got back behind the wheel, started the engine and drove off. Chris sat back comfortably in an armchair-style rear seat surveying the vast expanse of leather, the small bar fridge and built in LCD television. This was the first time he had ever been in a 'stretch' limo and it felt great. He recalled the interview at Fleeting Image, nothing about it was exceptional, just another interview. The executive that had conducted it was a stuck up, self important little jerk. What was his name again?

Twenty-five minutes later Chris was riding the express elevator to the executive suites of the Fleeting Image Advertising Agency on the sixteenth floor of the building. When the elevator doors opened, the VOICE from the telephone, a statuesque, well appointed brunette, greeted him warmly.

"Mr. Wilkins I presume. Please come this way." She got up from behind her trendy desk, adjusted her skirt and then led off down the hall. Chris followed behind; marveling at her ability to walk on ridiculously high heels without the slightest wobble. Very elegant.

"You are to go in immediately. Mr. Garvin does not have much time available before he has to leave for the airport and he does not like to be kept waiting. How do you have your coffee?"

"Milk and one sugar, thank you," was all Chris managed to blurt out before being shown into a huge, bright, corner office.

Subtle, framed posters, obviously from successful advertising campaigns, adorned the walls. The man seated behind the huge desk was casually dressed, in his late forties with graying hair. He seemed genuinely happy to see Chris as he rose from behind his desk and approached Chris with his right hand extended. They shook, and Garvin clasped him on the shoulder with his well-manicured left hand.

"Mr. Wilkins. Do you mind if I call you Chris? Sorry about the short notice. Hope the car was comfortable. Here, have a seat." He waved toward a lounge chair, one of many in the spacious office, then he went back around the desk to his own armchair. He gestured at some of Chris' artwork spread out before him.

"I was going over some of the short listed job applications about an hour ago and your work seemed to jump out at me. I was most impressed. As one of the two senior partners here, I pride myself on being able to spot talent when I see it. There are a number of junior partners in this firm who initially got a starting spot and owe their success to that ability. Your work is subtle, possibly too subtle because I missed it on the first inspection. It was only during the second look-over a little while ago that I decided you were what we were searching for. I talked it over with Mr. McGregor, the junior partner who interviewed you and we decided that the firm is prepared to offer you a probationary position. Interested?" Chris was speechless. He nodded vigorously, eventually spluttering out a, "Yes Sir!"

"Good." Garvin continued. "A starting salary of \$40,000 per annum, all the usual perks and, as I understand that you haven't worked for a while, an upfront expenses payment of \$2,000 to get you started. Report nine o'clock Monday morning at the fourteenth floor, two down from here. Okay?"

"Yes Sir."

"Excellent. Have a chat with Louise on the way out; she'll sort everything out for you. Oh, and loose the suit. We do far better work when we are comfortable." With that he rose, smiling and held out his hand once again. Chris shook it, grinning ear to ear.

"Thank you sir. Thank you." Then, with the interview over, he left the room.

"Two thousand dollars," he thought. "That would really help the apartment hunting."

He had his coffee with Louise, chatting with her about all sorts of things. She was very easy to talk with and he soon found himself discussing life's problems with her. He really liked Louise, not in a sexual way though, for apart from being a beautiful, svelte lady with a lovely voice, she was also a genuine person or so he thought. Not stuck up at all. Louise also found herself taking a shine to this naïve, young man. He was so fresh and earnest and innocent. She busied herself taking down extra details from him and drew \$2,000 from petty cash, which he signed for.

"Well," she said, "that is the biggest starting bonus that I have ever handed over, you must have really impressed the boss. Still, you will be able to buy some up-market clothes."

Appearance is everything in this place." She smiled at him at him warmly. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have work to do."

"Sorry, I'm a little confused. This has all happened so quickly that I can't take it in." Chris stood, gripping the back of his chair, letting the world catch up. Louise looked up, a faintly rapacious smile flickering over her face at the sight of this earnest young man in front of her, obviously overcome by the afternoon's events. Eventually he took his leave and departed.

It was an extremely happy Chris that rode the elevator down from the sixteenth floor, even the elevator music sounded good in this building. Bursting with the need to share his good fortune, he decided to visit Steve immediately. It was only ten blocks to Steve's house and it wouldn't take too long to get there. Here it was Wednesday and he had an excellent job, money in his pocket and at long last, some prospects for the future. What a surprise, right out of the blue. How lucky could you get, being spotted like that by a senior partner who was only in town for the afternoon. Hell, his luck had to change sometime and now was as good a time as any.

Chris stepped out of the building into a beautiful, warm, late July afternoon. It was such a wonderful day, he decided to walk the ten blocks to Steve's place. He needed the exercise anyway. Taking one last look at the tall building behind him, sunlight reflecting off its glass and steel, he set off towards his friend's place, unconsciously humming snatches of a song first heard only a few hours before.

“Addman, fadman, gonna be a bad man,
Need some money to get you started?.....”

Chapter 3.

Chris was about a block away from Steve's place when the plummeting body smashed head first into the footpath, with a bone crunching, splattering and surprisingly loud thud, not three metres from him. Bits of wet stuff, which felt like a fine spray of mist on the bareness of his face, splattered down the front of his clothing. Oddly, the syrupy sensation returned, the same sensation that had occurred when the colored guy was killed. Everything seemingly happening in slow motion, sounds muted, colors dulled. Silence. The late afternoon sunshine, filtered by the leafy branches of the avenue's trees, jigsawed the scene before him with light and shade. Bloody, blonde hair tangled in the remains of a head, skull split open like a ripe watermelon. Blood starting to pool around the brain matter spread over the footpath. The rest of the body was almost normal by comparison, dressed as it was in a tight, black tracksuit and obviously female. For some reason Chris looked up. As he did, the afternoon came back with a rush, horns honking, traffic noise, music playing somewhere, someone screaming at the horror on the footpath. Six floors up, a pale face, surrounded by black hair, pulled back over the balcony, out of sight.

Reality.

Stomach heaving, he turned away and lost his Fleeting Image cup of coffee and the snack bar he'd bought on the way over. Pulling the handkerchief out of his suit breast pocket, he mopped his face, wiped his mouth and absently started dabbing at his suit jacket. The

'crunching' sound of the impact kept playing repeatedly inside his head, making him feel nauseous.

The police arrived, pushing through the gathering crowd to get to the mess on the footpath. Business like, they moved the gathering crowd back, asking for witnesses, notebooks in hand, ready to take down details of the accident. Someone pointed Chris out to them.

More onlookers gathered, coming to see what everyone else was looking at. Some turned away, distressed at the sight before them while some just stood staring and talking to each other. Chris stood rooted to the spot, stunned, still idly dabbing aimlessly at his jacket, until one of the police officers approached him while the other went to call the incident in, unsure as yet whether they were dealing with a homicide or suicide.

"Afternoon sir, are you O.K? Yes? Good. Would you mind answering a few questions?" "No I don't mind," still dabbing.

"Could you tell me what you saw sir? Take your time." The police officer looked Chris over with concern, taking in the splattered dark spots on his suit and the pink blotches on his face.

"Are you sure you are alright sir?"

Chris woodenly nodded in reply.

Notebook ready, the officer waited while Chris struggled to compose himself.

Haltingly, still wiping, Chris started to relate what he had seen. "I was just walking along, minding my own business, enjoying the afternoon, when she fell out of the sky. I wasn't expecting it," he mumbled, still visibly shaken.

"Did you see anything else that may help us find out why she ended up here," the officer enquired, pointing toward the body. The question was more hopeful than expectant as the officer's gaze was already wandering over the thinning crowd. Sirens sounded in the distance, a meat wagon no doubt, on its way to the scene, or the homicide boys. To Chris' surprise, an answer sprang to his lips before he even had a chance to think.

"No, nothing," escaped from his mouth, as his brain screamed at him, 'What about the face? What about the face?'

The officer appeared satisfied and concluded the interview by taking Chris' name, address and telephone number.

"We will be in touch if we need more information, sir," he offered, before moving on to other possible witnesses. The ambulance pulled up and the ambulance officers stood by while yet more police arrived and photographed the scene from every conceivable angle. The crowd was thinning, the primeval blood lust partially sated for now. Chris took one last, long look at the sheet now covering the body, before turning and pushing through the onlookers to escape the disquieting scene.

Steve answered the door on the third insistent ring, apron on and a big wooden spoon clutched in his other hand.

"Sorry Chris, I was cooking some....." His eyes widened as his voice trailed off. "Shit. What happened to you?"

"It's a somewhat long story. Can I borrow some clothes and stay awhile?" Chris asked as he entered the house behind Steve, shaking visibly. They walked up the long hallway toward the back of the house as his friend replied.

"Sure, no problem. Take a shower. You know where it is. I'll get some clothes for you to wear."

Half an hour later, much scrubbed and with damp and freshly combed hair, Chris was sitting at the breakfast bar in front of a big mug of steaming hot coffee, feeling a little better, while Steve continued with his food preparations. The kitchen at the back of the house was bright and airy with a large kitchen table in front of a Welsh dresser, laden with decorative plates. The large windows had bright cafe style curtains which allowed the sunlight in and offered a good view of the back garden, with its neat lawn and attractive trees and shrubs. Altogether, a peaceful and harmonious place. Lucky Steve.

“.....So I had just put this CD on and barely heard the first couple of songs, when the telephone rings. It’s this big deal Advertising Agency, Fleeting Image, which I never thought I had a chance with. Yeah, right out of the blue. So they send a car for me. Would you believe it? A fucking huge, black limousine with a chauffeur and all the works. When I arrive there, and get this, the sixteenth floor no less, there is this really, seriously spunky secretary and one of the two senior partners, who is in town for the afternoon and wants to talk with me. To cut a long story short, I got the job and \$2000 in my pocket. Start on Monday.”

“Whoa,” was Steve’s reply, “That is seriously freaky. You really landed on your feet. What was the CD you were listening to?”

Chris looked up, flushing, “Oh, just a CD I picked up not long ago, nothing special. Sort of rap/hip hop stuff”

Steve considered his friend. Something was going on. It was unlike Chris to be furtive. He had known Chris long enough to know when his friend was hiding something. He was just about to delve a little deeper when Chris started speaking again.

“Anyway, when I left the office, about ten blocks east on the main drag, I decided to walk over here. You know, nice day, happy, all that stuff. I was about a block up the road when a jumper narrowly missed me.”

“Sorry, what’s a jumper?” Steve asked.

“You know, a person leaping off a building to commit suicide. She hit the footpath head first not three metres from me. That’s what all the shit on my suit is, brains and stuff. You might as well throw it out. I could never wear it again without remembering the sound of the impact or the sight of her body on the sidewalk.” Chris shuddered at the memory of the event and took a long pull on his coffee. Steve looked puzzled.

“Why didn’t you mention that incident before you told me about the job?”

It was Chris’ turn to look puzzled. “I don’t know. No idea really. Maybe I was trying not to think about it. Or maybe I needed to tell you in sequence to get it all straight in my head.”

They both considered one another for a moment, then Steve grinned and made the sign of the cross with both forefingers in Chris’ general direction.

“Two dead bodies in five days. Jesus! You’re starting to be dangerous to be around,” was Steve’s joking comment as he turned back to the stove to continue with his cooking, vigorously stirring the contents of the pan in front of him. He failed to notice the fleeting, pained expression on his friend’s face.

“Yeah, right. What’s the occasion?” Chris enquired with a sweeping hand gesture, taking in the ingredients and paraphernalia of the meal preparation, as his friend turned from the stove, a large steaming pan in his hand.

“Oh. I have some friends coming over tonight. I know that you are not really into religion and these people come over for religious talks and discussions. I didn’t think you would be interested, so I have never included you in the group. They are nice people and you are

very welcome to stay if you wish, considering what has just happened.” Steve was moving as he was talking, preparations now close to culmination.

“What do you mean by that?” Chris replied defensively, the thought of the joking comment, about him being dangerous, uppermost in his mind. Completely forgetful of the fact that he had no real interest in religion at all.

“Nothing Chris. After what you have just been through, I just thought being alone in your apartment wouldn’t be as pleasant as being among friendly folk.”

“Sorry Steve. I’m a little bit edgy is all. Yeah, I’d love to stay for dinner and meet your friends. Thank you for the offer.” There was no mention, anywhere in the conversation, of a pale face, surrounded by black hair, disappearing back over a balcony. It was as if it had never been.

So Chris met some of Steve’s other friends, people he didn’t know, people he would not ordinarily have met. They turned out to be a really nice bunch, especially a very gregarious couple, George and Doris Stansbury and a very fetching young lady named Mary. The meal was wonderful, slightly Mediterranean, pasta and some sauce that Steve had concocted along with salad and fresh bread rolls. The conversation was minimal as hungry mouths went to work on the tasty offering, frequently pausing to quaff the ample, good quality, red wine. A number of bottles were spaced around the table within easy reach, opened earlier to allow them to breath. After dinner, some of the group stayed in the kitchen organizing the washing up while the rest went to the lounge room. Chris found himself sitting next to George and Doris. He was bored. These people were really nice but boring, if he heard ‘underprivileged’, ‘developing country’ or ‘starving’, once more he would have to leave. The thought of spending that much time, money and energy on total strangers was alien to him. How could these friends of Steve’s devote their lives to feeding the starving masses in foreign countries, people they had never seen. What was wrong with having a good time?

“What is it you actually do?” Chris piped up during a lull in the conversation, turning to face George.

“We are fund raisers for our Church.” George replied, continuing, “We use all sorts of methods to raise funds to do the Church’s work. For instance, our latest fund raiser, a raffle, is really simple and seems to be working well, as the tickets are nearly all sold.” The two thousand dollars in his wallet stirred and, as if in response, Chris asked, “How does it work?”

“Easy, the prize is a sports car but instead of having lots of tickets there are only one thousand tickets at two hundred dollars each. That gives odds of one in a thousand for winning the car. Chevrolet has kindly supplied the vehicle at wholesale price, so our profit will be excellent. The draw is a fortnight from this coming Sunday.” George smiled.

“What sort of car are you raffling?” Chris was overcome with curiosity now and couldn’t help getting involved in the conversation.

“A Corvette convertible, a red one.” came back the immediate reply.

Chris’ right buttock tingled and his wallet warmed up, or did it? He was reminded of the cash advance he had received earlier and thoughts of good Christian deeds filled his head, overlaid with visions of himself cruising in a red Corvette with the top down.

“Do you happen to have any tickets with you?” Chris enquired.

“Well as a matter of fact, I have the last twenty-ticket book with me. Most have been sold. Do you want a couple?” George asked smilingly.

"No, one will be fine," replied Chris, missing the joke. He bought one of the last tickets available, for some reason choosing the number 999. "Oh well," he thought as he put the ticket away in his wallet, "If you are not in it, you can't win it."

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly as the conversation moved away from religion and became more social. Chris saw a side of Steve he never knew existed. Steve had changed since their days of flatting together; the 'cool' was gone. With it had gone most of the worn out, hip attitude and style of speech, leaving in the wake of these changes, a caring, well-spoken crusader for the underdog who demonstrated compassion for his fellow man. Mary found Steve extremely interesting, if her close proximity to him throughout the evening was any indication. Chris considered the tall, blue-eyed, blonde-haired young woman and for an instant, only an instant, toyed with the idea of joining the group. No, she only had eyes for Steve. Lucky guy, he could do a lot worse. Chris still did not know what Steve did for his income and wondered how he could afford to be so generous. According to George and Doris, Steve had made a number of fairly large donations to the church over the preceding year or so.

"One for later," Chris thought to himself as he made his round of goodbyes and headed for the front door, Steve following him out.

"Will you be alright tonight?" Steve asked as his friend hailed a cab.

"Yeah, sure," Chris replied. "I guess I'm getting used to it." With that, he smiled weakly at his little joke then got into the cab, which disappeared off down the road toward his empty apartment.

Steve was worried, he had seen the CD spin over to Chris' feet during the accident in front of Tonies Coffee Shop and he had also seen his friend pick it up and place it in his pocket. That CD had not been mentioned at all by Chris and Steve was starting to notice changes in his friend. They weren't good changes. He turned, as the taxi lights disappeared, leaving the chill of the evening to go back into the warmth and companionship that was his home.

Chris walked into his bare apartment and noticed that the red, 'power' light of his stereo was on. Damn! He was sure he had switched it off earlier in the day. It must have been the excitement of the limo arriving earlier that caused him to forget to switch it off. In the gloom of the living room, the light took on the attributes of a single red eye, staring balefully in his direction. A shudder passed down his spine and he strode to the machine and switched it off.

"Probably a fault in the equipment," he muttered to himself as he headed for the bathroom and a shower before bed. Behind him, as he left the room, the red light on the stereo slowly powered back to life.

Waiting.

The tall, lean figure stood in the darkened office, on the sixteenth floor of the Fleeting Image Ad Agency, gazing out over the city lights, far beneath the window. The glowing end of a big fat cigar was reflected by the glass, as smoke curled lazily into the air around him. "It was a good idea of yours, Andrew, to buy into a business. Especially one like this. The possibilities are enormous. Plus it legitimizes our operations somewhat."

The darkness hid the other person's wicked smile. "Wait and see what I have got lined up for the future," Andrew replied chuckling evilly. "The world of media is a whole new game and we all get turns to play!"

Chapter 4.

Lying in bed the next morning, Chris luxuriated in the feeling of not having to get up to go and search for employment. Having a position in a firm after such a long time off work was a great relief to him. His attention wandered as he considered his good fortune.

'Was he lucky or what?'

He shifted languidly and thought about his next major problem, his apartment or rather the lack of apartment. In nine days, he had to vacate these first floor premises and if he had not found a place by then he would have to move in with Steve. Much as he liked his friend, Chris' pride made him feel he would be admitting defeat if he couldn't make it by himself. Hell, he had a good job now and had got that on his own, an apartment shouldn't be that difficult to find.

Chris stretched, preparatory to getting up and decided to have some time off from all the running around he had been doing lately. He would start serious apartment hunting with Saturday's real estate section of the newspaper. Between now and then he would relax and try to catch up on some of the other things he wanted to do. Things which had been put on the backburner lately. A complete change of wardrobe came to mind. Right. He arose from his bed, made himself a coffee, then had a shower, got dressed and went out to shop for some new clothes.

It was a great feeling having money available to spend and Chris headed downtown for some retail therapy. He alighted from the cab outside of Tonies Coffee Shop and as he was paying the cabbie, he couldn't help glancing over to the tree with the piece of bark missing just next to the dark stain on the footpath. He shuddered at the recollection of the accident just six days ago and crossed over the road to the shopping arcade. The beautiful summer weather was continuing on into early August and he was glad of the air conditioning in the shopping arcade as he escaped the midday heat. There were so many stores to choose from. Standing in front of the arcade directory, Chris could not decide whether to go for big name brands, exclusivity or value for money. He couldn't spend all the money he had

at the moment but really wanted a complete wardrobe change, to mark his changing life and the next chapter in it. Eventually economics won and he found a menswear store that had reasonable prices with good quality, stylish clothing. He had a really therapeutic afternoon and bought some coolly elegant, casual clothes, up market enough he hoped, to fit the image of a classy advertising person from a very respectable firm. As the afternoon was wearing on, he decided to catch a cab home to avoid the afternoon rush hour.

He arrived home laden with packages and had just entered his apartment when the phone rang. He quickly shut the front door, ran to the kitchen and placing his shopping in a pile just inside the kitchen door, walked over to the kitchen bench and picked up the receiver. “Chris speaking.”

“Hello. Christopher Wilkens? This is detective Mike Carruthers,” the gruff voice on the other end of the telephone line announced. “I have been assigned to the apparent suicide of Sally Tuttle and would like to ask you a couple of questions regarding what you saw yesterday afternoon, if you don’t mind. We usually like to follow these things up and talk to witnesses after they have had time to settle down, mostly to see if they can remember anything further. Is that okay with you?”

“Er, yes.” Chris replied.

“I will tell you what we know so far. Sally had a busy social life but didn’t have many visitors to her apartment, there was no sign of a struggle in the apartment or of a forced entry and no one recalls there having been a visitor that afternoon. However, we know she used her entry card to access the basement carpark and half an hour later the card was used again. After she was dead. Presumably to exit the carpark. We have not been able to locate the card and it has now been cancelled for security reasons. Toxicology is not back yet but there was no suicide note, which is puzzling. So far, we have not been able to come up with a motive for suicide and we haven’t ruled out foul play either. Now could you tell me please? What did you see?”

Chris swallowed nervously and took a breath, “It was all rather sudden,” he replied. “I was walking along, minding my own business and this body just crashed into the footpath, head first, about three metres from me. I get sick just thinking about it.”

“Yeah, sorry about that but this is important, okay,” came the laconic gruff reply. “Try to not think about the body. What else did you see? Try to remember. We need more information to work with.”

Chris’ mind raced, a picture of a pale face surrounded by black hair, six floors up, intruded into his mind but his mouth refused to form any words. He stood there looking like a goldfish, mouth furiously mobile but no sound coming out.

“Hello, are you there?” The detective’s voice came down the phone line jarring Chris from his soundless mouthings.

“Sorry. Yes. No. I mean I can’t remember anything further.” Chris replied, his mind racing, this was really weird. Really weird. Why couldn’t he just tell the detective what he saw?

“Okay I wasn’t that hopeful. I’ll give you my number at work and if you can remember anything further give me a ring,” the detective said, sounding disappointed. Chris looked around for something to write on, eventually grabbing a blue envelope that was lying on the kitchen bench near the phone and scribbled detective Mike Carruthers’s phone number on the back. After he hung up he tore the number off the letter and folding up the piece of blue paper, stuck it in his wallet behind some business cards.

Dining out that evening, now that he had some spare cash, in a quiet little Italian restaurant near his home, Chris sat alone and his thought drifted to Angela and the circumstances of her leaving him. Her leaving had pained him, especially since she had moved in with one of the managers from her firm. That had to hurt. In the nearly two years he and Angela had been together, he had loved her deeply and thought his love was reciprocated. It wasn't. Angela was practical and an opportunist. His fatal misunderstanding was believing that she loved him. Evidently love meant different things to different people. Admittedly he had only been employed on a part-time basis for five out of the last eighteen months since they had left university but surviving on Angela's income should not have been a hurdle in their relationship. "I guess she must have decided that she had ended up with a loser," Chris thought. "And she was probably right," he admitted ruefully to himself. He did miss the regular love-making though. Still his luck had changed for the better and new horizons were opening up.

One never knew what was around the next corner.

Soon to begin a job with a good quality advertising company and having only nine days to find a new apartment, he felt it would be easier to accomplish now that he was employed. Smiling to himself he finished his meal and went to sit at the bar, imbibing a couple of after dinner drinks and watching people. He was slightly lonely but didn't feel up to striking up a conversation with one of the 'ladies' at the bar. Being basically a shy person, meeting strangers was not easy for him. In fact, come to think of it, it was Angela who had first asked him out. He finished his drink, thanked the barman and headed for home and his own bed.

Friday was relatively uneventful, a trip to the garage in the morning confirmed his old Ford was terminally ill and had got to the stage of not being worth fixing. He talked to the shop owner and picked up a couple of hundred dollars selling it for spares. It was better than nothing but now he was careless. The parting was not easy, that old machine had seen him through college and had been his trusted transportation during many an adventure in those earlier days. It had whisked him off to many a beautifull spot in the countryside where he had camped in it overnight and it had also been a moving motel for backseat liaisons. In fact he had lost his virginity in that old car. Patting the bonnet on the way out of the garage he felt another chapter in his life come to a close and mentally brushed away a tear as he strode away from the establishment, putting the sale money in his wallet, determined not to look back.

On the way home he checked in with a couple of real estate agents that he had been pestering lately, to update them on his employment status, as they could be usefull in the hunt for a place to live. When he arrived home the red light on the stereo was on again. Chris was ninety nine percent sure he'd switched it off. Not feeling like the rap/hip hop of the black CD, he played the next couple of CD's on the stacker, read for a while then, at the approach of evening, went out for a pizza and a six-pack of beers. Having to get up early Saturday morning for apartment hunting he decided to turn in after three or four beers and went to bed early.

The next morning the alarm went off bright and early. Chris rolled groggily out of bed, dressed quickly after showering, then staggered off to the newsagents for the Saturday paper. He was going to crack the apartment thing today; he really felt it in his bones. Returning home he put coffee on. Half an hour later with his first coffee of the day half

drunk and the newspaper spread out in front of him with circles and arrows all over the pages of the letting section and a growing list of telephone numbers on the scribble pad beside him, he looked up to find the red light of the stereo staring back at him.

“God damn,” he muttered. “I’m sure I turned that thing off.” As he stared at it, the light captivated him, until his vision was filled with a comforting red glow. Spellbound he rose and walked to the stereo, picking up the remote and cycling the stacker back to the black CD. He chose track three and pressed the PLAY button. Almost immediately the beat insinuated its way into his body, building to a toe tapping start of a song.

Home sweet home, that’s what they tell ya,
 ‘Till they come to take your keys away,
 Gotta have some money to pay the rent yeah,
 Or sleep in the park ‘till the break of day.
 The subway ain’t cool and my box is wet yeah,
 Not enough cash for a hotel room.
 Doorways got the urine and wet cigarette butts.
 Watch for Mr. Nasty in the doom and gloom.

I don’t want much, a place to sleep in,
 A very small area to call my own.
 Don’t need no luxury but dry is important,
 So I can get some sleep in the place called home

Our house is a very, very, very fine house,
 But we ain’t got no yard you see,
 Just a pot plant on the balcony,
 In a vertical slum, it’s the new industry.
 It’s easier to keep the rats in a place,
 That’s upright and occupies a smaller space,
 Where overpopulation is not a problem
 ‘Cause the excess falls off and drops to the bottom.

I don’t want much - a place to sleep in,
 A very small area to call my own,
 Don’t need no luxury but dry is important,
 So I can get some sleep in a place called home.

But you are special my chosen minion,
 Not for you those verticals slums,
 You need the space and the light to work in,
 To spread the word of the Special One.
 Somewhere pleasant where we can play now,
 Somewhere fine where I can come,
 No point in having a new disciple,
 If the word’s not spread - ‘My will be done.’

The telephone rang, startling Chris who almost dropped his empty coffee cup. "Christ, I was off with the fairies," he thought as he switched the stereo off and went and picked up the phone, "Hello, Chris speaking."

"Is that Mr. Christopher Wilkens?" asked the well modulated, articulate female voice on the other end of the telephone line.

"Yeah, that's me." Chris' curiosity was aroused, as he was unfamiliar with the voice.

"Oh good. You don't know me, my name is Patricia Simpson. I was talking with Louise Goodman from the Fleeting Image Ad. Agency, she is an acquaintance of mine who I've known for years and she tells me that you may be looking for an apartment."

"Possibly." Chris was a little puzzled by this turn of events and decided to be carefull. It could be a scam. "You know of one?" he queried.

"Well actually, I own an apartment in a very nice area of town and it has a rather hefty mortgage. As I work as an air stewardess and am only in town at odd times, I let out half the apartment. Unfortunately while I was out of town last trip, there was a fatal accident and I no longer have a tenant. I can't afford to have it empty too long. Because I am very particular about whom I have in the apartment, I was interested in hearing about you from Louise. She said you are quite a nice person, well presented and have good references, so I thought I would give you a ring and see if you are interested. I hope you don't mind."

Chris was blown away, right out of the blue, just like that, this was really weird.

"Mind? No, not at all. It is really good of you to contact me. Yes I am interested! Where do we go from here?"

"Well," came the reply, "I have a flight out tomorrow night and would like to get something sorted out before then if possible. I will be in all day today. Would you be able to come over if you are not busy, so you can see the apartment and I can meet you face to face and have a chat? The building is the Cobb Apartments on Junction Road not far from the intersection with Fowler Street. Do you know the area?"

"Yeah sure. I'll have a shower and grab some breakfast, say about an hour from now?"

"That would be lovely," came back the reply.

Chris wrote down the address which seemed somewhat familiar and then after a few pleasantries, hung up. His heart was soaring and he found himself humming snatches of a song only recently heard.

"I don't want much, a place to sleep in,
A very small area to call my own."

He suddenly realized it was the song he had just heard on the stereo. How coincidental, a song about a place to live, then he gets that phone call. He looked at the address in his hand, the same suburb as Steve's place. That was why it was familiar. Even better.

It was only as the cab was cruising down the tree lined avenue about an hour later that Chris realized why the street name had sounded familiar. That was confirmed when the cab pulled up outside the Cobb apartment building. The same building where, just three short days before, that horrifying episode had occurred. He paid the cabby with a slight tremor of the hand and a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He turned and saw the place where the body had hit the footpath. There, about 10m from the doorway of the apartment, was a scuffed chalk outline of a body and the dark blood stain, sucked into the stone of the footpath and resistant to removal. Tearing his gaze from the unfortunate spot with a slight shudder, Chris entered the apartment building through the revolving glass front

doors and headed for the lift banks. Not more than three paces into the foyer, a uniformed doorman slid in front of Chris.

"Excuse me sir, I don't believe you are a tenant. Could you state your business please?"

"Sure, I'm here to see a Ms. Patricia Simpson."

"Very good sir. If you don't mind waiting for a moment, I'll just ring up and check with Ms. Simpson. Your name please?"

"Chris Wilkens."

"Very good Mr. Wilkens." The doorman used the telephone on his desk to call from.

"Ah, Ms. Simpson, there is a Mr. Chris Wilkens here to see you. Yes. Thank you." The doorman turned to Chris with a pleasant smile on his face, "Sorry sir, but you understand. We have a secure building here, like to keep it that way. Just take the lift up to the sixth floor, turn left out of the lifts, Apartment one. Have a nice day."

"Wow," thought Chris entering the lift and taking a last look around the foyer before the lift doors closed, "This is a really cool. An apartment building with a doorman and security. I could get used to that." The lift whispered up quietly and the doors opened onto a plush, plum colored carpet. Traffic noise was barely discernible as he turned left out of the lift heading across the foyer. Just as he reached the apartment door, it was opened by a tall, slim woman. Not as tall as Chris' one hundred and eighty-five centimetres but nonetheless statuesque. She was a very attractive thirty-something with perfect make up and not a hair out of place, just like a grownup, life-size Barbie doll.

"Chris Wilkens? Hello, I'm Patricia Simpson" She held out a manicured hand, devoid of rings but with perfectly applied caramel colored nail polish. Chris took the offered hand in his and they shook while he studied her. She looked, and, Chris realized, smelt great. Her clothing was casual but very well made, probably designer. She favored browns and greens which set off her hazel eyes and dark brown hair to best advantage. He had no idea what the subtle perfume was that she was wearing but it sure was easy on the nose.

"Pleased to meet you," he replied and realized he actually was

Chris was gently drawn into the apartment and given a tour. What a place, modern furniture, great décor, quiet, air conditioned, light and airy. It was only when they got to the balcony that Chris felt uncomfortable, the view was great but looking down he could see the chalk outline and stain on the footpath. He decided not to mention his involvement to Patricia but she noticed his glance over the edge and the tightening of his facial muscles, so she gently laid a hand on his forearm and invited him inside for coffee. Chris felt better sitting in the kitchen watching Patricia put coffee together. She was really easy to get along with so he decided to get the ball rolling.

"What happened? What was she like?" he inquired.

Patricia turned, startled, with an odd look on her face.

"Sally? She seemed pretty normal to me. Mid twenties, successful model. She'd been in the city three to four years and appeared to know her way around. I met her through a friend about a year ago, when I was looking for someone to rent here. She came with good references, wasn't any trouble, settled in quickly and kept the place clean. In fact, until Wednesday she was the ideal tenant. The police are a little suspicious but can't prove anything. Apparently, she had some outstanding debts and there's a question about cocaine usage but nothing to suggest suicide. Shame really, she was a lovely person." Patricia sipped her coffee and looked over the rim of the cup at Chris who was trying not to think about a white face and black hair. She continued, "Her things will be removed shortly and the apartment will be available from next Saturday." Then she dropped a minor bombshell,

"After we have had our coffee, would you like to see the parking." Chris' face registered his amazement.

"The apartment has parking? The detective that rang me about Sally mentioned something about parking but I didn't see any driveway when I arrived."

"No," she seemed amused. "They built it with the entrance to the underground car park in the back street."

Coffee's finished, they rode the elevator down to the underground parking area in the basement and she showed him the automatic, card operated, entry gate and the apartment's parking spot.

"I don't have a car as I'm in and out of town all the time with my job," she told him. "I use taxis when necessary, which saves the expenses of car ownership. So you are quite welcome to use the space if you want to."

"I don't have a car at present either," was Chris's rueful response. "But I hope to have one soon. Thank you. Does that mean that you are offering me the apartment?"

"Yes," was the short reply.

"I am not sure I will be able to afford it."

"Don't worry, you will be pleasantly surprised."

The pair then headed back upstairs to finish their coffees and over the next hour, finalized the tenancy agreement.

The result was an ecstatic Chris, leaving with a set of keys to the apartment, a garage door pass card and an introduction to the doorman, one of the three who looked after the place around the clock. Exiting the building he turned left to walk the block to Steve's place. On the way he thought about the name of the apartments, Cobb, a male swan and that girl had taken a swan dive off the sixth floor balcony. Coincidence? The white face and black hair leaning over the balcony once more intruded into his thoughts but he banished the vision, not wanting any problems on this glorious day. As he walked, he hummed snatches of a song.

‘Our house is a very, very, very fine house,
But we ain’t got no yard you see.’

Chris purchased a hot dog for lunch and ate it while walking. He arrived at Steve's house early Saturday afternoon, still chewing, to find a scene of confusion. There were a number of cars parked outside the place and the front door was wide open with sad looking people coming and going. He walked through the open front door and made his way up the long hallway in search of Steve, looking into the various rooms of the house as he passed them. He saw a number of Steve's friends in various states of shock and grief. A young girl was sitting on the lounge in one room, sobbing into a large handkerchief and being consoled by an older woman. In the study, a group of people were arranged in a circle, heads together, discussing something quietly. Chris wandered on through to the kitchen, puzzled, where he found his friend Steve looking pale and drawn. Mary leaned against him with her arm around his waist. All Steve could manage was a weak smile for Chris.

"Hi Chris, good to see you. We're having a bit of a bad time at present. Most of the Bible group is here."

"Yeah," Chris replied. "I don't know a lot of them but I saw them on the way through. Everybody looks really unhappy. What's up?"

Steve swallowed, then looked at Chris, “Remember that couple you met Wednesday night? George and Doris Stansbury.”

“Yeah. I bought a raffle ticket from them.”

“Well they were both killed in a head on collision with a truck last night about nine thirty. They had left the church meeting and were going home as usual. Apparently their car was on the wrong side of the road and they collided with a semi head on. The car exploded on impact, killing both them and the semi driver. The police have surmised that George may have had a heart attack but are unable to verify that due to the intensity of the blaze. The funeral is next Wednesday.”

“Jesus,” Chris breathed out. “We were only talking to them three nights ago. What the hell’s going on? That’s four dead people in one week. It’s getting too much,” He sat down, stunned, feeling a bit weak in the knees. The hot dog he had just eaten forming an uncomfortable lump in his stomach.

“Coincidence,” Steve muttered, more it seemed to convince himself, rather than anyone else. “Just coincidence.”

Chris felt his friend’s pain. “Anything I can do to help?”

“No, there is nothing to be done really. There will be a special service at our Church tomorrow for friends and family but other than that, everything that can be done is being done.” Steve sighed.

The rest of that Saturday and Sunday passed in a bit of a haze. Neither of the two friends felt like partying or having a good time. The death of George and Doris weighed heavily on Steve. Chris wasn’t as badly affected, as he didn’t know the couple as well as his friend but he felt Steve’s sorrow. He tried to console Steve and assisted by staying and organising the running of refreshments to Steve’s friends all Saturday afternoon and then spending some of Sunday afternoon with him. For some reason the idea of church on Sunday morning repulsed him slightly so he stayed home until the services were over, knowing that Mary would go with Steve to give him support.

Chapter 5.

Monday morning, at five minutes to nine, Chris entered the lobby of the tall, modern, glass and steel building where the offices of the Fleeting Image Advertising Agency were housed on the fourteenth to sixteenth floors. There was a constant flow of people in the lobby, hurriedly crossing to the lifts in their rush to reach their various work places on time. Some of them, Chris supposed, were probably his new workmates. He was excited at the thought of working again but still took time to inspect the large lobby. When he had been here last week for his job interview, it had all been a mad rush and there had been little time for a look around. After his interview, when he had left, his mind had been on other things. Off to his left were a row of small businesses; a small bar and coffee shop, a flower shop, a small convenience store and a jewelers. On the other side of the lobby were the offices of maintenance staff and security, with the names of the various departments displayed plainly on the doors and the mirrored windows reflecting the foyer back at him. He inspected his reflection to check how he looked in his new clothes, then gathering himself together he headed for the lifts, ready to begin his new job.

Chris stepped out of the lift on the fourteenth floor directly in front of the logo announcing the Fleeting Image Ad. Agency. All was quiet. There was no hustle and bustle, there were no phones endlessly ringing, there were no minions rapidly flitting to and fro through the offices, in fact there was just him and a rather bored looking janitor.

The morning had a rather surreal quality to it he reflected as he stood in the quiet surroundings. The air pollution outside was thicker than normal and the light wasn't as bright as it usually was. Through the windows it lent the outside city-scape an air of unreality. The colours were subtly wrong, with a yellowish, purple tinge everywhere he looked. In addition, the contrast was diminished due to the lower clarity of the air and the diffraction of light by the particulate debris. Inside the offices the effect was hardly noticeable, just a subtle shift in the feel of the morning. A bit like the change before a thunderstorm, when the clouds gather and partially obscure the sun.

He wandered around the reception area on the fourteenth floor thinking about the lovely Louise, wondering if he would get to see her soon so he could personally thank her for helping to find him his new apartment. "I wonder if a dozen red roses would be over the top?" he mused to himself.

It was during his third trip around the reception area that the lift doors opened and a shortish, well appointed, young blonde girl stepped out of the lift.

"Good morning," Chris got in first. "I'm the new guy, supposed to start work here this morning."

"Hi New Guy. I'm Cynthia. Nice threads. I assume by the fact you're standing here that you didn't get the orientation tour when you were hired or you would have known that we don't start work here until nine thirty."

"Huh, sorry. Mr. Garvin told me nine o'clock." Chris stuck out his hand, "My name is Chris Wilkins."

Cynthia swapped her purse from her right hand to her left hand and took his proffered hand with a surprisingly firm handshake. "Call me Cindy, everyone does. Mr. Garvin has no idea which way is up when it comes to little things like starting times, we haven't started at nine for over a year now. He just flits in and out on his travels and leaves the running of the company to his new partner. I'm the receptionist here and kind of unofficially run this level. Like, if you are going to be late or out of the office for a while, just let me know and I can cover for you. You know, one big happy family." She smiled sweetly, "Wanna coffee?"

"Yeah, sure. Thanks," replied Chris. He followed her around the back of the lift banks to a spacious kitchen area with cooking facilities as well as a coffee machine and a kettle. Cindy busied herself in an obvious morning routine as she filled the coffee machine and the kettle with water, set out variously shaped and colored cups and topped up the coffee in the machine. There seemed to be enough cookies in the cookie jar to satisfy her inspection so she made two cups of instant coffee while the machine was heating up.

"How do you take your coffee?" Cindy enquired. "We use coffee whitener here. If you want real milk you will have to bring your own. The fridge is over there, just put your name on the carton and no one will touch it."

"White and one please." Chris had that new guy feel, almost exactly the same as when he started First Grade at school, same thing starting high school and repeated again at the start of university. On one level it was a pleasant feeling, on another it was scary. He surreptitiously checked Cindy out while she was bustling about. Boy, was she a cutie. Handing him his coffee, Cindy looked Chris up and down. "Before you get any ideas, I have a boyfriend and everything works better around here if you just treat me as Cindy, nothing more."

Chris felt the color rushing to his face and his shoes became extremely interesting.

"Don't worry," she continued, "I take it as a compliment. Now if you have finished with your inspection, grab your coffee and I'll take you on a quick tour of the offices and show you your work area. We have about fifteen minutes before the phones start ringing."

Sipping her coffee, she headed out of the door, turning right. Chris followed.

For the next fifteen minutes, as people were drifting in to work, Cindy showed Chris around the fourteenth floor offices. The layout wasn't difficult to get to grips with. As everyone's office or work area had their name attached someplace. Reception was in the centre of the building opposite the lifts, the stationery storeroom was behind reception while the toilets were located in the stairwell beside the lifts. The kitchen, where he had already been, was behind the lift bank. The rest of the floor was given over to offices with glass walls or open plan work areas. The whole effect was light and airy and the view from the fourteenth floor windows was simply amazing, seemingly going on forever despite the air quality. Chris learned that the fifteenth floor was totally given over to equipment storage, video splicing and sound rooms, a small movie theatre, conference and presentation rooms. It was the anvil, he was informed, where the junior advertising people were hammered into shape when their work was presented to some, or all of the partners who inhabited the sixteenth floor. He understood the meaning of the unfinished sentence that Cindy left hanging, regarding junior advertising people who weren't malleable enough or whose ideas were poor.

"If you last longer than three months.....," was the last he heard as she headed back to her spot in front of the lifts, leaving him at his own work area, a large desk with a low LCD widescreen on each side and windows behind.

"There is a chance you might become an admman." The sentence was finished by an extremely handsome young man in a dark, three piece suit, sitting in the adjoining workspace.

"Hi. I'm Andrew and for the next few days I'm to be your Mother Hen. Bosses orders."

"Chris." He shook Andrew's hand finding it surprisingly warm. There was something about Andrew that Chris immediately liked. He didn't know why, maybe it was the impish smile or the way a lock of his black hair dangled over his forehead or the feeling that he had known Andrew for ages. Odd. Chris didn't normally get that friendly with people that

quickly but if this guy was going to be looking out for him and was in the next workspace, it was probably for the best. He secretly hoped that the feeling was reciprocated as he really wanted to succeed here.

The next few days were busy ones for Chris. Work started each day at nine thirty and people started drifting off around five in the evening. He gradually met more of his co-workers and was initially given small jobs to do. His special skills in computer graphics were not ignored and very shortly after starting with the company, a brand new computer with a huge video chip and lots of graphics software arrived. It took ages for the installation and it would be a good couple of weeks before he was able to do the thing justice and suss out all of its capabilities. One of his first tasks was a simple morphing of a breakfast cereal bowl into a coffee cup for a video presentation. His computer handled it with ease but he knew if there were big jobs to do, he would need to use the monster computer upstairs. Still, having his own computer for the smaller jobs made him feel like part of a team and a little bit important. Every time Chris had a question regarding work or protocols, Andrew was there, cheery, tanned face split by the ever present, likeable grin. "He must spend a lot of weekends out of doors," thought Chris, slightly jealous of Andrew's tan. Still, the way the company worked its staff was quite simple, a junior adperson was given an assignment and had two weeks to come up with a couple of presentations. The big company accounts were all handled by upstairs, although some of the bright up and coming adpersons were often seconded onto larger projects. Chris learned that the first fortnight was usually considered to be a settling in period and the small commissions he was getting were being used to ease him into his work. It gave his superiors an idea of his capabilities before he received his first proper assignment. Andrew made him aware of a very important point. If he did his work well and quickly, there could be quite a bit of free time available for private use, as they nearly always had a fortnight for each assignment. If he finished an assignment in three days. Well. The conclusion was left hanging but was obvious.

Wednesday morning his phone rang as he settled into his work area. He picked it up.

"Hello, Chris speaking."

"Hi Chris, Cindy. There is a Patricia Simpson on the line wishing to speak with you. Shall I put her through?"

His mind ticked over, Patricia Simpson, Patricia Simpson, the apartment!

"Yeah, sure," he replied. There was a click.

"Good morning Ms. Simpson, is everything alright. You know, the references and everything."

"Good morning Chris. No problem," came the reply. "Sorry to ring you at work, it is just that I am in a bit of a dilemma which I would like to discuss with you. Do you have time to talk?"

"Sure." Chris leaned back puzzled and put his feet up on a handy desk drawer.

"I flew back in last night," Patricia continued, "and there was a message on the machine from Sally's parents. You remember, the girl who used to live with me. So I rang them.

Well, to cut a long story short, they only want her personal possessions and her car, which the police have. They are not interested in her furniture. They told me to dispose of it as I saw fit. The reason for my call is to see if you need any items of furniture for when you move in. Otherwise I will have them cleared out."

Chris was stunned. He glanced over at Andrew's workstation to find Andrew looking at him with raised eyebrows and a curious smile on his face. He swallowed with difficulty and

managed to compose his voice. He couldn't however get rid of the prickly feeling between his shoulder blades.

"Well, actually, I don't have much furniture or anything since my girlfriend moved out a couple of months ago. I was going to go shopping on Saturday to buy what I needed for the apartment. I really only have a stereo system and a chair at the moment."

"How amazingly wonderful. You don't mind taking over a furnished room do you?"

"Not at all," replied Chris, a sense of elation creeping over him.

"Good. That will save me a great deal of work. I am flying out again Friday so I won't be there when you move in. However, feel free to use whatever you find in the fridge and I will set to now, clear out Sally's personal belongings and send them to her folks. The police have finished with their investigation. Apparently, there were traces of cocaine in her system but nothing has been found in her room. So I am free to go in there now and clean up. Everything should be done by the time you move in on Saturday. You still okay with moving in?"

"Yeah, sure," and funny enough he was okay about it. The thought of the dead girl didn't bother him at all now. Hell, he had gotten over that pretty quickly. He glanced up and noticed that Andrew was still scrutinizing him, a knowing smile hovering around his lips.

"Well, goodbye Mr. Wilkins. I'll see you early next week."

"Call me Chris please."

"Ok Chris and you must call me Patricia."

"I shall. Bye Patricia and thanks heaps for the call."

"My pleasure. Bye."

He hung up the phone and sat back, staring out of the window, pondering. Things were really happening for him at the moment. He must thank Louise for helping him get the apartment.

Cindy was in her usual place at reception when he wandered over. Leaning on her desk, he casually asked about Louise' daily timetable.

"Aiming a bit high aren't we? You've only been here a couple of days," was Cindy's pert reply to his enquiry. Chris immediately colored up with embarrassment.

"It's not like that at all, it's just that she helped me get a good apartment and I wanted to thank her. You know, take her some flowers or something."

"A likely story," was the reply but he spotted the amusement on her face. "She'll be at her desk about one o'clock this afternoon. After lunch. She always is."

"Thanks Cindy, I owe you one." He smiled at her before returning to his work area.

Fortuitously, the foyer of the building in which he worked had a flower shop, which he had observed on his entrance that very first morning. After lunch, a bunch of a dozen red roses clutched in his hand, Chris headed up to the sixteenth floor. As he stepped out of the lift he spotted the well shaped rear end of a girl in jeans leaning over Louise' desk, chatting. She looked over at him as the lift doors closed behind him and he had a jolt of recognition but couldn't place her. How could anyone forget such a beautiful pale face surrounded by such thick, luxuriant black hair? He caught himself staring and slightly embarrassed continued walking toward the desk. Before he got there, the girl had said something to Louise and hurriedly left, heading in the opposite direction. Chris almost called after her but didn't. Instead he presented Louise with the dozen red roses and a big thank you for helping him find a place to live. She was delighted with her flowers, so much so, that it was half an hour before he made it back downstairs. He never did ask who the black haired girl was though.

After work he walked over to Steve's place. Today was the day of the funeral for George and Doris Stansbury who had recently been killed in an unexplained collision with a semi trailer. They had been regulars at Steve's bible group meetings and Steve was still very saddened. Chris felt he wanted to help his friend, if he could, in any way.

When Chris arrived, he found a very somber Steve, sitting with a group of people all dressed in mourning black, having a quiet drink. No one was saying much and an occasional sob was all that broke the stony silence. George and Doris had been well liked among their circle of friends and they raised a useful amount of money for their Church. They would be sorely missed. Chris accepted a drink and sat there, quietly lending his presence. His mind however, was idly speculating on whether or not the raffle for the car would be drawn a week on Sunday as was planned. He had a ticket with a one-in-a-thousand chance of winning and wanted that car. One just never knew. All the grief around him was starting to become unbearable. What was the matter with these people, George and Doris were dead.

Grief was a selfish act of the living.

After a suitable interval he made his goodbyes and left the sad environment, it was too much for him, all that grief. On his way home, his mood lifted as he thought of his own good fortune. Life had started to turn around now. Soon he would be in his own furnished apartment, just up the road from Steve's place and within walking distance to work. Three more days.

As the day of moving drew nearer, Chris' excitement mounted and he couldn't get out of work quickly enough on Friday evening to head home for his last night in the old apartment. Finally, to be rid of memories of Angela, which teased him constantly from the bare walls of the apartment they once used to share. Chris couldn't sleep properly, tossing and turning with the burning anticipation of the impending move, so he arose at six in the morning on Saturday. He had the whole day to move but he mentally planned it as he prepared his breakfast. A few hours or so to pack his things up and get a cab over to the new place, a couple of hours back here to clean the place up and then a trip to the real estate office to drop the keys in. With any luck the bond would be returned on Monday. The extra cash would be useful and he would probably need it before he got paid, that was for sure. Two thousand dollars didn't go far these days.

After his final shower at the apartment, Chris got dressed then made breakfast, packing various foods into cardboard boxes as he munched on his toast and marmalade. Some of the items were pretty old, so they got chuck into the charity box for the soup kitchen. The coffee he made was excellent and he took it into the bathroom with him while he cleaned up and put the contents of the bathroom cabinet into yet another cardboard box. By the time the alarm clock in the bedroom went off at seven thirty he was on a roll.

Switching off the alarm he started packing up the room. Not much to it really, his clothes, a little bedding and a few personal possessions. The room took on the look of all stripped down bedrooms, the bare single mattress indicating lack of occupation and all the personal style in the room disappeared into yet another cardboard box. Chris made a couple of trips, carrying his boxes out to his front door. On his way back through the lounge, the stereo winked at him his with its little red eye of a power light. Realizing that the black CD was still in the machine he picked up the remote and pressed the PLAY button to have a little music to work by. There was a very slight hiss which suddenly disappeared as the first

chords of the next song blasted from the speakers. Once again the machine seemed to have picked the next song on Side 'A'.

How did that work

?Chris stood rooted to the spot, breathing slowing as his eyes glazed.

Ain't signin' no deals to get me no car
 When I can go 'jack one from outside a bar.
 A red one, a black one, a big V8
 An' all I do to drive it, is change the number plate.
 Don't want no spoofy turbo
 Don't want no Princess wheels
 Just give me a big V8 man
 'Cos I like the way it feels

G.M. made in America, Chevy's good to go
 A red Corvette convertible, that car has got some soul.
 Drivin' with the top down, lookin' really cool
 In wheels I didn't pay for, I ain't nobody's fool.
 Christos needs a motor car
 You hear just what were singin'.
 That Mr. D. he toyin' with you
 Just listen for the telephone ringin'

G. M. made in America, Chevy's good to go
 A red Corvette convertible, that car has got some soul.
 Drivin' with the top down, lookin' really cool
 In wheels I didn't pay for, I ain't no ones fool.

A noise intruded into Chris' brain. The telephone. He automatically turned off the stereo and answered it.

"Hey Adman, it's me." Steve sounded a lot brighter than he had the other night.

"Morning Steve." Chris replied a little fuzzily.

"Do you need a hand with anything? I am free all day and I know today is Moving day."

Chris considered for a brief moment, "Yeah. I wouldn't mind a lift over to the new place in a couple of hours. That will give me time to finish the last of the packing and clean this place up. We could drop the keys into the Real Estate office on the way over and you could check the new place out. I'll even introduce you to one of the doormen. Ok?"

"No problem Buddy. I'll be there in two. See you." With that, Steve hung up.

Chris stared at the phone in his hand then glanced over at the stereo. No, he wouldn't put any more music on. He didn't have time to stand and listen to songs anyway. Today he was out of here. Cool song though he thought as he replaced the handset in its cradle, he always did like Corvette convertibles. Luckily, he'd arranged for the phone to be cut off tomorrow and not today.

With the morning sun beaming through the apartment windows and the low hubbub of street noise drifting up as a pleasant background, Chris set to. Before long he had his remaining few possessions packed and the flat cleaned up. He left the mattress leaning against the bedroom wall; maybe some one would find a use for it. All the while he was working he unconsciously hummed a tune only very recently heard.

“G.M. made in America, Chevy’s the way to go.....”

Two hours later, when the doorbell rang, he had finished. The suitcase and small stack of boxes by the door contained all of his worldly goods, including his stereo system. He felt a small glow of achievement as he led Steve through the clean apartment to the gleaming kitchen, where two cups of steaming coffee stood by the microwave.

“Looks great,” commented Steve. “And coffee too. Man, you are organized.”

They chatted for a while over the coffee then rinsed the mugs, unplugged the microwave and proceeded to load up Steve’s car with the boxes. Ten minutes later, all packed and ready to go, Chris took one final look around the apartment, shut the power off at the mains, locked up and headed down the stairs for the final time. He even remembered to take his name card out of the letterbox. Enjoyable as it was living there, Angela’s presence intruded. Being left for another man and having your apartment emptied of furniture was not happiness making. It was a shame he had to leave. Still, a new life beckoned and the apartment he was moving into was far better than this place.

‘Time to start my new life.’ He thought as he got into Steve’s car.

It was a relatively short trip to the new place. Past the real estate agents to drop the keys off and after a few directions to Steve, they were pulling into the underground carpark of his new apartment building.

Steve was visibly excited, “Wow. This is really cool. Pity about your old car though, having an underground car park and all available.”

“Yeah. I’ll start looking for another car after I get paid,” responded Chris. “The private elevator over there has its own key. We can bypass Cerberus at the gates and go straight up to the apartment.”

Steve shivered. “You may only be referring to the doorman but I never make jokes like that. You never quite know about that sort of thing. Being a believer certainly changes your attitude to stuff like that.”

Chris laughed, “Sorry pal, I forgot you became a bible basher. Still, the lift makes things easier and when we’ve got the stuff up to the apartment I’ll make us a coffee and give you the grand tour.”

The two friends worked quickly and soon there was a small stack of boxes in the entrance hallway of the new apartment. Steve had already commented on the carpeted foyer of the sixth floor with its plush carpet leading to the front doors of both apartments on that level. “Who lives in that one?” Steve asked, pointing at the other door.

“No idea,” his friend replied.

Finally, with everything shifted into the apartment and promised coffee in hand, Chris took Steve on a tour of the apartment. As they entered the lounge room, Steve let out an involuntary low whistle of surprise. The open plan space was beautifully furnished with expensive, high quality furnishings. Some of the polished wooden furniture gave the impression of being very old, with exquisite carvings crawling over the exposed surfaces.

The sun flooded in through the large windows and the floor to ceiling glass doors leading to the patio. The whole apartment was light and airy.

"Well you have certainly landed on your feet with this place. Pity it had to come the way it did," commented Steve. "Is that the balcony where.....?"

"Yeah," replied Chris quickly. "That's where she fell from. It's something that I guess I'll have to learn to live with."

The two friends carried on with their tour, carrying their coffees, a little of the shine taken off the day. Chris' room was clean and bare of ornaments. The big window in the bedroom faced toward the west, looking out over the smaller buildings along Junction Road, the east-west avenue at the front of the building, which the north-facing balcony of the living room looked down over. It was a decent sized bedroom containing a queen-sized bed with a bed head, matching bedside cabinets and a matching dresser with a large mirror. There were also empty built-in wardrobes.

"You can almost see my place from here," observed Steve, staring out of the window. "No need to make a stranger of yourself now, although by the looks of this place I should visit you. What did you say your landlady did?"

"Sorry, I forgot to tell you. She's an air hostess and is generally away for four to five days at a stretch. Should work out quite well though. Yeah, if you want to cruise up, shouldn't be a problem, although I don't think I could cope with religious groups."

"Don't worry your little pagan self; I'll conduct those at my place." Steve replied. Then he fell silent, gazing out of the window with a strange, sad expression on his usually happy face. Chris had never seen his friend like this before and grew slightly troubled. This was a whole different Steve.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Steve appeared a little distant and replied quietly. "I am just a little worried is all. The last two weeks have been really, really weird. Just over a fortnight ago today we saw that colored guy get killed outside of Tonies Coffee Shop, then you got the job in the Ad. agency a few days later on the following Wednesday. That same afternoon a girl dies, virtually at your feet, apparently from suicide but there is no suicide note. Two days after that, George and Doris die in an unusual head-on accident with a semi and the next day you score this apartment. One week later, here we are where the girl who died used to live. Doesn't it strike you as a little too coincidental?"

Chris thought for a minute, then grinned, "Naw, it is *just* coincidence. For once in my life I guess I am getting lucky for a change. What? Do you think there is some grand plan in all of this?" As he spoke, the image of a ghostly hand removing a CD from an airborne boom box gently intruded into his thoughts. Hell, he hadn't thought of that for a while. He shuddered involuntarily as a pale face surrounded by black hair also appeared in his memory.

"Someone walk over your grave?" joked Steve.

"No, Must be a draught in here or something," Chris quickly replied. "Want another coffee?"

"I'll take a rain check if you don't mind. I've got to get home and clean up, there's a bible discussion group happening at Mary's place tonight and I have to go. She hasn't got a boyfriend at the moment and I really like her. It appears to be mutual. Religion doesn't preclude sex you know."

Chris smiled at his friend's enthusiasm, so different from the somber attitude of a few moments before.

"Ok. Fine by me. I'll walk you downstairs and introduce you to the doorman on duty, whichever one it is. I haven't met them all yet either."

Fifteen minutes later, having seen his friend out, Chris stood in front of the balcony doors, gazing out. The sun was sliding down the sky toward the west and in the angled light Chris saw traces of blue spots here and there on the glass. Fingerprint powder, the police had been thorough in their investigation. They must have suspected something. A pale face with black hair rose unbidden to his memory, leaning over a balcony, leaning over a desk! It came back to him with a rush. Louise at work, flowers, him stepping out of a lift. He made a mental note to casually ask Louise, next time he saw her, about the pale-faced black haired girl. In the meantime he had plenty to do. He looked around the lounge room, taking in the huge flat screen plasma T.V., BlueRay D.V.D., video, CD player and surround sound system. Well, entertainment was no problem; he would even be able to use his own system in his bedroom. He wandered over to the CD rack, chose 5 CD's and put them into the player turning the music up loud. The next three to four hours were spent unpacking his meager possessions and setting his room up how he liked it. Later, he watched the sunset from his bedroom window, bathed in the fiery red glow from the last rays of the dying sun which also painted the wall behind him. For a moment, his silhouette was a black imprint on a blood red wall, then it was gone. After the sunset, he stacked some of his food into the kitchen cupboards then made himself something to eat and watched cable T.V.

The rest of the weekend turned out to be fairly mundane. Chris found the nearest convenience store when he went for milk, met another of the doormen and generally just mooned around the apartment familiarizing himself with where everything was located and preparing himself for his second week at work by washing and ironing a few clothes. His future looked really good from here.

Chapter 6

Another Monday morning rolled around and very low pressure it was. A nine thirty start, nine blocks up the road, heading east. Cool. If he rushed he could get up as late as eight thirty in the morning but there was no need to rush. Chris showered leisurely, dressed in some of his comfortable, new casual clothes then breakfasted and wandered off to work. The day passed rapidly. He finished a couple of computer jobs and a few loose ends from the previous week that he had not finished. People seemed to be pleased with his work and he noticed Andrew keeping a watchful eye on him. A bit too watchful at times. Chris was starting to think that Andrew may be gay. That would explain the tan that looked like it was sprayed on. He didn't bump into Louise either, as she worked two floors higher up the building and rarely came down to his floor. It would be a bit obvious to waltz up there and ask about the raven haired girl he had seen leaning over her desk last week. He let it pass for now. No doubt he would see Louise eventually at some later time.

When he arrived home that evening Patricia was there, looking absolutely stunning in her hostess uniform. She was a bit older than him and also his landlady, so Chris pocketed his libido and complimented her on her looks. Patricia smiled and thanked him. Heading for her room she called out over her shoulder.

"I'm just going to get showered and change. Then, if you don't mind, we'll have a chat if you're not going out. I've eaten already." With that she disappeared into her room.

Chris pulled a TV dinner out of the freezer and stuck it in the microwave. He couldn't be bothered to cook tonight, so 'nuked' food was the easiest. He had just put the plastic plate in the rubbish and washed his knife and fork when Patricia came out of her room. She was dressed casually in slacks and sweater, her hair was down and the makeup gone, replaced with shiny moisturizer. The fine lines around her eyes and on her top lip were just visible

now and Chris suddenly realized that Patricia was quite a bit older than he had at first thought.

"No need to look like that kid. I'm not quite old enough to be your mother." Patricia jokingly commented. "How's the coffee coming along?"

Chris went bright scarlet. It felt like the colour started at his feet and rushed up to his ears. He was so embarrassed it just flooded over him.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to stare. It was just such a transformation from the working image. It took me by surprise. I feel such a klutz. Please forgive me."

"Nothing to forgive, Chris. My job requires me to be dressed up to the nines but there is no reason I can't be me when I feel like it. Let's both get a coffee and sit in the lounge if you are not going anywhere. I would like to get to know you a bit better, as you're going to be living in my house."

Chris made the coffees and dutifully followed Patricia into the lounge room, settling into one of the large comfortable chairs as Patricia went to the music centre and put on some Norah Jones and Diana Krall as background music then took a seat opposite him. She was a good listener and before long Chris found himself opening up to her and telling her about some of the things in his life that not even Steve was aware of.

His natural mother had been an orphan. Her father had died in the Vietnam War, just thirty five years of age and her mother could not face living without him and just faded away. Mom had died from cancer when he was just five years old. He had a younger brother, Michael, who was four years old then and a sister, Catherine, who was two years old when the tragedy occurred. His father, Luke, had been twenty-eight years of age when Mom died and was totally unprepared for what had happened, he literally fell apart. The cornerstone of a life together, being built around the family unit, a good job, a house, a car and three lovely children. The wife of his dreams, gone. Almost overnight. Chris couldn't understand his father's retreat from life and looking back, always thought that at that time he'd lost both of his parents. Grandma and Grandpa stepped in to fill the gap. The house went first. His father was drinking heavily and wasn't working so the house had to be sold because the mortgage wasn't being paid. His dad got angry a lot too, and looked rough and smelt terrible. Grandma, that was Dad's mum, ended up with four kids to look after but she'd done it all before and it is always easier the second time around. She whupped them all into shape and after 6-8 months his father had started to sober up and even managed a smile now and again. It was when Chris was six or seven that his dad first brought Jenny home to meet them all. Jenny had a bag full of smiles and smelt of flowers when she hugged them. She was nothing like his memory of his mother but then nothing ever is like a memory of a mother. Jenny soon became a regular visitor, Dad was happier than he had been in quite a while and so were Grandma and Grandpa. Everyone loved Jenny. There wasn't a mean bone in her body and when she smiled the sun shone. She raised the family as well as any mother could. Her one regret was being unable to have children of her own. His dad loved her fiercely. They had an excellent life together until several years ago when his parents had died together, instantly, in a highway accident. It had been a sad time for the kids but Grandma had been there as always before. Chris and his brother and sister had gotten a lot closer then and weathered the storm.

Chris saw tears welling up in Patricia's eyes and paused his story there.

"I'll just go and make another cup of coffee," she said as she quickly rose out of her chair and headed for the kitchen, wiping her face with the back of her hand. Chris sat back comfortably in his chair. He had forgotten how some people reacted to the story of his

childhood. For him, it was just something that had happened, something that he had to grow up with. Memories of his birth mother were few and ethereal. For all intents and purposes, Jenny was his mum. Michael and Catherine knew nobody else. They were a tight family until the accident. That was why he had difficulty in believing in a God. His parents were good people and didn't deserve to die so young after finding one another.

Patricia returned with two steaming mugs of coffee and handed him one.

"Sorry to leave suddenly, I just felt like another cup." No mention was made of tears and her eyes were dry now. "Please continue," she said, sitting down again with her feet curled under her.

So he did, telling her about school, sports, holidays and about meeting Steve at High School. How Steve became his best friend after the accident that claimed his parents, about Steve's folks and how Steve never seemed to do anything but always had money. Then he went on to tell her about University and how much he liked artwork and computer graphics. He hesitated before talking about Angela but once the subject was broached, he just carried on talking. It was almost cathartic talking to Patricia, so he just went right ahead. He had met Angela at Uni. They both shared computer classes and she was attractive in a homely sort of way. Before long they were a couple, going everywhere together and during the last year of University had moved in together. It was only after moving east that the relationship had started to change. Angela was a real go-getter and had scored a job pretty quickly after their move. Her personal development raced ahead of his and the working environment had changed her. So much so, that she had eventually decided that a future with Chris, who was a bit of a dreamer, was not enough for her. Not long after, she left and moved in with an executive from her company.

Chris paused. "That just about brings us up to the present" he said as he put down his cup. The music stopped. Just before Chris was about to tell Patricia about the accident at Tonies Coffee Shop. He got up to put more music on and forgetting all about the accident asked Patricia about herself on his way back to his seat.

Over the next half hour or so, he found out that she had been married in her early twenties and divorced six years later, though she never mentioned why. She had taken up air hostessing as soon as she met the age requirement because she wanted a glamorous job and soon found she enjoyed it. Her grandmother had passed away about four years ago and left her some money, which she had used to part finance her purchase of the apartment. In another two years, she would own it. Chris did a little mental calculation and put her age around 35 years but he wasn't that good with ages.

Patricia put a hand up to her mouth and stifled a yawn. "Sorry. I am a bit tired. I had an overnighter last night and didn't get much sleep. I really must go to bed now."

"You should have said," responded Chris. "Here I am yakking away, keeping you up when you should be asleep."

"No problem. I have really enjoyed our little talk and feel like I know you a lot better now," she replied. "But if you will excuse me, I'll say goodnight and turn in." With that she left, heading for her bedroom. Chris went to bed shortly afterwards.

The next day was a work day. Patricia was out with friends during the evening so Chris went to bed early and Wednesday came around pretty quickly. After work, Chris dropped over to Steve's place in the evening and found his friend sitting on the porch having a quiet beer. Joining him, they sat and chatted for a while about small, unimportant things until Chris caught Steve studying him.

“What?”

Steve raised an eyebrow, “Did you buy a raffle ticket in that car raffle that George and Doris organized?”

“Yeah, thought you knew. I bought one from them because I had some spare money and it was a worthy cause. I ended up with the next to last ticket.”

“That was the last ticket. The next one got burned in the crash with them. They bought the last ticket themselves. Lucky the ticket stubs had been handed in to the Church.” Steve commented as he continued studying Chris.

“Oh. I didn’t know that. I guess the odds just improved.”

“That’s not funny.”

“Sorry.”

“Well,” Steve said, “they are drawing the raffle after the morning services on Sunday, at noon, in the church hall at St. Pauls. I thought you would like to know in case you wanted to turn up.”

“Not much point really,” said Chris. “I have never won anything in my life.”

“Well you seem pretty lucky lately and anyway the car will be there and I will be there because it is happening straight after the service. If nothing else, you would be able to get an up-close inspection of a Corvette convertible.”

Chris looked up and found Steve watching him. Almost testing him by his response, which was, “OK. I’ll be there about 12 o’clock. I don’t feel comfortable with the church thing at the moment. Maybe another time.”

Steve nodded, “Good,” was all he said.

Later that night Chris pulled the raffle ticket out of his wallet and checked the number, it was still 999. He became engrossed with the picture on the front of the ticket, a shiny, bright red, Corvette convertible. Surely a prize worth winning. He would have to go on Sunday and watch the draw.

Patricia flew out again Friday for four days. Something to do with a European leg he thought she’d said. Due back ten o’clock Tuesday evening. He had the apartment to himself. Saturday he did a bit of shopping in the morning and during the afternoon and early evening watched NASCAR on the big screen. A four hundred miler. Most of the race time he spent dreaming of Corvettes. After that, he caught up with the last half of a collage game of gridiron. It went down well with a few beers. He turned in after the game so he would be bright and aware in the morning.

Sunday morning Chris arrived at the hall about eleven-thirty. The sound of organ music and hymn singing was emanating from St. Pauls as the service was coming to an end. There was hardly anyone around and parked in front of the church hall, which was around the back of St. Pauls, was his most favourite car in the world. There, crouched in the summer sun, gleaming, with its top down was a Corvette convertible. Red. He had a good look over it, all the extras; CD player and tape deck, magnesium alloy wheels, a body kit and a beautiful black leather interior. The number plate read VETTE 4U. What a beauty. Still, no point in getting too excited, there were 998 other tickets in the raffle.

The singing in the church had stopped and people were starting to emerge into the dazzling sunlight. Chris saw Steve and went over to greet him. Together they filed into the church hall which was getting quite packed with expectant people. There was a buzz of excitement running through the crowd which quickly quieted as Father O’Connor came out onto the

stage. He went to the microphone and quietly announced the drawing of the lottery. He then went on to speak about George and Doris Stansbury and the fine work that they had done for the church and the disbelief of all regarding their sudden deaths. He talked about the inherent goodness of the couple and how unselfish they had been in their Christian outlook and how they would be sorely missed.

God works in mysterious ways.

Then the Bishop was introduced and spoke kindly of the Stansbury couple and their methods of money raising for the charitable contributions which would be sorely missed. He then talked about the prize and what the Church intended to do with the money raised from the lottery before stepping over to the drum containing the stubs of the 1000 lottery tickets. A deathly hush fell over the assembled crowd. The Bishop grasped the handle on the side and spun the drum for about a minute.

He then stopped it and opened the lid.

The air was tense, the hall was totally silent. He reached in and extracted a ticket. Walking back over to the microphone, he adjusted his glasses and read.

“Ticket number 999.” No one moved but a few groans could be heard emanating from some of the unlucky ticket holders. “Ticket number 999.” Still no one moved.

“Mr. Christopher Wilkins, are you present?”

Chris suddenly realized it was his name that was being called out. He jumped to his feet waving the ticket. “Here. Here,” he cried.

Steve sat stunned at his friend’s good fortune but only for a moment. He leapt to his feet also, clapping his friend on the back, congratulating Chris with all his heart, jumping up and down in his excitement, something Chris had never seen his normally staid friend do.

“Go. Go and show them the ticket,” he yelled.

“Right,” was all Chris could manage as he headed for the stage. His ticket was checked, proved to be correct and then he was led to a side room where the paperwork was signed. He discovered his prize included a year’s insurance and after showing his driver’s license he was handed the keys to his very own red, Corvette convertible, with a full tank of gas and the registration paid.

He made his way out of the hall behind the tail end of the crowd that was leaving. A crowd that contained a number of unlucky ticket holders. The ground underfoot was littered with discarded raffle tickets.

Then it was time for media photographs. Chris, the car, Chris and the car, the Bishop, Father O’Connor and the car some more and then a group shot. Finally the crowd of onlookers drifted away and soon very few people were left standing around to hear Chris fire up the vehicle. The big V8 purred into life with a low rumble and the stance of the car changed. It was waiting to go. Chris left her in PARK while he went for a final round of handshakes and thank-yous. Then dragging Steve away from his local clergyman as politely as possible and depositing him in the passenger seat of the car, Chris jumped into the drivers seat and slid the stick into first gear and headed off for one of the best afternoons he could ever remember. With him was his best friend, Steve, sitting with an idiot grin on his happy face.

It was only near midnight, as he was drifting off to sleep, his new toy parked downstairs in the underground car park, that it finally came home to him that he had won it. As he drifted off to sleep he dreamily hummed snatches of a song heard only once before.

“G.M. made in America, Chevy’s OK for me.”

However, only a block away, Steve was still up, sitting at his kitchen table, a stiff drink in his hand. Pondering. The ice in his glass was melting rapidly, diluting the whiskey. He couldn't believe Chris' luck. It was unnatural. What were the chances of that ticket coming up?

What was going on with Chris? He seemed to be on a real roll. Not like the Chris that he knew, the guy who was nice and laid back, definitely not a go-getter. It was impossible luck, all of the things which had happened to Chris since that incident outside of Tonies Coffee Shop, when Chris had picked up a black CD but denied all knowledge of it. Also, what about all the deaths that had occurred to people recently? Deaths that Chris had seemed to benefit from. Coincidence? His friend didn't even seem to be that worried by the mounting death toll; four people dead in as many weeks.

Steve was not the jealous type but he was worried. No. Scared! There was something evil going on here, if his religious intuition was accurate and it usually was.

What could he do about it?

The prickly hairs on the back of his neck stood up, something was definitely not right here. He would go and have a chat with Father O'Connor tomorrow and see if any light could be shed on the matter.

Evil was definitely afoot.

Chapter 7.

Chris' eyes snapped open and he felt instantly wide awake. Dawn light was just beginning to filter in through his bedroom window as he glanced over at the clock and discovered that it was only six in the morning. No way was he able to go back to sleep, so he arose and had a shower. The weekends were really flying by now that he was working again and here he was at the start of a working week, early on a Monday morning, with the feeling that the week held great promise for him. He grabbed a quick breakfast then took off downstairs to the underground car park and spent the next half hour repolishing his car. There was something sensual in applying polish to the rich red carapace before rubbing it off and finally buffing the car down to get the shine deep and slippery. The curves of the vehicle slid under his hands as he worked, learning every nook and cranny of the aerodynamic body. Eventually, satisfied, he stood back and gazed at his pride and joy for a moment before realizing that it would soon be time for him to go to work. First though, he would go for a short drive in his new toy. It wasn't long before he had the Corvette out in traffic and decided to go over to the real estate agents to get his bond back.

Mission accomplished, he returned to his apartment building, parked the car and headed upstairs to get ready for work. Looking back over his shoulder a couple of times as he wandered over to the basement lift, he still couldn't believe his luck as he gazed with adoration at his beautiful new wheels.

So, here he was, strolling to work along Junction Road, heading east. The early chill of the morning was gone, replaced by the promise of another hot, clear day. The morning rush hour had diminished to a steady stream of vehicles and pedestrians. Life was good. There was a cheque in his pocket from the bond money, he had a great job, a fabulous apartment and a car which was the envy of any red-blooded male. What more could he want?

A well built blond with her hair in a ponytail flashed by on rollerblades. Chris' eyes followed her and he felt a stirring from the region of his groin. There was the start of the answer to his question. A little over three weeks ago he had virtually nothing and now he was on a roll. Even leaving sex out of the equation, it would still be really fulfilling to have someone a bit special to share his good fortune with.

Getting laid would be a real bonus.

Hell's bells he was getting greedy. Really, he should thank God for his good fortune and leave well alone. As soon as that thought entered his head, his foot found a slight lip in the sidewalk and he tripped, only to be brought up short by his shoulder slamming into a light standard. He cursed and stood massaging his shoulder for a while, grimacing until the pain subsided. Whatever made him think that? Then he continued on with his walk.

Work was great. On the way to his desk he found time to chat with Cindy and mentioned his good fortune regarding winning the car. What he really wanted to do was stand in the

middle of the office floor and yell out the good news to everyone. Offices being the same the world over, it wasn't long before the whole place was abuzz with the news anyway. People he hadn't even met yet were coming over and congratulating him on his good luck. Also, he noticed that a few of the younger single women were starting to eye him up. Not good enough for them last week, now he was a lot more eligible, what did that say about them he wondered.

Chris ignored them.

Andrew seemed amused by it all.

Chris couldn't figure him out. No way. Andrew chatted a lot but never seemed to say anything. Still he was a godsend (godsend?) as far as Chris was concerned, his time in the firm, with Andrew's advice helping him, had been smooth and trouble free.

Work went without a hitch and the day flew by until, all of a sudden, it was time to go.

That evening he almost sprinted home to take the red 'vette out for a spin. A very satisfactory experience it was, even down to the drive-in burger and thickshake.

The car really was an eye catcher.

The drive-in waitress seemed to want to get to know him better but he politely rebuffed her attentions. Arriving home about nine o'clock that evening, he parked the car, put the alarm on and headed upstairs.

Tuesday was similar to Monday. At the office, the excitement over his good fortune was dying down and more work was coming across his desk. One of the junior partners dropped by to see how things were working out and promised him a small commission of his own for the following week. Chris couldn't wait for the end of the business day and for the first time since he had started working for the Fleeting Image Ad. Agency the time seemed to drag. Finally, he was able to leave and raced home to take his new toy out.

Steve wasn't really keen on going for a drive when Chris dropped by. In fact, Steve was a little withdrawn and offhand, acting like something was bothering him. Chris put it down to jealousy as he drove off alone but was a little troubled by his friend's attitude. Steve was normally very straightforward and never seemed to change that much. This was totally unlike the Steve he knew.

Curious.

Rain was forecast for later, so Chris did not go for a long drive. The red 'vette had to be back in the underground car park before any showers started. No rain for his baby yet. Too new.

He turned in early and didn't hear Patricia come in from her European stint. She wasn't up the following morning before he left for work so he didn't see her until Wednesday evening when he returned home after another great day at the office. After the usual pleasantries and small talk, he informed her of his good luck and virtually dragged her downstairs to see his car. She was happy for him but didn't seem to be particularly impressed by the red beast. This was a slight disappointment to Chris, who was starting to thrive on the attention the car was bringing him.

"Still," he thought to himself, "If you fly all over the world and mix with rich pilots and stay in exotic foreign hotels, another flash car is not about to blow your socks off."

As it was drizzling slightly, he decided not to take the car out and headed back upstairs with Patricia. After his evening meal, not wanting to watch what Patricia was watching on the TV, he headed for his room. The red light on the stereo was on again. "Damn thing must be faulty," he muttered to himself as he crossed the room to switch it off. Standing in front of

the stereo, hand poised over the POWER switch, his eye was caught by the midnight black CD in the machine. Side ‘A’ had been interesting so far. He stood transfixed, his mind wandering over the association between the CD and his good fortunes. Was it possible? What else was there on this CD? Okay, he would listen to the next song on the ‘A’ side. He reached forward and picking up the remote pressed PLAY. Hissing again, the space between the music tracks should be clear. Funny but it actually sounded like somebody hissing. Then the song started, not too loud but funky. The Damn machine had once again started on the next track. Chris was not bothered, just curious as the rockier song began.

What a cute little mama, she’s lookin’ mighty fine
 The Babe walks in, not a hair out of line.
 Headin’ for the dance floor, the music’s really hot
 This one could be trouble, but I don’t care a lot.

Let me see it mama, show it to me
 A little taste of honey now, just for free.

She seems so easy, with her feline grace
 A little flush of pleasure, all over her face.
 With long hair a flowin’, down to her waist
 And sweet red lips that I’d love to taste.

Let me see it mama, show it to me
 A little taste of honey now, just for free.

Her hips start swayin’, her feet start a movin’
 Her arms are into motion and now she’s really groovin’.
 The beat picks up and the base is really pumpin’
 Then she smiles at me and my heart starts a thumpin’.

Let me see it mama, show it to me
 A little taste of honey now, just for free.

See this girl a dancin’, all night long
 Moving to the rhythm and singin’ her song,
 “Come and taste my honey, don’t try nothing funny,
 All I really want from you is lots and lots of money.”

Let me see it mama, show it to me
 A little taste of honey now, just for free.

“Come and taste my honey, don’t try nothing funny,
 All I really want from you is lots and lots of money.”

Chris woke up the next morning with a start at the sound of a car horn intruding into his room from the road below. Try as he might, he could remember nothing of the previous night from when the song had started. He looked over at the stereo, which was off. No red light from the power indicator. Then his glance slid over to the dressing table where the black CD lay in a pool of its own shadow. Getting out of bed and crossing to the dresser, he looked down at the disk. Side 'B' was now uppermost and ready to go.

The warning on this side now read, '**18 years and over only. Lyrics will definitely be harmful when listened to!**' Chris was amused, it seemed record companies would stoop to anything to sell music these days. He opened the top drawer and put the disk away, the music wasn't bad but he had better things to do than listen to more of that stuff.

The shower beckoned and after showering, dressing and breakfasting, it was off to work again.

When he arrived at the office building, he was just in time to see a lift door closing. He hit the button and it opened again, revealing the lift's only other occupant, Louise.

"Good morning Louise. How are the flowers holding up?"

"Fine thank you Chris. How are you? I heard about your good luck regarding the car."

"I'm great. Thank you. Just great."

Louise pressed the button for his floor. She looked stunning this morning, that is, more stunning than usual. The floor numbers started being eaten up by the control panel as the lift, gaining momentum, sped upwards.

Chris swallowed, summoned his courage and said, "I have something to ask you, a favour but I don't know how to put it. Would you mind if I came up to the sixteenth floor for a short while?"

Louise considered him for a long moment. "Not at all, as long as you are not going to ask me for a date. I have a partner you know."

"Lucky Devil," Chris muttered, then in a louder voice. "No, I didn't know but I wasn't going to ask you for a date. It's regarding another matter."

"Okay then, no problem."

When the lift doors momentarily opened at the fourteenth floor, Cindy was a bit surprised to see his wave as the lift doors closed on him and he continued on up with Louise to the sixteenth floor. He sat on the edge of her desk, considering how to put into words what he was about to ask, while Louise went through her morning routine.

"Remember when I dropped the flowers up a week last Friday?"

"Yes I do. That was very sweet of you but I already thanked you for that."

"No, what I meant was. Sorry. I will start that again. When I got out of the lift with the flowers, there was a black haired girl leaning against your desk talking to you."

"Yes. That would be Ruth. I have known her for quite a while. We get together now and again. She just popped in for a chat. Why, are you interested or something?"

"Well, if I am not treading on anyone's toes, I wouldn't mind meeting her. She is very pretty and my girlfriend walked out on me a couple of months ago and I am not really any good at meeting girls and I get embarrassed easily and, I'm babbling aren't I?" His voice trailed off as he started to blush.

"My. Mr. Corvette's a shy boy," she teased. "Actually, Ruth is not seeing anyone at the moment. She is a bit jaded with the usual macho types that hang around bars. Do you want me to get her number for you?"

"Would you? Oh yes please. That would be great," he replied boyishly as he stood up from her desk and straightened up, very relieved at the course of events.

Louise appraised him with a slightly lifted eyebrow, "Well the flowers were a thoughtful gesture. I will see what I can do. Now get out of here so I can get some work done."

Chris backed to the lifts, bowing repeatedly all the way as a joke to lighten the moment.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you." On the last 'thank you' he backed into a junior partner who was just getting off the lift. The last he saw of Louise that day was her chuckling to herself as the lift doors closed, swallowing him up.

Chris exited the lift at the fourteenth floor whistling happily. Cindy looked up from her work, taking in the big grin on his face.

"What was all that about?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing." Chris replied airily and headed off to his work area. She looked after him, as he was happily wandering off and shook her head bemusedly. She quite liked Chris but he looked and acted like one of those kids who did not know which way was up. A little prayer to a higher power was probably appropriate.

Nothing much happened to Chris for the rest of the day. It was drizzling when work finished so a cab home seemed appropriate. Patricia had left a note to say she was out for the night, so he relaxed in front of the television before turning in early. Friday came and went. Nothing of much note in the day. It was still raining when he finished work so he took a cab home again that evening. Patricia was in, so they had a bit of a chat for a while during which he learned that she was due to fly out Sunday afternoon and be away until the following Friday. Chris felt really fortunate to be in the position he was in. He was living in a great apartment and his Landlady was away most of the time. She went out again that evening and he stayed in and watched a movie. It was an older one of Patricia's, from her DVD collection, starring Keenau Reeves, about a young lawyer who ends up working for the Devil. The large screen and surround sound made up for the age of the movie and he found it quite enjoyable.

Saturday morning he got up late and cruised out to the kitchen to find Patricia up to her elbows in flour and mixing bowls and stuff.

"Morning Chris. I don't get much of a chance to do this domestic kind of stuff. So I thought I would bake a cake. There is coffee in the pot. Would you like one?"

"Sure. Nice to see you enjoying yourself," he replied just as the phone rang.

"Could you get that please?" asked Patricia, holding up floury hands.

Chris picked up the phone with a cheery, "Good morning."

A delightful low and throaty female voice on the other end of the line asked, "Is that Chris Wilkins?"

"Yes it is."

"This is Ruth. Louise told me that you had asked for my number. It was just as easy for me to ring you. I got your number from her. Hope you don't mind. She told me a little about you."

Dark hair, pale beautiful face, it was her! A thrill ran through Chris.

"Good of you to call."

"Hey. After what Louise told me, I must admit that I was curious. She is quite taken with you, you charmer."

Chris thanked the powers that be that there was a phone line between them as he felt the heat radiating from his face. He turned away from Patricia so that she wouldn't see the

colour his face had become. He hoped like hell his voice didn't crack, that would really stuff up his chances of a date with this gorgeous woman on the other end of the telephone line.

He tried to keep his voice even as he replied, "That was good of her. It got us talking which is a start. Would you like to meet up for a coffee and a chat? Nothing serious, just spend a bit of time together. Maybe get to know each other a little"

"Sure." The voice thrilled Chris as Ruth continued, "I'm not available evenings, Tuesday through Saturday, due to work commitments. Sundays and Mondays are fine though. It puts a bit of a damper on my social life but that is how it is for now."

"No problem. Do you know Tonies Coffee Shop?"

"The coffee place on the Boulevard?"

"Yeah, that's the one. What say we meet there midday tomorrow. Is that okay with you?"

"One o'clock would be better," Ruth replied.

"Excellent. Meet you there at one. We can save our 'get to know you' talking until tomorrow. See you there."

"Bye."

Chris hung up the telephone and turned around to find Patricia regarding him with a smile on her face.

"Couldn't help overhearing," she grinned stirring the cake mix and nodding toward a steaming mug of coffee on the benchtop. "Getting a social life are we. Good luck to you. Just take care Chris, it is a big bad world out there." With that she went back to the cake mix leaving him to sit and sip his coffee while gazing at the view from the balcony.

Steve was out when he cruised over in the 'vette a bit later on, so he went for a drive by himself. It really was a fun car. Very civilized, until the loud pedal was tweaked. It needed running in and putting miles on the car was the best way to do it. That was his excuse and he was sticking to it. He felt like giving the car a bit of a caning but didn't want to until it was properly run in. Patience, what a pain in the arse. Driving back into town later that evening he picked up Steve, who was home alone as Mary was visiting her folks. They drove to Chris' apartment building, parked the 'vette and caught a cab to a blues bar they both liked with the intention of sinking a few cold ones.

It was there that Chris told Steve about his date the next day and how he had spotted Ruth at work, talking to Louise upstairs. Steve looked at Chris, studying his face intently, head tilted slightly to one side.

"You must be the luckiest guy I know," he said. "One month ago yesterday I was just getting ready to bankroll you. Now, I have never seen you so happy. You are glowing man. I can feel the heat from here. Don't get me wrong, I am not jealous. I never told you this before but when I was fifteen my Grandfather died and left me a whole heap of money. I live off the interest and am basically set up for life. The only reason that I am telling you this now, is so you can understand that I am not jealous at all of your good fortune. I have enough money to get virtually anything I want and still have change. However, I am just a little worried about you. Something does not feel right. You know I am a bit of a bible basher but I have this funny, tingly feeling at the base of my neck. It has always been accurate before as a warning that something is not right with the world."

Chris was sitting with his mouth agape, staring at his friend. This was the longest speech that Chris had ever heard Steve make. It explained a lot about his friend that he didn't know and Steve was not quite finished yet.

"I know you think I am a bit odd with the religious stuff but I feel like I have been called to serve the Lord. It is a feeling that I cannot resist and I do not mind at all. However, the day that George and Doris were killed in the car crash, I had that same prickly feeling quite strongly from about two hours before the time of the accident. It hasn't gone fully either, and I am getting really worried that something else is about to happen. It seems to get stronger when I am near you. Take extra special care man, I worry about you. Your good fortune is almost too good to be true." With that, he sat back and took a long pull on his beer.

Chris shivered. He was a bit creeped out by what he had just heard. Visions of a ghostly hand ejecting a Cd from a wildly spinning boom box rose into his mind. Not now. He grabbed his beer and raised his glass to Steve.

"Let us hope it's a false alarm. Here's to a long and happy life."

"Amen," was Steve's only reply.

Chapter 8.

Sunday morning, Chris rose early. Not a difficult task, as he had been tossing and turning most of the night with suppressed excitement due to his upcoming date with Ruth. After a quick cup of coffee, it was down to the basement car park with bucket and rags to give his

car another, probably unnecessary, clean and polish. She positively gleamed when he finished, just waiting to go out. Chris headed back upstairs, breakfasted, showered, shaved and dressed in some of his newer clothes. When he had finished there was still a couple of hours until his appointment at Tonies Coffee Shop, so Chris headed off in his car to cruise for a while before the meeting.

The 'vette nosed out of the basement garage and turned onto the road that led out across the river. The morning, for the end of summer, was pleasant. Neither too hot nor too cold for driving with the top down. With the wind gently blowing in his hair, a 'Pink' C.D. on the stereo system and light traffic, Chris felt like the king of the world as he cruised over the bridge. The river looked blue today, not its usual muddy brown and it sparkled in the morning sunlight. Nothing could spoil today.

About twelve-thirty, refreshed from his drive, he luckily found a two-hour parking spot just down the road a little from Tonies Coffee Shop. It was an excellent spot, visible from the sidewalk tables, which meant the convertible top could be left down. He wandered up the Boulevard to 'Tonies' where he sat down outside at an empty table and ordered a cappuccino. When it came, he pushed his designer sunglasses to the top of his head, sat back and took in the scenery before him.

The end of August. Leaves on the trees losing the bright freshness of previous months, starting to think of the coming autumn when they would harden off and change colour. The nights were starting to become cooler and the days not so hot. The brightly dressed pedestrians, seeing and being seen, wandered up and down the Boulevard and in and out of the many retail shops which were open for trading on Sunday. The pace was leisurely, not the tired leisurely of people struggling with oppressive heat but the leisurely of people with nothing better to do and the income to make spending pleasurable. The brightly polished, red 'vette was a lovely contrast with the dark brown tree trunks and bright green leaves. Now and again people stopped to check the car out and Chris felt himself swell a little with pride. As he gazed at the spot where his car was parked, he slowly realized that it was almost precisely where the coloured guy had been killed. He couldn't help himself; his brain went into instant replay and even with his eyes open he saw the coloured guy walking up the Boulevard, the child with the ball, the car swerving to miss the child. He heard again the thud of impact, as he saw in his mind's eye the body flying through the air and the ghostly hand materializing to press the EJECT button, sending the CD spinning away from the accident towards him.

"Chris?"

He turned at the sound of his name, torn abruptly from the scene playing in his mind and fell headlong into the most beautiful, deep green, red flecked, cats eyes he had ever encountered. Time seemed to stop, almost, and as he struggled to mentally extricate himself from the eyes he noticed other features. Delicate, curved, black eyebrows, the pert nose, sensual full red lips and the long, shiny black hair. Almost oriental and definitely wondrous. He suddenly realized he was holding his breath.

"Ruth!" He sprang to his feet, knocking over his chair, banging the table and spilling his half empty coffee cup. Embarrassed, the colour rose swiftly to his cheeks as he glanced her way and tentatively held out his hand.

"Sorry. I am such an idiot sometimes. You took me by surprise. Hello."

She took his hand in hers gently, an amused smile flickering across her lovely lips, as she shook hands with him.

"Relax. Don't worry, I don't bite, much. Mind if I sit down?"

"Yes, I mean no. Please do." Chris pulled out a seat for her and righted his own chair, summoning a waiter who tidied up the mess he had made.

"Coffee Ruth?" He couldn't tear his gaze from her face, the red lips parted slightly with the tip of her tongue gently moistening them.

"Yes please. Cappuccino."

"Make that two," he said turning to the waiter who scurried off to get them.

Chris sat and stared at Ruth. Up close she was magnificent. Shapely, medium sized breasts and dressed in a red cropped top with black slacks and red high heels. His jaw got a little slack. Ruth tilted her head sideways directly into his line of vision, she seemed a little nonplussed.

"Can you talk?"

"Oh. Sorry. Please forgive me. It's just that up close you are so beautiful and perfect and and..." Lost for words his voice trailed off.

She laughed, a throaty, amused, genuine chuckle. "Well, I can honestly say that I don't think I have ever had that effect on a guy before. You are so sweet. Shall we start again?" He nodded dumbly.

"Hi, I'm Ruth," she said, holding out her hand. He took it in his own, feeling the strength in her grip this time and the pointy red nails which just grazing the flesh of his palm.

"Hi, I'm Chris Wilkins." His voice firmer and more natural now.

The coffees arrived and they busied themselves with sugaring and stirring.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" She sniffed slightly. "I am trying to kick the habit but I am not there yet."

"Not at all," Chris replied, pushing the ashtray towards her. "Smoke only bothers me in confined spaces."

A slim, king-sized cigarette seemed to miraculously appear out of nowhere. Placing it between her red lips, she lit it with a slim gold lighter which she replaced in a small red clasp purse that Chris had not noticed before. This she placed on the table beside the ashtray. Exhaling smoke, she looked him up and down.

"So Chris Wilkins, tell me about yourself. Whatever you feel comfortable with. I'd just like a bit of background so I can figure out how someone can live in this city and still be as innocent as you appear." Her eyes twinkled with challenge. "Start with your age."

"I'm twenty four and will be twenty five in November. I moved to the city from a smallish country town about fifteen months ago and am living over on Junction Road in the Cobb apartment building, not far from work where I first spotted you."

At the mention of the street name and apartment building, her eyes narrowed involuntarily and her hand jerked slightly. Enough to dislodge the ash on her cigarette but Chris missed it as he was gazing at his coffee cup. He continued on with his run-down, mentioning work, Louise and seeing Ruth at Louise's desk that day. He told her about his apartment and how fortunate he had been in getting it but he did not mention the car. That was going to be a surprise. When he eventually wound down from talking, there were two cigarette butts in the ashtray.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to ramble on like that. It was a bit rude of me."

"Not at all. I find it rewarding to meet a male that can actually string more than three words together and talk to me and not my boobs."

His gaze flickered down to her boobs and when it came back up her eyes were laughing at him as their glance met. He flushed and apologized.

"Don't be silly. I set you up for that," she teasingly told him, breaking the ice and telling him in an unspoken fashion that she didn't mind if he looked at her boobs. As long as he realized they were attached to her and not vice versa.

"Tell me a bit about yourself." Chris raised his coffee cup to his lips and took a pull on the cold cappuccino. "Would you like another coffee?"

"Yes please."

Chris signaled the waiter.

"Well, let me see. I am twenty six and have lived in this city all of my life. There is not a lot to tell really. The folks are still alive, Mr. and Mrs. Suburbia, boring as shit. Dad goes bowling twice a week and mum has Tupperware parties. I went through school as far as High School which I left when I turned eighteen. I worked in a department store at the cosmetics counter for a while but that was going nowhere. I had a couple of relationships that were less than satisfactory, so I did something different. I went to business classes and took dancing lessons. Now I dance at a club, which I part own. Sort of explains why evenings are out for socializing. The income is good enough and it leaves my days free. Oh, here comes the coffee."

Ruth leaned forward to take her cup from the waiter and all further questions left Chris' mind at the sight of her cleavage. Hell, she was magnificent!

Coffee occupied the next five minutes, a comfortable silence, drinking in each other along with the coffee. Chris took to Ruth like a duck to water. This had never happened to him before but there was just something about her that he found irresistible. Not just her breasts or the fact that she was drop dead gorgeous. There was something more to her. Mysterious. Inscrutable. He knew she was far more sophisticated in the ways of the world than he was but got the impression that she genuinely liked him. It was time. He put down his empty cup.

"Would you like to go for a drive?" he asked.

"Oh. You have wheels?"

"See that red car over there?"

"Not the Corvette." She gave a low whistle. "Really?"

"Yes Maam." He replied, beaming with pride.

"I'd love to go for a ride. Right now. Let's go."

Chris looked at her approvingly as they both stood up and started walking towards the car. He dropped a ten spot onto the table to pay for the coffees as they left and made it to the passenger door in time to open it for her. Ruth rewarded him with a stunning smile. He jumped in and fired up the big V8. Indicating, he pulled out into the traffic as Ruth squirmed with pleasure in the comfortable, black leather seats, giving little squeals of delight as she did so. Chris liked her more every minute.

The rest of the day was magical. They drove over to the ocean and had a late lunch at a little seafood place they discovered down the coast a ways. Then it was barefoot walking along the sand, the ocean waves swelling up the beach to wet their feet and legs in cold spumey water. A cooling breeze was blowing off the sea and the afternoon was clear and bright. Later, they drove back into town and sat in the quiet, peacefull green of a park, near the river, where they watched couples strolling romantically hand in hand, children playing together and Frisbee-chasing dogs. Only one incident marred the otherwise perfect afternoon. A Frisbee landed near them and the dog that came to fetch it suddenly pulled up with its hackles raised, barking in their direction. The dog's owner was most apologetic when he came to fetch it and take it away, claiming his dog had never done that before.

Ruth never moved. As the sun was descending, the air started to get a little chilly. Chris turned to Ruth.

“What now?”

“I would like to see that wonderful apartment that you told me about, Chris. Maybe listen to a bit of music, watch T.V. or whatever.”

Twenty minutes later, with the red beast safely parked in the basement car park, they stepped out of the lift at his floor. Ruth seemed to know which door was his but that fact never registered with Chris. As soon as the apartment door closed behind them, she turned and putting her hands behind his head, pulled him down for a long, lingering kiss. He put his arms around her, his body responding immediately. She slid her hand down his body to the front of his trousers.

“Mmmm. Big boy,” she said as she gave him a squeeze there, smiled, then turned and headed for the bathroom.

He blinked a couple of times, stunned, then heard the shower running. Patricia? It couldn’t be, she had flown out earlier this afternoon. Luckily for him. Chris headed for the bathroom. There on the floor was a pile of red and black clothes and steam was rising from the shower cubicle. He heard singing. How had Ruth gotten in there so fast? Another pile of clothes soon joined those on the floor and he stepped naked into the shower, not caring about his obviously erect state. Naked, she was magnificent. White, white skin, not a mark, not a blemish. Her medium sized breasts jutted from her chest, rising to two hard points of aroused nipple. Her flat stomach led down to a thin strip of jet-black pubic hair which disappeared down between her legs. She tilted her head back under the water to allow the spray to splash her face and run down her long black hair. The water running from her hair drew his eyes to her backside, which was beautifully proportioned.

“Glad you could join me.” Ruth grinned as she reached for his stiffness. At the touch of her hand he felt a jolt like an electric shock and started ejaculating uncontrollably. She looked down and moaning with delight, got to her knees and took him deep into her mouth, sucking furiously. Chris could not believe what was happening, no-one had ever done this to him, ever, and he was still coming. Never had he come so much or so hard before and there was Ruth, kneeling in front of him, sucking and swallowing. His knees started shaking as his penis softened. Ruth looked up at him and then stood up and rinsed her face off in the shower jet and turned to face him. Placing her hands on his chest, she looked up at him with a fiendish twinkle in her eyes.

“My, that was tasty, Big Boy. Don’t worry about it, you’ll be a bit slower for the next round. Now kiss me.”

So he did and they spent the next twenty minutes soaping each other down and kissing, stroking and cuddling in the shower. It felt so good to him. Then, after toweling each other dry, she took his hand and led him to the bedroom.

They lay on the bed and continued kissing and stroking each other for a while. Then Ruth rolled on top of him, rubbing his chest with her nipples while they kissed, before moving down his body. She licked both of his nipples with her long, red tongue before rolling them between her moist lips, nibbling them with her sharp white teeth. Chris gently gripped her head between his strong hands as she moved downward from his chest, leaving a trail of shiny saliva down his stomach to his pubic hair. He was quickly stirring to life again as she gripped him firmly in her hand, gently inserting the end of his penis between her full red

lips. Her mouth felt extremely hot and as her tongue swirled around the head of his penis he could feel it expanding and getting bigger and firmer. He could finally stand no more of the exquisite pleasure and grabbing Ruth's shoulders, pulled her up his body to once again kiss her hot mouth. Chris then turned her onto her back, massaging her breasts gently and rubbing her nipples with his thumbs. She groaned. He moved his mouth down her neck, biting gently as he crossed her chest until he had a mouthful of breast. Ruth put her hands behind his head and pulled him harder onto her breasts, groaning as he sucked and chewed, her stomach heaving with passion. He stopped and looked up at her. Her eyes were rolled back into her head and her nipples were the colour and size of ripe raspberries. He trailed his tongue over her stomach, heading south.

Her pussy was sopping with the most aromatic, sweet tasting secretions he had ever encountered. Her outer lips were covered with short black pubic hair while her inner lips were a bluish colour, pumped right up with excitement. Ruth was as ready as any of the few women he had known previously. He licked her clitoris, to be rewarded with a jerk of her hips for each stroke of his tongue. She was starting to tremble.

"Oh. Fuck me. Stick it in me now," she moaned.

So he moved back up her body and covering her mouth with his, inserted the tip of his twitching penis into her. The moment the head of his penis touched her nether lips she involuntarily bit his tongue. Hard. His reaction was to jerk suddenly and he embedded his whole length inside her with one stroke. Pubic hair to pubic hair. She groaned, then opened her eyes and focused on him; blood from his tongue was in both their mouths.

"Fuck me Big Boy. Fuck me hard and long."

So he did.

Then again, to see if it was as good as the first time.

It was.

Then again, after she had sucked him hard once more but more slowly and for longer this time.

Lying together afterwards, in the afterglow of good sex, Chris was vaguely aware of Ruth asking if she could smoke. He could hardly talk, just nodding dumbly as his eyes started to close of their own accord. The last thing he remembered was Ruth sliding out of bed.

All of a sudden it was Monday morning and on coming awake he noted the destroyed bed and started recalling events. Ruth was great. What a woman. Never before in his limited experience had he met such an enthusiastic and uninhibited woman. She seemed so worldly. He got up, looking for her but she wasn't in the apartment, just two cigarette butts in the ashtray on the coffee table in the lounge. Beside it was a simple, hand written note, which read. THANK YOU. R.

Chapter 9.

The walk to work that Monday morning was a revelation for Chris. His body was talking to him as it never had before. Each sparrow flight, each rustling leaf in the morning breeze, each flash of light from the chrome or windows of passing cars crept into his consciousness. All the sounds and sights of life were in him and he felt so full of the joys of life that he could not keep the large ear-to-ear grin off his face.

When the lift doors opened at the fourteenth floor of the Fleeting Image Ad. Agency, Cindy's smiling face was the first thing that Chris saw. She studied him closely, took in his happy, tired expression and grinned.

"Someone looks like they had a good weekend," she said. "Ate the whole bowl of cream, did we?"

Chris squirmed a little uncomfortably but try as he might, could not remove the idiot grin from his face.

"Something like that, we just hit it off so well. I had a really great time actually."

"Who's the lucky lady then?" Cindy asked him.

"A woman by the name of Ruth. You probably don't know her," replied Chris.

At the mention of the name, Cindy's demeanor changed, her smile disappeared, to be replaced by a slight look of concern.

"Does she have pale skin and black hair, along with green eyes? Does she know Louise upstairs?"

"Why, yes. Do you know her?"

"Not personally but I've seen her around and heard a couple of things. Never mind though. You just take care with her, she's a player or so I've heard. Now scoot, there is work to do around here."

Chris wandered off, a little puzzled by the reaction he had just witnessed. Was Cindy jealous of Ruth? As he reached his desk he looked up to see he was being closely regarded by Andrew.

"What?" Chris asked, still mulling over Cindy's reaction.

Andrew's face split into a beaming grin.

"Congratulations on having such a good time over the weekend. You certainly picked a great girl there."

Chris was appalled, "What is it with this place? Has everyone got spies and cameras on me or what?"

"Not at all. Just so you know. Ruth is my sister. Two years younger. She rang me this morning after she got home. It appears that you made quite an impression on her and she had a great time on your date together."

Chris was rocked. The more he stared at Andrew's face, the more obvious the resemblance became. How had he missed it? This weekend was the first time he had seen Ruth up close but Andrew had the same green eyes and his hair was very dark, although to be fair to himself, not as black as Ruth's. The main difference between brother and sister was their skin colour. Hers was extremely pale whereas Andrew was quite tanned and dark.

"I get out in the sun more," Andrew commented, almost as if he had read Chris' mind.

"Sorry. If I had known the connection, I would have said something to you," Chris offered as he collapsed into his chair.

"Don't be silly," replied Andrew. "We are all grown ups here. Don't worry about it. I just thought it was better to tell you, now that you are going out with her." He sniffed a couple of times and wiped his nose with a handkerchief.

"We have only had one date," Chris offered, looking confused. "What do you mean 'going out' with her?"

Andrew's smile could best be described as feral, as he casually replied.

"Ruth gave me a number to give to you where she can be reached, in case you wanted to ring. She is free on Mondays as well as Sundays. I must admit this is a bit surprising for me, as she doesn't usually give out her number. You must have created quite a 'big' impression." Chris smiled sheepishly, slightly embarrassed under Andrew's quizzical but knowing scrutiny.

"Uh. Yeah, I guess so. She is pretty special."

He watched as Andrew wrote the number on a piece of paper, then reached over and took it from Andrew's outstretched hand.

"I will ring her later, as right now I have to get cracking on this account. Because it's only a minor one, low budget, I was only given a week for conceptualization and production."

With that, he swung his chair around and switched on his computer. Later, after Andrew had gone for an early lunch, he picked up the piece of paper with Ruth's number on it and rang. Her voice on the other end sounded sleepy and caused an immediate physical and slightly painfull response in the region of his groin as his breath caught in his throat. Getting over his immediate reaction, Chris managed to chat with Ruth and eventually arrange an outing for the evening, meeting about seven o'clock. Ruth seemed very happy during the conversation, very positive about how well they had 'clicked' and merely laughed at his surprise in discovering Andrew was her brother. She suggested that it would be easier if she

came over to his apartment at the arranged time, rather than meeting somewhere. Chris was in full agreement.

After that phone call, the day passed slowly. The minute hand of the clock crept uphill to the hour and floated slowly down the other side. Time dragged and the rest of the day seemed to last forever until he could get away. He busied himself with work, breathing a sigh of relief when finishing time rolled around. The only downside to the afternoon came as he was leaving work. As he was passing Cindy's desk, she looked up and said to him, "When are you seeing Ruth again?"

"Tonight actually."

"Well, remember what I said, okay?" She looked up at him and raised one of her perfectly plucked eyebrows.

"Alright, 'night." He shot over his shoulder as he stepped into the lift.

The evening went extremely well. After Ruth arrived they went out and found a little Italian restaurant that was open, even though it was a Monday night. It was a very romantic place with only a few patrons, so they had excellent service. Because he was driving, Chris only had one glass from the bottle of Chianti they ordered but Ruth managed the rest with ease. It hardly seemed to affect her and they arrived back at his apartment in high spirits. She was just as intent on getting him out of his clothes as he was in getting her out of hers. In fact they didn't make the bedroom and ended up on the carpeted hallway floor, going at it like two mink in heat. The next two times were a little more relaxed in the bedroom and finally Chris fell into a deep and dreamless sleep. When he awoke in the morning, he was once more alone in the apartment and the note on the pillow next to him read, "Had a great time, see you again. Love Ruth."

He lay back on the bed, staring sightlessly at the ceiling, considering the woman who had just exploded into his life. She was exceptionally beautiful and had a certain sort of charisma, not just sexual, although her energy in that department would keep him tired if he let it but also in the positiveness that radiated from her. Ruth seemed to have a love of life that eclipsed the petty worries of a day to day existence and her enthusiasm was very infectious.

Chris was infected.

He lay daydreaming about a future that included this wonderful woman in it and how he could make it happen. Ruth's sophistication and hunger made his previous girlfriend, Angela, appear lacking in a number of basic female attributes. How could that be? Had he really loved Angela or just fallen into the relationship due to apathy? Whatever. He wasn't going to let Ruth slip away from him without doing his damnedest to keep her. Women like that did not grow on trees and he suspected that he may never get another opportunity to capture a prize such as her.

At lunchtime he took Louise up another bunch of flowers as a thank you for introducing him to Ruth. She seemed a little surprised at his gesture but what Chris did not see was the self satisfied little smile that crept onto her face as he turned to leave. Louise had done well, even by her own standards and this was going to be an interesting union. The other senior partner of the firm had an interest in such things and she would be rewarded handsomely in due course. She sighed expectantly, coloring slightly.

Tuesday evening rolled around and Chris cruised on over to Steve's place. It seemed ages since he had seen Steve and found that he missed his friend's company. Since finding out about Steve's history, Chris realized that his admiration and appreciation of his friend had

increased markedly. Steve was a genuine person and Chris really looked up to him. He couldn't wait to tell him all about Ruth.

When Steve answered the door he was genuinely delighted to see Chris and it was not long before they were sitting around the kitchen table sipping on a couple of beers.

"So she called you after you spoke to Louise," Steve confirmed.

"Yeah. Pretty cool I thought. Especially as she is such a looker."

"So you say. I guess I have to believe you as I wouldn't know. I've not met her yet. Does she have two arms, two legs and a head," teased Steve.

"Then some," Chris retorted, going on to describe his day with Ruth and how he had found out that Andrew was Ruth's brother. His infatuation was obvious in the way he talked about her.

"Where did you say she worked?" asked Steve.

"I didn't, or rather she hasn't told me. I must remember to ask her." Chris replied.

After a while the conversation came to a natural break so they watched a replay of a Monday night game of basketball while downing a few beers during the game. It was only later that same evening, when both were mildly intoxicated, that Steve raised a topic which had been bothering him.

"You must be the luckiest, sorry-arsed bastard I have ever met. Or something is going on in your life that we do not understand." Steve sat observing his friend's reaction before continuing. "I have not felt right about something for the last month or so. In fact, ever since that coloured guy got creamed outside Tonies Coffee Shop. Something happened that you didn't tell me about. Didn't you mention something to me about a CD ages ago? You know, the same day that the girl landed head first on the footpath next to you as you were on your way over here."

Chris looked over at his friend speculatively, a strange premonition creeping over him along with a fierce desire for secrecy but the need to confide in someone, especially his closest friend, eventually proved to be the stronger motivator.

"Yeah. Well, it's really strange. I have this CD, sort of rap music. Every time I put it on to listen to it, I usually only hear one song before there is an interruption, like the phone ringing or something. Funny thing though, the songs all have different subjects. The first is an introductory track, then the next one is about employment. After I listened to it I scored a job. The third song is about a place to live and after hearing that one, I am rung up out of the blue about an apartment. The fourth track is about owning a car, a Corvette no less and I win one in a raffle. The last song on the 'A' side is about an attractive girl and I meet Ruth, who is a real honey, fairly soon after hearing it. Pretty eerie when you think about it though. Almost too much for coincidence but it's all to the good."

Steve was starting to look a little concerned.

"Tell me what the first song was about," he asked urgently. His tone of voice was starting to worry Chris.

"Can't really remember, it was sort of about violence and stuff. You know, similar to a lot of the age restricted, rap records with violent lyrics that are out there. I got distracted and didn't hear it properly."

"What distracted you?" Steve asked.

"Can't remember," came back the reply.

"Okay, tell me. Where did the CD come from?" Steve seemed to be genuinely curious as well as worried. Chris started getting fidgety. Steve continued. "Well, how did you come to have it? CHRIS! Look at me, this is important. How did you come to have this CD?"

Chris felt a pain in his head as he tried to think of how he came by the CD and how to tell Steve. He put his hand to his head and wincing, looked up at his friend, obviously in distress at the effort of recalling the event. Steve saw something in that look and got up from the table and went into the next room. He returned almost immediately and thumped a bible down onto the table next to Chris.

The effect was dramatic, Chris' thoughts cleared and the haze left him. He sat looking at the bible on the table in wonderment then started to speak.

"It was the accident. The one outside of Tonies Coffee Shop on that Friday just over a month ago. The one involving the coloured guy. You know, when he was killed. As he was hit by the car, a CD shot out of his ghetto blaster and landed at my feet. I just picked it up automatically without thinking. I don't know why but I stuck it in my pocket and forgot about it." Chris did not mention the ghostly hand. Steve would think he was really nuts.

"I didn't really associate the songs with what was occurring because of the time interval in between playing each of them and like, how can a song make something happen?"

Steve sat staring at the table, deep in thought, as Chris' voice trailed off. He seemed to be looking at the bible which lay there.

"Tell me Chris. You seemed to be surprised when you won the car in the raffle. I know you must have looked at the ticket heaps of times but it still took your name being called for it to register. What was that about?"

Chris thought back to the raffle draw for the car, for some reason he was able to think clearly now. He glanced down at the bible on the table and shuddered before continuing.

"I have no idea really. I had my ticket number memorized and as the draw was taking place it felt as though my head was being examined from the inside. At the time, I had no idea it was happening. It is only now, when I seem to be able to think straight, that I can remember."

"What was the ticket number?" Steve asked him.

"The number was 999. I thought at the time it was an odd number to win with."

Steve scribbled on a piece of paper, looked at it quizzically and then turned it around. His mouth formed a grim line and without comment, he slid it over to Chris who looked at the upside down piece of paper and read 666.

"You could be in deep shit Chris."

Chris' reaction caught Steve by surprise, his friend laughed, loud and long.

"Get real Steve. Are you trying to scare me or what? It is just coincidence that all this is happening. That is why it is called coincidence. It just happens. These are modern times, so you can cut out the mumbo jumbo religious stuff. Music is just music, so stop trying to scare me. I am sorry, I know you are just trying to help and I know you are concerned and I thank you for it but this is just too crazy to believe. God and the Devil don't really exist. It is just scary stuff cooked up to get people into religions and churches. You may be right into it with bible groups and stuff but I do not believe in any of it, so it is not going to affect me."

Steve was totally unmoved by this outburst from his friend and asked in a very level voice.

"What else has happened that is not readily explainable."

Chris immediately thought of the pale face and black hair retreating back over the edge of the balcony after the girl's body had plummeted to the street below and crashed head first into the pavement beside him. He thought about Ruth, his Ruth, knowing her way around the apartment. Coincidental? Hell, there must be hundreds of pale faced, black haired women and men in town. Could have been any one of them, couldn't it?

“Nothing,” he replied to his friend’s question, not daring to have these things examined. “Okay then,” Steve replied. “Listen, I know you think all this religious stuff is bullshit but I would like you to wear a crucifix around your neck. If for no better reason than to keep me happy while everything has a chance to settle down. I have a spare one in here somewhere.” So saying, he arose from the table and looked through the contents of one of the kitchen dresser drawers, eventually extracting a cross and chain which was entangled with other drawer contents. Freeing it, he handed it to Chris who obligingly put it on. It couldn’t hurt to do so and it would keep Steve happy. Steve may sometimes act like a wet rag but he was Chris’ best friend.

Steve’s next request filled Chris with foreboding.

“I would like to listen to the CD, please. I just want to get a handle on what we are facing. Can we do that soon?”

“Yeah, tomorrow night if you like. After work. Patricia isn’t back until Friday. Just come over after 7pm. I’ll cook dinner and you can watch a movie if you have time. That is, if you are free.”

That was more or less the end of that Tuesday evening and not long after Chris went home.

Work the next day was fairly normal; Chris wore the crucifix under his shirt and didn’t mention it to anyone. Andrew turned up for work but after an hour or so started to appear a little unwell and telling Chris he was going to take a sick day, left. Chris thought Andrew must be getting a cold as he seemed to be sniffing a lot. Time passed rapidly and by the time seven o’clock arrived that evening he was only half way through preparing the meal that he had invited Steve over for. He had told the doorman to expect Steve and his friend was as punctual as ever. When Chris answered the door he didn’t comment on the shoulder bag that Steve carried or the way that Steve handled it.

After dinner had been eaten and the dishes washed and put away and the kitchen tidied up, they went to Chris’ room where his sound system was. The shoulder bag came too. Chris picked up the CD and handed it over. Steve examined it closely, looking at the warnings and trying to find something unusual about the black disk. Apart from the fact that it was the blackest black he had ever seen and playable both sides, Steve found nothing unusual about it. He handed it back to Chris, who put it into the CD player on the stereo. Then Steve opened up his backpack and drew out a large bible which he placed on the dressing table in front of the mirror. Chris picked up the remote and nervously poising his index finger over PLAY.

They looked at each other.

“Ready when you are,” Steve offered.

“Okay, here goes,” replied Chris pressing the PLAY button. The CD started but no sound came from either of the speakers. Chris looked at Steve and cranked the volume up. Only a low hiss could be heard with the dial on full volume. They went right through the ‘A’ side of the CD, alternating between FAST FORWARD and PLAY but to no avail. Nothing was heard.

“Is the machine working?” Steve asked in frustration.

Chris put another CD in and it nearly blasted their eardrums to oblivion when it played.

“Well I guess the stereo is working. Sorry Steve. The CD must have been wiped somehow. C’mom let’s go and sink a few beers and watch a movie.”

Steve picked up his bible and reluctantly followed his friend out of the room, casting a backward glance over his shoulder as he left. The red stereo light seemed to wink at him, as though sharing a joke. He shook his head resignedly, he would have liked to examine the CD further but didn't want to upset his friend by being too insistent about it. This was all very puzzling.

As they entered the lounge room Steve had an idea.

"Let's try that CD on this sound system. Just to see if it works," he suggested.

Chris appeared a little pissed off but went to get it and put it on the living room CD player. He pressed PLAY and exactly the same thing happened as before. No sound, just hissing.

"Sorry Chris, I just wanted to make sure. You know how it is." Steve sounded a little embarrassed, so Chris waived it off.

"De nada."

They sat back and had a few beers together companionably while watching a movie on cable T.V. Steve asked if it were possible for him to meet Ruth sometime soon and after Chris explained about her work times and what nights she had free, they eventually settled on the coming Sunday evening for a meal at Steve's place. Mary, Steve's girlfriend would be there and that would make up a foursome for dinner.

Steve left about 10.30pm and Chris went to bed shortly after that. Just before he lay down he took the crucifix off and carefully hung it on the bedpost of the bed.

Chapter 10.

Work went well for the rest of the week. He was not the ‘new boy’ around the office anymore and people were getting to know him and accept his presence as one of them. Some of his co-workers were quite friendly and some were a little standoffish, just the same as everywhere else he supposed. Chris completed his assignment on time and presented it to the junior executive who had given it to him. His advertisement was well accepted, it was merely a one page magazine layout but Chris had managed to make it eye catching and informative. He was actually invited to sit in when the advertisement was shown to the client who had commissioned it. The client was very happy which in turn made management very happy and the advertisement was sent off to the publishers with no changes. This was a rare accolade for a rookie adman. Chris was over the moon. Life was good.

Friday night Chris breezed into the apartment to find Patricia home. He had looked forward to her return, as he found Patricia to be a warm and lovely person. This particular evening however, she was unsettled and agitated. After greeting her and dumping his bag in his room, he came back into the kitchen.

“You don’t look real happy, how about a glass of white wine for starters?”

“Yes thank you, Chris,” she answered distractedly.

He took a bottle of white wine from the fridge, removed the cork and pouring two glasses from it, offered her one which she gratefully accepted.

“I know we don’t know each other that well Patricia but even I can tell something is bothering you. Would you like to sit down and talk about it?”

Patricia studied him for a moment then came to a decision.

“Yes I would. I would really like to talk to someone not involved and you’re a fairly sensible kid, sorry, young man. Let’s go sit in the lounge.” So saying she moved through to the lounge room and sat in her favourite chair. Chris wandered in with the wine bottle and sat down opposite her, wondering what was going on. While she was gathering her thoughts, Chris took the opportunity to top up both their glasses and then sat back waiting. She would begin in her own time, no point pushing. Patricia looked at him, somewhat sadly and began.

“I’ve been like this all week, ever since Monday. I am fairly doped up on Valium, guess I shouldn’t be drinking but what the hell. As you know I flew out last Sunday night. It was the usual European run. This time Athens was the first stop. Early Monday morning we were about 500 miles from Athens when the starboard engine blew up. It didn’t just catch on fire, it actually exploded. Luckily we were over Mediterranean Sea as some fairly large chunks of it are missing. People were screaming and panicking as the plane dropped and zigzagged for a while until the pilots’ regained control. It was a mess, as we had just started to serve breakfast and there were trays of half eaten meals everywhere.

We started a controlled descent immediately. I was terrified but had to look after the passengers, you know, get them sorted out and buckled into their seats as quickly as possible then try to clean up the mess. It was no real biggie, those planes will run on one of the three engines but I don't mind admitting that I was really scared. The fire didn't last long, there wasn't much left of the engine and the automatic fire extinguishers worked well. There wasn't much fuel left to dump and the pilots managed an emergency landing in Sicily. Everything went pretty smoothly considering."

Chris sat with his mouth hanging open. He had never considered this aspect of being an air hostess before now. The thought of having and dealing with emergencies of this magnitude, as part of the job, had never crossed his mind. Patricia continued.

"Nobody knows what caused the explosion. It could not have been a bird at that altitude, so it must have been something internal, or sabotage. Not much engine left to work with. Lucky the pilots were on the ball; it could have been quite a disaster. However, I cannot stop thinking about the 'what ifs' and when I eventually get to sleep I dream about all these horrible outcomes." Patricia took a tissue from her sleeve and wiped her eyes, a sob caught in her throat. She weakly waved a hand as Chris went to get up from his seat to find more tissues.

"No, it's alright. I'll be fine." She took a good pull at her wine and replaced the glass shakily on the coffee table. Her hands were twisting up the tissue, all by themselves.

"This is the first time I have seriously thought about giving up as an air hostess. It has really scared me badly." She picked up her wineglass and sat back in her seat staring at it.

Chris was stunned. He didn't know what to say. What do you say to someone that has been close to dying, in a situation that they had no control over?

"I am sorry; I just don't know what to say. When are you supposed to go back to work?" was all he could manage. He looked up, regretting his question immediately. Patricia didn't seem to notice his blunder.

"That is the good part; we automatically get two weeks leave after an 'incident' like that. On full pay of course, so I get to stay home for two weeks and the way I feel now, I reckon I will need every minute of it." She held out her wineglass and Chris reached for the bottle and refilled it for her. Patricia settled back into her chair, composure returning.

"If you don't mind, a little non-thinking entertainment is just what I need to occupy me right now." With that she picked up the remote and turned on the big screen television, sitting back to let the inanity of early evening programming wash over her.

Being a Friday night, Ruth was working, so Chris stayed home to be around in case Patricia had need of company. It turned out to be a quiet night as the combination of wine and Valium bowled Patricia over and she staggered off to bed quite early.

Chris sat and considered the chain of events; Patricia's Monday morning over the Med was about the same time that he and Ruth were having the best sex of his life. It was funny how things happened like that. Plusses and minuses occurring all over the world.

The next morning, Saturday, he decided to go shopping and buy some new music. His collection was becoming a little dated and he needed something new to listen to. Patricia was still in bed when he left the apartment for the short drive over to the mall. He spent some time in the music store listening to a variety of new music, particularly rap and hip hop, something he had not much been interested in before. He purchased four CD's and could easily have bought another four. Chris really preferred having cassette tapes in the car as they stood up to wear and tear better than CD's and didn't seem to mind being

dropped onto the floor or shoved into glove boxes but the ‘vette came with a six CD stacker which partially solved that problem.

After wandering around the mall and amusedly checking out the babes, whose sole purpose seemed to be strutting around, acting cool, just so the guys could check them out, he ordered a burger, fries and a coke which he ate before returning home. There was only one babe for him now. That was for sure!

As he walked into his room back at the apartment, he noticed the light on the stereo was on again. If this kept up he would either have to get the stereo checked out or buy a new one. He was positive that he had switched it off on Tuesday night when Steve was over and the light hadn’t been on since. What was up with the damn machine? Must be a loose connection or something. He placed his shopping on the bed and went to the kitchen for a coffee, Patricia was nowhere in sight. He figured that she had probably gone over to a friend’s place or something, so he hit the lounge and got involved in a pretty gripping, pre-season game of football on the television and forgot all about his new music.

Sunday morning, late, he met Ruth at Tonies Coffee Shop. She looked a little tired but absolutely luscious and he got hard with his first eyeful. She gave him a close hug and then stepped back with a twinkle in her eyes.

“Miss me did you? Or is that just young male hormones?”

“It’s just you. Sight, smell, sound, taste and feel,” was Chris’ earnest and husking reply. “I have been missing you every minute of every day since Monday.”

“Oh good. I’d hate it if you just liked me for my brains.” Then she laughed at his confused expression and waggled her tongue at him, which brought a flush racing to his face.

They sat for a while, conversing over the coffee, occasionally stroking each others forearms and generally behaving as any young couple in lust would. They had lunch there and then decided to go for a drive down the coast. Once again Chris was lucky with the weather.

Late summer sunshine, at the end of August, warmly bathed them as they cruised along the coast road with the top down, listening to music with the wind in their hair. Chris glanced across at Ruth and remembered about dinner at Steve’s place that evening. He turned the volume down slightly and brought up the subject of dinner.

“I have a really good friend in town, my best friend actually. We went through college together. His name is Steve and he has invited us over for dinner tonight. Is that okay with you? Do you mind?”

“Not at all, I am flattered that you want me to meet your best friend.”

“Are you joking?” he replied.

“No, for once I am being serious,” was the response.

About six that evening, after another incredible afternoon with Ruth, Chris nosed the ‘vette into Steve’s drive and parked it. They went up to the house together and Chris rang the bell. Steve was whistling when he opened the door but stopped dead when he saw Ruth. He started to smile but didn’t quite finish it. Steve and Ruth stared at each other, almost in recognition. Chris coughed as the silence started to linger. Steve finished his smile but it did not reach his eyes.

“Sorry Chris but you have a most attractive companion.” He said, looking at Ruth. “Miss er?”

“Just Ruth will be fine thank you and you must be Steve. Chris has told me a bit about you.” She held out her hand and they shook. Barely a touch, no grip.

"All good I hope. Please come in and make yourselves comfortable," he said, as he led them inside to where Mary was waiting. Chris had met Mary before and found the tall, slim, blue-eyed blonde to be very pleasant. Not at all like the stereotypical nervy or overweight, plain-Jane, bible bashers he had mentally pictured. What a contrast between the two girls, one seemed to radiate light and the other seemed to suck it in but both were stunning. One tanned with blond hair, Caucasian looking. One pale with black hair, slightly Oriental looking. Both beautifull.

After the introductions and having being supplied with liquid refreshment, Mary took Ruth off on a tour of the house leaving the boys in the lounge. When they had disappeared down the hallway and their voices were hardly audible, Steve turned to Chris.

"There is something about Ruth that I am not sure about. Just a feeling. I recognize something but I can't put a finger on it. I don't know if I have seen her before in passing or what it is. Forgive me if I seem a bit off. She is really attractive, in a dark sort of fashion though."

Chris leaned back on his seat, a little surprised. This was very unlike his friend to make comment and say things; he normally just accepted a situation and said nothing. Chris made a mental note of it.

"Well Steve," he replied. "I know that you are not jealous. Mary is a real stunner."

Steve smiled at his friend and winked. Just then the girls came back, giggling from some shared joke. The moment disappeared into the evening, with meal preparations and the ceremonial joint being passed around and soon everyone had settled down and gotten over first-meeting jitters.

Almost.

There was something going on between Steve and Ruth. Every so often Chris would look up to find Steve studying Ruth or Ruth studying Steve. It almost edged over into a battle of wills but never quite got that far. When they spoke to one another there was just a trace of coolness there. Mary pretended not to notice, as did Chris but the atmosphere during the evening became slightly strained in spite of their best intents and by nine thirty it had to come to an end. If they stayed any longer, either Steve or Ruth would end up being rude to the other. On the pretext of being tired and needing an early night, Chris engineered an escape and before long Ruth and he were sitting in the 'vette in his basement garage.

They had their first argument.

Chris told Ruth that Patricia was home for a fortnight due to an incident occurring to a plane she was a hostess on. The last thing he expected was Ruth refusing to come up to the apartment while Patricia was in it.

"But why," he asked again, half turned in the big, black leather seat.

"It's a woman thing," came back the stonewalling reply.

"Well okay, we can go to your place," he suggested.

"That is not an option either. I have decorators in and the place is a pigsty. I don't want you to see it like that, I wouldn't feel right." She glared at him, almost daring him to argue. He sat staring straight ahead, thinking.

"How about a motel then?" he suggested.

She sighed and placing a hand on his arm, smiled sweetly.

"I would really prefer that. You are so understanding" She batted her eyelashes, gazing at him with adoration. He blushed, basking in her approbation.

Chris turned the car on and headed out of his basement garage looking for a suitable motel.

He found one not far away, private, comfortable, with off road parking. He booked the room for two nights as Ruth also had Mondays off work. While he was wrestling with the convertible roof, as the car had to stay outside, Ruth went up to their room carrying her handbag. Five minutes later, as he entered their room she was just coming out of the bathroom, wiping her nose and sniffing.

“Getting a cold, honey?” he asked.

“No, probably just the night air,” she replied. “Go take a shower while I get comfortable.” No sooner had he hopped into the shower than Ruth was there also, naked. Sniffing, she took the soap from him and started washing him all over, paying particular attention to certain jutting out bits of his anatomy while nibbling him where he was not soapy. Then it was his turn to wash her, all over. Then it was passionate love making.

The next morning he awoke to find her studying him while touching herself under the covers.

“Need a hand?” he said, smiling at his own joke.

“Definitely,” was the reply. So another bout of lovemaking ensued before breakfast arrived. As they were eating breakfast, Chris basked in the afterglow of good sex, feeling tired, as his thoughts wandered. Great woman, great car, fine apartment and wonderfull job. How good could life get? The only way to make it better was to have Ruth with him permanently. He had only known her for a short while but he felt like he had known her forever and loved her dearly. His testosterone love caused him to become erect again. The coffee cup rattled in its saucer causing Ruth to look down. She grinned and lifting the breakfast tray out of the way, dived under the covers.

Chris arrived late for work that morning. He had driven the ‘vette straight from the motel and left it in the parking building across the road from the office. He had left Ruth lying in bed with a self-satisfied smile on her face and didn’t have time for a shave or to get himself a change of clothes. It was lucky for him that casual was the dress code for work. He was thinking about asking Ruth if he could visit her club as he exited the lift on the fourteenth floor. Cindy was looking pointedly at her watch.

“Good morning. Glad you could join us. Remember what I said? If you are going to be late, call in, so I can cover for you.”

Chris blushed bright scarlet and before he could say anything Cindy asked.

“Ruth?”

He nodded dumbly, really embarrassed now. Cindy sensed it.

“Go on. Get out of here. You haven’t been sprung and I’ve got work to do.”

Chris strode off, grateful at not having to endure any more embarrassment. Andrew nodded to him as he arrived at his desk, casually lifting one eyebrow.

“Yeah, yeah. Okay.” Was all Chris said as he got down to his work.

That evening, after work, Chris drove straight to the motel. Ruth was there waiting for him and they went out to dinner prior to taking in a movie. It was over dinner that Chris asked Ruth if he could visit her club. He was really surprised when she turned him down.

“But why?” he asked.

“You are not ready for that yet. We don’t know each other well enough. It is a semi-private club for adults and the dancing I do isn’t ballet. For me, it is just business but you might take it the wrong way and get jealous of me or think less of me. It would be better if we gave our relationship a little time, Chris. We don’t have to do everything and know everything

about each other instantly. We have time don't we?" She purred the last question and looked up at him from the depths of those emerald green eyes. End of discussion. Later that night after more excellent lovemaking, before dropping off to sleep, he asked if she was getting a cold.

"Why?" came back the sleepy reply.

"Because you seem to be sniffing a lot."

"No, I don't think I am," she replied.

He spooned into her back and snuggled up, his uppermost hand cupping her breast. She was so warm to the touch, she was always so warm to the touch and yet she didn't wear many clothes. Must have Eskimo blood in her, maybe that is why she looked a bit Oriental. He drifted off to sleep.

Oblivious.

THE 'B' SIDE.

Chapter 11.

In the morning, Chris managed to reach work on time. He had left Ruth lying in a pile of crumpled bedding, fast asleep. Smiling as he wandered over to his desk, he felt really happy and was totally unprepared for the welcome he received from Andrew. There on his desk was a steaming mug of coffee and a couple of chocolate biscuits, his favorites. He looked up to find Andrew watching him, with a big smile on his face. The morning greeting was more effusive than normal and Chris was just a little taken aback by the display of friendliness. From the wink that he received, it was obvious that Ruth must have been talking to her brother since Chris left the motel less than half an hour previously. He seemed pretty well informed on what was happening between Ruth and Chris. One question was a bit peculiar though, Andrew asked about Steve and how long Chris had known him. Chris response was minimal; he felt that Steve was nothing to do with Andrew. Work was pretty ho-hum after the highs of the weekend. He picked up his next assignment which was a fifteen second animation for a TV advertisement. Not prime time, just a morning spot on a local station. He hadn't even been his responsibility to make up the idea for the advertisement, he was just doing the animation to order for one of the junior execs. Still it was another step in showcasing his talents and he would get to use the big computer upstairs to do the job on. Chris had the feeling that he was really getting noticed and the respect building around the office did not go unnoticed either. He was proving himself in a tough field. The word was getting around.
How much better could life get?

After work that evening he drove home and let himself into the apartment to find Patricia much improved on how she had been. She was bright and cheerful and had spent the day on the computer, researching the available information on aerial mishaps and found that they were not that uncommon. Very, very few resulted in fatalities, in fact, most incidents that occurred allowed the plane to fly on to its destination. The one that had occurred on her flight was a little more serious than most but the plane would most likely be back in the air within a month, probably less. After dinner, Chris went to his room to listen more fully to some of the rap CD's. Looking around, he decided that his room needed a clean-up and having plenty of time to do it, he went and got the vacuum cleaner, glass cleaner and a couple of dusters and set to. After doing the floor and windows and putting a few things away he stood back and surveyed his room. The large mirror on the dressing table caught his eye. There were a few smudges of what appeared to be fingerprint dusting powder on the edges of the mirror. It needed cleaning. It was a big mirror, one of the older types that had a mirror held to a backing board by metal clasps. As he was wiping the periphery of the mirror, his duster caught on what he assumed was a splinter but when he glanced at the spot he saw a tiny, red triangle.

Curious.

He stopped what he was doing and tried to grip it with his fingers but to no avail, it was too small. So he went and borrowed some tweezers from Patricia and managed to pull a small business card from between the mirror and its backing board. He assumed the police must have missed it when they examined the apartment after Sally's death.

The card was quite simple, a bright shiny red, printed with black letters. In large bold print it proclaimed, '**SATANS NIGHT CLUB**' and underneath in smaller, less bold letters, '**For the Devil in You**'. Along the bottom edge of the card, in tiny letters, there was a line that read, '**a hell of a good time**'. Other than that, there was no further information on the front

side. Puzzled, Chris turned it over to see if there was any more information on the back. There was. A handwritten telephone number. He sat down on his bed turning the card over and back, over and back, trying to make sense of a business card with virtually no information printed on it.

This was something to puzzle about later, so he put the card into his wallet and finished cleaning his room. He completely forgot about listening to his new CD's and ended up talking to Patricia and watching TV for the rest of the evening.

Next day at work, Chris removed the card from his wallet and sat looking at it. He had mentioned its existence to no-one. Really, the police should be told, but he was curious. Could it be linked to Sally's death, or had the card been stuck behind the mirror for years? He toyed with the idea of ringing the number on the back of the card but didn't. Instead he tried to find out more information by using the telephone directory service. That drew a blank and was of no help whatsoever. Next he looked in various phone books, both private listings and business listings. Then he telephoned the business registry office and discovered that there was no business of that name registered, nor had there ever been. Chris decided that the card must be really old and the business now defunct but for some reason he put the card back in his wallet and carried on with his work.

Later that day, after work, he dropped over to Steve's place with a six-pack of beer and found his friend sitting in front of his computer, trying to format the church newsletter for delivery to the printer's office the next morning. Steve was glad to stop as he was nearly finished and had done enough for the day. Truth be told, he was nearly as good as Chris on computers and got all these odd jobs because he had the free time to do them and didn't mind helping out. They took the beer and adjourned to the front porch to sit in the last rays of the dying sun. Chris felt an awkwardness in Steve and could stand it no longer. "What?" he demanded, "Is bugging you! You have been behaving strangely since I arrived"

Steve looked up from his extremely close inspection of the top of his beer can.

"I should have known that you'd pick up on it. I want to ask you something but feel that you may take it the wrong way. Okay, here goes. How well do you know Ruth?"

Chris was a bit stunned. "Why?"

"Well both Mary and I felt something odd about her. No, it's not a girl thing. I first felt it when I opened the front door on Sunday. Remember when I told you about that prickly feeling that I get? It was a bit like that. She is so intense. Her eyes seemed to look straight through me. I felt like I was being examined and judged at the same time."

Chris was incredulous, was Steve talking about Ruth, his Ruth. Gorgeous, dark haired, soft, with the greenest green eyes that you could just drift into? The Ruth that took him into her body and threw him up, beached, on some foreign shore he knew not where, to lie in her radiant sunshine for hours.

"You are talking about Ruth, like black hair and green eyes," he asked Steve, just to be sure.

"Yes. What do you know about her?"

Chris was still taken aback. "Well she part owns a club where she dances. She works Tuesday through Saturday nights. Sleeps late. Her place is being redecorated at the moment. I don't think she drives and I work with her brother, Andrew."

"Sorry." Steve glanced sideways at him. "I just had to know"

"No worries, I'll just have to keep you two separated from each other."

It was later on that evening, after a few more beers, that Chris remembered the card in his wallet. For some reason he didn't feel like telling Steve that he had found it. As casually as possible he asked Steve if he had ever heard of a nightclub called 'Satan's'. Steve's face grew troubled and his eye brows pulled together.

"Yes, but not really," he replied. "Everything I have heard is a rumor of a story, or something that someone told the person who told me."

Chris' ears pricked up and he encouraged Steve to tell him more. Maybe give a few examples.

"Why?" Steve wanted to know.

"Oh, I just heard someone mention it." Chris lied.

"Okay. Well for instance, no one seems to know where it really is. Somewhere on the South side of the city is the nearest I can pinpoint it to. From rumor and innuendo I am led to believe that it is a nightclub. The emphasis is on 'night'. Apparently, not all that goes on there is legal, or Christian I might add. The name of the club is a worry. Father O'Connor at St. Pauls has hinted that the name has been mentioned in confessional a number of times but couldn't go into details. Vows and stuff, you know. Generally, I would recommend it as an excellent place to stay away from, if you ever get invited."

This, for Steve, was a fairly long speech and Chris was a little bothered by its content and the fact that he had just lied to his long time friend. He felt uncomfortable with his duplicity and found an excuse to leave before much longer.

He arrived home about 10pm to find Patricia bustling about the apartment. She had a duster in her hands but wasn't doing much with it and didn't stop when Chris greeted her. He caught a glimpse of her face with tears streaming down wet cheeks and went over to her. He felt a little stunned. Patricia was so strong. Jesus, she had almost been in a plane wreck last week and was fine this morning. What the hell was going on?

"What is the matter Patricia?" He asked quietly

She hiccupped a sob and faced him, openly crying now and spoke through the tears.

"It's my mother, she has had a stroke and been hospitalized. Right out of the blue. She is really fit and well and only fifty-five. She was out shopping and bam. I have arranged to go up there tomorrow. The train leaves at 10am."

Chris did not know what to say. He held open his arms and took Patricia into a comforting hug.

"I will give you a lift to the station in the morning," he promised, thinking to himself,

"What next?"

The following morning, Thursday, Chris took Patricia to the train station and saw her off on the train. She had no idea how long she would have to be away and left him with a list of instructions and the telephone number of her mother's place. He got to work late but had already rung Cindy who covered for him and there was no problem at all. As he slid behind his desk Andrew greeted him cheerily, then after Chris' somber response asked if anything was amiss. Chris had not intended to say anything, as it was a private matter but found himself relating the whole story to Andrew. Why, he didn't know. Maybe just because he was Ruth's brother and Chris needed someone to talk to. Afterwards he put his head down and worked hard all day alternating between his desk and the upstairs computer.

Arriving home that night to an apartment which would be his alone for an indefinite period, Chris felt a little disjointed. He sat at the kitchen table, beer in hand, thinking. A lot

had been happening in his life recently, most of it good but it was all happening so quickly. He almost needed a few days of doing nothing just to come back to the ground and take it all in. He hadn't been working long enough to take a holiday or he would. It was all just getting a little fast for him.

He wandered off to his room and decided to listen to the CD's he had meant to go through the other night. It was relaxing lying back on his bed.

That Slim Shady was surely an odd character.

The black CD was sitting on top of his dresser. Side 'A' had been blank when he had played it for Steve. Maybe it was corrupted and no good any more.

Wouldn't hurt to check.

He reached over and picked up the midnight black CD from the dresser, once again surprised at how cold it felt to the touch. He turned it over, inserting it in the stereo system so the 'B' Side was ready to play. Idly picked up the remote Chris hit the PLAY button. There was an audible 'pop' which drew his attention just as the music started. It was unlike the previous side but no less compelling. His eyes were involuntarily closing and his head sank forward with the words ringing in his brain.

Walking up the Boulevard, cruisin' down Main,
Lookin' for the Ladies that love cocaine
Cocaine, takes away the pain.

There she goes in her dress so white
C'mon little lady, who are you doing tonight?
Cocaine, takes away the pain.

I've taken Sally, you can try Ruth
It makes no difference when you seek the truth
Cocaine, takes way the pain.

Sitting here, on this cold hard floor
Come on little lady woncha give me some more?
Of that Cocaine, takes away the pain.

Staggering up the Boulevard, stumbling down Main,
Lookin' for the ladies who sell cocaine
Cocaine, takes away the pain.

Irritation suddenly rose in him, irrational, until he realized that the telephone was ringing. He quickly turned off the music, thinking, as he headed for the telephone, that he had almost heard that song or something like it, before now.

It was Patricia on the other end of the line, ringing to tell him that she had arrived safely, settled her things into her old room at her folks' place and checked in on her mother, who was conscious but heavily sedated at the moment. The prognosis was unknown at present but guarded. The doctors at the hospital would know more in the next few days. She thanked Chris once again for being so helpful and reliable, gave him the hospital's phone

number in case he needed to call her, then said she had to go and rang off. Chris was still a bit dazed and stood looking at the telephone receiver in his hand until the persistent buzzing got through to his brain. He hung it back in its cradle and went back to his room. There, he ejected the black CD, sat it on the dressing table and carried on with listening to his new ones.

Chris was a bit dull when he woke the following morning, Friday, but he put it down to all the excitement that had been going on in his life lately and managed to get to work with time to spare. Andrew wasn't at the office when Chris arrived and unusually, hadn't turned up by start time. Cindy told him later, when he was getting coffee, that Andrew had rung in sick and wouldn't be in for the day but was expected back at work on Monday. The afternoon was quiet and the office was half empty by four o'clock. What a life these ad-people lived he thought. How cool being one of them, disposable income and time to spend it in. So thinking, he pulled out his wallet to see how much money he had left for the weekend. The red card caught his eye and he slipped it out of his wallet, studying the bright red colour and jet black print. For some reason he didn't know, the card was flipped over and the telephone was in his hand before he had a chance to think about it. Fingers pressed buttons then the ring tone started. The phone rang about ten times and Chris was just about to hang up when it was answered.

"Hello." A deep voice spoke softly.

"Er, is that Satans?" Chris asked shakily.

"How did you get this number?" the voice enquired, steely, no longer soft.

Chris thought rapidly, he had come this far, might as well try lying a little.

"Sally gave it to me."

"Sally's dead." No hesitation.

"Yeah, I know." Chris replied, wondering how the other guy knew, although it wasn't a state secret. "She gave it to me before she died. I just put off ringing until now."

"How did she give it to you?" came back the unshakeable reply.

"It's written on the back of a red business card that has **Satans Night Club** printed on the front." Chris said, staring down at the card.

"Okay. Sorry." The voice softened slightly. "All our clientele is by reference only. We have an exclusive membership policy and only admit introduced people. What can I do for you?" The voice was still deep but marginally warmer now.

"Well," Chris said, "I would like to come by the club, sometime. Could you tell me how to get there please? Also, when are you open?"

The voice replied, "We open at ten in the evening and close about four in the morning Tuesdays through Saturdays. Do you know Southside at all?"

Chris replied that he did and proceeded to write down the complicated list of instructions and directions of how to get to the club. This was one mission the Corvette was not going on. His car would not last ten minutes parked in that area of town. Neither would he, for that matter, if he was on foot. This was a taxi job and he had better charge his mobile phone so he could ring for a cab before he came back out of the club.

He could go tonight. Friday was a good night and he had all day Saturday to recover if he stayed out late.

Pity Ruth was working; it would have been fun to take her to a club.

Ah well, that's life.

Chapter 12.

It was nearly 10.30pm when the cab pulled up to the place Chris had been directed to in Southside. There was nothing remarkable to see, it was just another road in a run-down area of town. He paid the cabbie and hopped out into the dimly lit street, getting his bearings. He noticed a couple heading down a little lane opposite where he was standing. The name on the street sign read 'Shadow Lane'. According to the street directory he had checked earlier, after getting his directions, there was no such lane listed. The directory showed an unbroken block of buildings for this site. How could that be? The directory people must have made a mistake.

Unusual.

Curiosity aroused, he crossed the road and followed the couple down the short lane and was just in time to see them duck into a dark alley on the right. Obviously the same one he had been instructed to take. After a wait of a minute or two, he wandered over and turned down the alley. It was empty. There was a brick wall ten metres in front of him and that was all, no rubbish, not even a garbage bin in sight. He stood wondering where the couple had gone and as his gaze passed over the end of the alley again he saw a small video camera high up on the wall. If it wasn't for the fact that it glinted, it could easily have been missed.

As he approached the wall he noticed the button and the speaker grille, both the same colour as the wall. Chris pressed the button and a voice responded.

“Yes.”

“Chris Wilkins,” he replied.

A section of the wall to his left opened up and in the red gloom he perceived another door and a frighteningly large man with a bald head and a goatee beard wearing an amused grin on his dark face.

“Come on in then.” He chuckled. “Don’t look so surprised, it always gets first timers like that.”

It was the voice from the telephone conversation earlier that day.

Chris entered and the outer door swung shut on well-oiled hinges, soundlessly. As it clicked shut a bright light came on. To all intents and purposes he had left the world he knew behind him. He suddenly wished he had let someone know where he had gone, maybe rung Ruth or someone. Too late now. Over on the desk, a television monitor was displaying a scene of the empty alley outside and beside it was a hand held metal detector. “Card?” the big man asked.

Chris figured he meant the red business card, so he pulled it out of his wallet and handed it over to the giant. You didn’t argue with someone that size, not if you were sane or wanted to argue ever again. The card was handed back and he was checked with the metal detector and then frisked by hand.

“Everything you need is supplied inside,” the giant said by way of explanation.

“Okay,” he was further instructed. “You have been image captured by a hidden camera and in future will be computer I.D.’d. There is no charge for admission and if you sell anything and I mean anything, in here, the house gets ten percent and we have to know about it. Killing or maiming is not permitted and you must wear a condom if you have sex with anyone or anything. All pets must be on a leash and I am not talking about animals. Have a good time.” With that, the inner door was opened and the noise, the heat and the smell of smoke, liquor and bodies hit him.

The place was huge. He was at the top of a wide, sweeping staircase. Off to both sides, on a level with him, were wide balconies with tables and chairs and extra seating. Some were occupied and some were empty. Doors led off the balconies at various intervals, to places unknown. At the bottom of the staircase was a large open area, most likely the dance floor, which ended in a stage. At the present moment the stage was curtained off with red velvet curtains. The lighting was red and fairly dim and through it, as he descended the stairs, he could make out groups of people here and there. Some were sitting at tables, some were dancing to the DJayed music and a few were sitting at the bar. The striking thing about them all was that there was no dress code and although the night was early, he saw a nearly naked woman standing next to a leather clad man, both acting completely at ease.

Chris tried not to stare but it was difficult, everything around him was really odd and in his limited experience, he had never been exposed to this sort of thing before. The musical beat was throbbing and insistent and he felt like he should know the music and could almost recognize it but not quite. He went over to the bar to get himself a drink, standing beside a shapely redhead in spandex tights. Just before he could get the bartender’s attention, Chris felt a gentle groping at his crotch and recoiled quickly. He looked down as the redhead removed her hand and saw a distinct bulge in the front of the spandex tights.

“Sorry honey, didn’t realize you were a new one,” said the husky male voice.

Chris suddenly registered that he had just been groped by a beautiful transvestite.

"Uh, uh, I, er. I'm just not used to it yet," was all that Chris could manage to say at that moment, as he fronted the bar to get a beer, pressing his crotch tightly against it. The transvestite wandered off and Chris grabbed his reasonably priced beer and found a barstool to sit on, back in the shadows, with his back to a wall. The five or six people in the group in front of him were a mixed bunch of people that obviously knew each other well. One looked like Billy Idol, a woman, he realized, two were in tuxedos, there was a woman in evening dress and the transvestite in the spandex tights. It wasn't long before one of them produced a large, wicked looking joint. It was lit and passed around. When it got to the transvestite, he stood up and made his way over to Chris.

"I'm not trying to pick you up honey, although I wouldn't mind. Sorry about before. I thought this might settle you down, you look a little tense. Have a couple of hits and pass it to Ray, that's the guy over there in the tux. The name is Philomena but you can call me Phil."

"Thank you Phil. I mean it." Chris' reply was genuine, recognition for a small kindness.
"I'm Chris. I will try not to be so rude next time but I am not gay."

"No problem straight guy. Enjoy." Phil went and sat down with his friends again. Chris applied himself to the joint. It was excellent stuff. The smoke was thick and oily and didn't burn the back of his throat. He took down a huge lungfull which nearly took the top of his head off. How the hell could they smoke this stuff? He was shaking and sweating and unsteady after one hit. He had another to make sure it was as good as the first and then staggered over to deliver the joint to Ray. He caught Phil smiling at him and grinned back gratefully before lurching off to his stool. Ten minutes later when he could function again he ordered another beer.

"Is there any entertainment tonight?" He asked the barman when he could think straight.
"I mean, there is a stage over there, I guess it gets used?"

"Sure is and sure does, bud. Show starts at midnight, best damn dancers in the state. If you don't enjoy the show there is something wrong with you." With that he moved off and down the bar to attend to more of the growing crowd of customers who were filling the place up.

Chris spun out for a while only to be brought back to earth by a change in the rhythm and volume of the music. There were people everywhere now, the place was packed.

Something was happening.

Spotlights sprang onto the red curtains around the stage. The volume of the music was increased and the area in front of the stage was filling up with people, fast. Jostling each other, trying to get a spot as close as possible to the edge of the stage where the action was about to take place.

The curtains parted; there was a realistic backdrop of flames, in front of which stood a form completely wrapped in a red cloak. He was having difficulty seeing properly as the grass was really affecting him. A voice over the loudspeaker announced.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to SATANS. Where anything goes. For your pleasure please welcome 'The Queen of the Night'."

The house lights were dimmed, the music became even louder and he found himself jiggling on his stool in time to the insistent tempo. There was only one spotlight on centre stage, picking out the conical shape of the red cloak which started flapping side to side as the figure underneath gyrated to the music. Suddenly, with dramatic flair, the cape was thrown to one side revealing a black haired, obviously female dancer in red tights with a forked tail stitched on the back, a bikini top that was tiny triangles of red material, horns

and a trident. As she turned, Chris saw white face paint and black circles around eyes which glowed red.

SHIT! SHIT! SHIT!

His heart sped up and the blood drained from his face. Nooooooo.....

Ruth, his Ruth. Magnificent Ruth of the black hair, beautiful boobs and sexy touch. The woman he loved. Up there on the stage dancing, her eyes aglow and boy, could she dance. Ruth moving as though boneless, trident planted shaft first on the stage with her bending and twisting around it. The music changed slightly and he remembered the song, it was one off the black CD he had. The one that he had played before he got his job. Only now, Ruth was dancing to it in a way which, in spite of how he was feeling, made him horny as hell.

Gifted, lifted, gonna get some income
Everything comes to those who wait
Havin' a life you only dreamed of
But most of the time it arrives too late.

She was bumping the trident with her crotch now, oozing sex, eyes glowing bright red. Cheers, yells, clapping and whistling were coming from all through the enthusiastic crowd. She looked in Chris' direction and smiled knowingly at him.
He fled.

Cowardly it may have been, the smoke could have contributed but he couldn't stand seeing the woman he loved in that place, in front of those people and dancing nearly nude. He turned and ran up the stairs, through the two doors and hit the street running and didn't stop until he could hardly breathe and his chest hurt. Then he vomited, forcefully, gagging and trying to breath at the same time. He did not know where he was and he didn't really care right at this moment. He eventually calmed down a bit and pulled himself together. How could she do that to him? He checked his watch, it was about one in the morning, so he just kept walking and eventually found himself in a busier area of Southside, without getting mugged. He flagged a cab and went home.

Chris woke up feeling thick-headed and glancing at the clock saw it was ten thirty in the morning. He rolled over in bed and.....What the.....

Standing naked beside the bed after having just leaping out of it, he recognized the black hair on the pillow beside where he had been a moment before. Ruth turned her head to look at him.

"Come back to bed honey," she said in her best little-girl voice. "I want you to give me something."

He felt himself stirring.

"How did you get in here? What are you doing here, it's Saturday? I saw you at the club last night. Why didn't you tell me?" He almost wailed the last sentence out.

"Oh grow up. I saw you run out of there last night, like all the hounds of hell were after you, so I thought I would come over and explain. I told you I part-owned a club and danced. It is not that bad. I don't do live sex shows or anything like that, I just dance. It brings in the clients and I am good at it.

Anyhow, when I arrived here the door was unlocked, so I let myself in. You were fast asleep so I just got into bed with you. I love you, you woodentop. I was going to tell you eventually, you know, break it to you gently. You just beat me to it.”

Chris was sure he had closed and locked the door last night but here she was so he mustn’t have been as thorough as he thought he had been. She did look rather tasty, lying there like that.

“What about the eyes? They scared the shitbags out of me?”

“Stage contacts. Glow in the dark plastic.”

Wide awake now he got back into bed, his erection painfull.

“I must have looked a real twit, running out of there,” he laughed.

“Just let me know next time you intend visiting,” she said as she gripped him with intent and all conversation came to an end.

They got up about 3pm and had a late breakfast after a lengthy shower. Ruth got back into the clothes she had arrived in the previous night and started to apply her makeup in front of the mirror in Chris’ room.

“I thought that you didn’t want to come here when Patricia was around,” teased Chris.

“She’s not. Andrew told me she was away visiting her sick mother who has had a stroke,” was the instant answer.

Chris had forgotten all about that, Ruth was really quick. There was definitely a potent brain in that pretty head.

Finishing her makeup, Ruth went out to the coffee table in the lounge room and sat down in front of it. Chris followed her out. She took a flat mirror out of her purse, laid it down and tapped white powder out of a little bottle on to it. She pulled out a credit card and proceeded to chop the coke into lines.

“JESUS H.CHRIST,” Chris exploded. “That’s cocaine.”

“My, aren’t you a bright cookie,” was the laconic reply.

“But that stuff is addictive and really fucks your head up.”

“Look Chris, let’s get a few things straight. You have seen me dance, I part own the club and I need to stay bright and wide awake until four in the morning, five days a week. I have been snorting coke for at least six years, off and on. I am not an addict and just out of curiosity, is my head fucked?”

“Well no. You seem okay. Is that the cause of the sniff the other day?”

“Bright boy. I wanted to tell you but figured that you weren’t ready. You almost aren’t now but I thought you might as well know. Try a little bit. If you don’t like it, don’t have it any more. I guarantee that you will not get addicted. You can stop any time you like.”

“No way,” he replied, sitting on the edge of a lounge chair. “There are too many Hollywood types who get onto that stuff and then fall apart. They have all sorts of problems and end up getting busted. I don’t want to end up all fucked up. Anyhow, it is really expensive and although my pay is okay, I could not afford buy the stuff.”

She gave him an appraising look. “I’m not asking you to buy it; I have my sources, which are very reasonable. You smoke dope don’t you? Are you addicted to that? No. You just have a smoke now and again to relax. Like at the club last night.”

“How did you know?”

“Because I was observing you. All new patrons automatically get their pictures sent to the office so we can pick out the law or feds. When yours came up I kept an eye on you.”

“Why didn’t you come and talk to me at the club,” he enquired.

"Because I guess I wanted to see how you handled it. The other reason is that I stay out of the front area until my act begins. It reduces the impact if I go out and mingle beforehand. Anyhow, when I had finished, you were already long gone."

She cut the coke again, credit card flashing. "Look. You smoke dope so you might as well try this stuff. It isn't addictive, that is just hype that gets put out by the authorities to try and stop people using it. Coke is really fun, you will really like it and it makes sex wonderfull." She smiled at him seductively and ran the tip of her tongue over both upper and lower lips while rubbing her nipples through her flimsy T shirt. Chris could see her big nipples firming up in response to her fingers. His penis stirred.

"And anyway," she continued. "Where do you think the tons of stuff that get into the country each year, goes?"

He had no answer to that one, in fact he had never met anyone before Ruth that used cocaine and Ruth seemed totally normal to him, apart from her sexual appetite. He loved her and wanted to share her life. All of it. Looking at the taut T shirt and stiff nipples was no help either. He looked down at the cocaine on the table and thought about it as she rolled up a crisp \$10 note into a tube. It was Saturday; he didn't have to go anywhere. If he tried it and got weird, he was at home and could go to bed. If he didn't like it, addiction was not likely after one time.

Ruth completed rolling the note, picked up the mirror, stuck one end of the tube up her right nostril and sniffed a line. She swapped nostrils and sniffed up another line. She held out the mirror and tube to Chris, who took them and then she sat back on the lounge with her index finger crosswise under her nose.

Chris looked at her. Ruth's eyes were shining and there was a flush of colour on her cheeks. She squirmed her thighs together a bit as she sat and sniffed loudly.

"Well Big Boy, are you going to join me? Or do I have to go home now?"

He looked down at the two lines of coke on the mirror and making a decision, stuck the tube up his nose and sniffed deeply.

Four lines of coke and two hours of passionate sex later, with Ruth just gone to the club to work and Sunday to look forward to, Chris sat in his favourite chair sniffing occasionally while watching a movie on cable T.V. He was physically tired but wide awake and his nose was numb. Coke was great! Ruth had even rubbed a little bit onto the end of his penis and they had partaken in sex for over an hour that time. He was still buzzing, what a woman. Ruth was going to ring him tomorrow, after she woke, so they could spend more time together. Chris sipped his beer and reflected on the situation. He had better not tell Steve about 'Satans' or the cocaine.

Steve would definitely not approve.

Chapter 13.

The large window in Chris' bedroom faced west, well away from the morning sun which was fortuitous, as he was having a sleep in. The alarm clock had not been set because it was a Sunday and due to the excesses of the previous afternoon/evening he had not wanted to awaken until late in the morning or whenever he came to. Chris lay in bed, gathering his scrambled thoughts together as he came awake and stretched languorously under the sheets. He felt wonderfull. Coke was great, most enjoyable, as was the sex he and Ruth had shared under its influence.

Ruth was fantastic!

Never before, in his relatively short life, had any woman even come close to exciting him the way that Ruth did. It was almost as if she could read his mind. She was unbelievable; self assured, self sufficient, interesting, horny and she really seemed to like him. Why, he couldn't figure out. She could have anyone she wanted. Oh well, who was he to complain.

The telephone rang, breaking his reverie. Glancing at the clock he discovered it was after eleven so he climbed out of bed, full of excitement and went to answer it. It was Ruth, ringing to say she had just woken up after her work at the club the previous night and could they meet at Tonies Coffee Shop about two o'clock in the afternoon. He loved the sound of her voice; even over the telephone it sent shivers down his spine. He quickly agreed after rechecking the time and gracefully managed to put the phone back in its cradle before the conversation became too steamy. He smiled as he headed off to the kitchen for his first coffee of the day, not able to believe his good fortune in having such a woman as his girlfriend.

Hell he was lucky.

At two o'clock that afternoon, he was just nosing the 'vette into a parking spot near Tonies Coffee Shop, when the passenger door was opened and Ruth hopped in.

"Let's not waste time Big Boy, I want to go for a fast drive down the coast road. You know, blow away the cobwebs and get some sea air into my lungs. We can call by your apartment and have a quick snort before we go."

Chris was stunned, "But I can't drive after snorting coke," he said. "One, it is illegal and two, I don't know if I would be capable."

Her green eyes seemed to glow as she stared at him. "Sure you will be capable and who's to know unless you tell them?"

Twenty minutes later, the red Corvette drove out of the underground car park of Chris' apartment building with Chris at the wheel. He was buzzing and felt on top of the world. Driving on coke was far easier than he had believed it to be, his reactions were quicker and he felt able to deal with any eventuality that may arise, no problem at all. The car felt taught and responsive beneath him, almost like a woman in its responsiveness to his ministrations. While they were up in the apartment, he had picked up some of the CD's of his newly acquired music and the stereo was now loudly pumping out one of his preferred selections. '8 Mile by Eminem'. Not the latest but classic.

Ruth eyed him speculatively.

"How do you feel?" she enquired.

"Fuckin' A1," was the reply.

"Great. I'll bring you over some 'house' music, you know, dance tracks. The sort of stuff I work to. It's got a pretty fast beat and sort of gets your body going. Speaking of which, let's get out of town. I feel like wind in my hair. Want to blow out all the night time cotton wool from my brain."

With that she pulled a pair of designer sunglasses out of her bag and slid them on. Chris retrieved his from the dashboard and put them on also, as he turned the car onto the new coast road. For a Sunday and such a beautiful day, the traffic was extremely sparse. They had been traveling for about twenty minutes, listening to the music, when Ruth turned to him.

"Do you always drive this slowly?"

Chris looked down at the speedometer; it told him that they were doing the legal speed limit of seventy miles per hour. He looked over at Ruth.

"We are just on the legal limit and I don't want to chance getting a ticket. The police are pretty vigilant along this stretch of road."

She flared her nostrils at him. "You know, sometimes you are a real pussy. Live a little. It's Sunday and there doesn't seem to be many cops around. Let this baby stretch her legs a little, she will love it. Corvettes are not designed for pottering around in you know."

The taunt really stung Chris. He considered himself to be a good driver and a very capable one at that. To be told he was a pussy really stung. With the coke buzzing in his system and the car feeling like an extension of himself, he sped up. The traffic was light and as he went faster, Ruth's hand on his thigh crept higher and higher. At one hundred miles an hour she was rubbing his crotch gently and he had a boner on. He glanced over at her and she gave him a little pout so he pushed his foot down a little further on the accelerator. They flashed past the police car, hidden off the side of the road, at one hundred and ten miles per hour. A loud, red blur. The cop in the police car spilled coffee over his hand getting rid of it, fast, out of the window and gunned the motor of the pursuit vehicle into life. As he fishtailed off the gravel onto the tarmac he called it in.

"Dispatch? This is car eighteen on Highway six. Do you have a copy?"

"This is dispatch. Roger that, car eighteen."

"I am southbound in pursuit of a red car, make and registration number unknown at this time. Obviously speeding. Do you copy?"

"Affirmative," was the scratchy reply.

"I will get back to you when I have caught up to them. Over."

"Roger that. Dispatch out."

The cop replaced the handset on the bracket beside the radio and concentrated on his driving, he loved high speed chases. It was an excellent, legal opportunity to drive fast and catch speedsters. Sometimes women drivers even gave him favours not to write a ticket out. That, he enjoyed.

Ruth was bent over and working on his zipper when Chris caught sight of the pursuing police car, its roof lights flashing, in the rear view mirror. He swore vigorously under his breath and Ruth lifted her head.

"What's the matter? I thought you would enjoy what I am doing."

'Yes I would but we have a slight problem. Take a look behind. We are doing one hundred and ten miles an hour and we have a cop on our tail.' Chris responded with difficulty, as his heart was now thumping loudly in his chest and his throat had suddenly become very dry.

"Don't worry. I have friends in the police department. Good ones." She winked at him.

"This will never make it to court. It is amazing how easy it is to lose paper."

Chris slowed the car and found a place to pull over onto a gravel rest area. A few moments later the traffic cop's car pulled in behind them, lights flashing, sirens blaring and stopped about ten metres behind the 'vette. The policeman got out, put on his hat and walked slowly towards their car with his hand on his gun. Chris was becoming really agitated. Ruth smiled at him.

"Calm down. All you were doing was trying out your new toy. Play it dumb Big Boy and I will take care of the ticket. You have to learn to trust me." She chuckled. "I guess you could say that you were in my hands." She winked at him.

The policeman stood beside the driver's door, checking out the inside of the car and the occupants. He was trained to look for tell-tale signs of drunkenness or drug use in these situations and his early first inspection often told him a lot about the people he was dealing with. This time he drew a blank, just a young guy in an expensive car with an incredibly attractive, raven haired and well put together woman.

"Please turn the music off and remove your sunglasses." The cop spoke authoritatively. "I need to see your license and registration please."

Chris turned down the music and took off his sunglasses, reaching for his wallet in the hip pocket of his jeans.

"Slowly sir, if you don't mind." The traffic cop said, hand on gun.

Chris understood the inherent meaning, so slowly and carefully eased his wallet out.

Taking out the license he handed it to the policeman. Then he stole a glance at Ruth who was looking out the back of the 'vette, concentrating on the police car.

"Officer. Isn't that smoke coming out of the front grille of your car?" she enquired sweetly and enigmatically.

Both Chris and the officer turned to look at the police car and sure enough, wisps of smoke could be seen coming from the grille area.

"Shit." The policeman tucked Chris' license into his uniform shirt pocket. "Don't go anywhere, your registration number is on the police car's video and I've got your license. So stay put until I sort this out." With that he spun on his heel and strode back towards the police car as the smoke intensified. It was now coming out from under the front wheel arches as well. The cop went to the passenger door of his vehicle and opening it, grabbed a

fire extinguisher. He then went around to the drivers side and reaching in through the window, pulled the bonnet release.

Ruth was intent on the whole scene. Chris, who was worried about the fallout from being caught travelling so fast, studied her as she stared at the unfolding events. Her breathing was speeding up and a little flush appeared on her cheeks. A pulse was jumping in her throat and her eyes narrowed. Chris shifted his inspection to the rear-view mirror to see what was happening behind. The smoke was black and oily looking and was pouring out from under the guards. The policeman was fumbling with the bonnet catch and seemed to be having trouble getting it open. Just as the bonnet started to lift, for some unknown reason, Chris switched his gaze to Ruth. At that instant her eyes flew wide open and there was a slight nod of her head. He felt a pulse of something thrill through his body and simultaneously heard a loud explosion. He whipped around to see the policeman toppling backward to hit the ground, staring sightlessly upward, with a piece of fan blade embedded deep in his head, right between the eyes and a huge fireball curling lazily upward from the front of the police car. The bonnet had been nearly blown off by the force of the explosion and lay bent back over the roof of the car, twisted but still attached by one hinge. Chris could only sit, stunned, as the policeman's body stopped twitching and lay still, with blood oozing from around the wound and also trickling down its nose.

Ruth leapt from the car and ran back to the policeman, shielding her face from the growing flames with her forearm. She unbuttoned the uniform pocket and extracted Chris' license then ran back and jumped into the 'vette.

"He's dead. Go!" she yelled.

Chris hesitated, "But that's leaving the scene of an accident and it's not our fault."

"Don't be stupid. That car is about to blow up. Get going. NOW!"

That explosive command jarred him into action. He started the car and accelerated hard, sliding onto the road sideways, rear wheels squealing, just as the sound and force wave of the police car exploding, hit them. He was shaking and driving slightly erratically but had the car under control. Ruth looked over at him.

"Slow down a bit and turn off down here, on the right. We can take the back way home up the old road. No-one saw us but you can bet someone will be here soon." She seemed unfazed by the unfolding of events and handed his license back to him.

"You should take more care with this you know," was all she said.

The drive home was uneventful. He drove carefully, checking his rear view mirror constantly, expecting to be pulled over at any time by hordes of police. It was only on reaching the entrance to his basement garage that his breathing started to regularize. Once inside the apartment, his car parked below, miraculously free of damage, he relaxed slightly and switched on the television, turning to the local news station. Nothing. Ruth seemed fairly unconcerned by what they had both witnessed and put the chain of events down to luck. For some inexplicable reason, she was incredibly hungry and suggested they order in Chinese food. An hour later, with four or five empty containers from the Chinese takeaway shop strewn over the coffee table, a news item interrupted the normal program on the television. Chris turned up the volume in time to hear the presenter say.

"At this stage the officer's death looks like an unfortunate accident. He was killed by an unexplained explosion in the engine bay of the police car. It was believed he was about to use the fire extinguisher, found at the scene of the tragedy, when the explosion occurred. It is known he was in pursuit of a red car about that time but due to the video recording

device being burnt in the fire, no identification of it is possible. There were no witnesses to the event and police are asking anyone who saw this officer, about fifty miles south of the city on the coast road, to come forward please. The accident is believed to have happened around 3.30pm. The officer was unmarried. Now we return to normal programming.”

Chris picked up the remote and switched the television off. Turning to Ruth he said, “How about that, I do not believe it. Dead. No witnesses. Boy, there is sure a lot of weird stuff happening lately.”

“We were lucky. Now what you need is a long soak in the tub followed by a long soak in me.” She grinned at him as she took the mirror and vial out of her bag. “But first, Dr. Ruth advises a little medication to help you relax and to get my juices flowing. Care to join me in a snort or two?”

He sighed and went to join her on the lounge.

Early the next morning, Monday, she was gone. There was a note on the pillow which read, “Stay cool ‘till after school. See you this evening. Love, Ruth.”

Being a work day for Chris, he wandered into the kitchen to prepare breakfast and get himself ready for work. The previous day’s events were playing on his mind so he switched on the television to see if there was any further news. It was droning on in the background when the telephone rang. Chris nearly dropped his coffee. When he answered it, Patricia was on the line.

“Hi Chris, sorry to bother you. I just rang to tell you that I will be stuck up here until Friday at least. Mother is a little better but she will need help for a while. I have arranged things with the airline so I don’t have any flights until next week at the earliest. I will stay up here for now. How is everything going?”

“Huh, okay I guess.”

“You sure?” she replied. “You don’t sound very confident about it.”

“Sorry. I am not at my best first thing in the morning. It takes me a little while to get going. You just caught me by surprise,” he lied.

“Okay. Take care then and have a good day. I will ring back later in the week. Bye.”

With that Patricia hung up, leaving him standing there looking at the dead telephone in his hand.

Cindy looked at him closely as he stepped out of the lift that morning.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“Sure, why?” he countered with.

“You look kind of pale and worn out this morning. Did something happen over the weekend?”

“No, no,” he lied. “I think I am just overdoing the late nights.” He winked at her in what he hoped was a conspiratorial wink and turned away to go to his desk.

“Well you should look after yourself a little better,” he heard her say as he walked off.

Andrew was waiting for him, a big smile on his handsome, dark face when Chris slid into his seat at the next desk.

“Hi. Seems like you have had a pretty eventful weekend. Sis brought me up to speed this morning. Pretty cool thing to witness, an explosion and a cop buying it.”

Chris quickly looked around to see if anyone nearby could have heard Andrew.

“Don’t worry; I am not stupid enough to let anyone else find out. This will be our little secret, just the three of us. You, me and Sis.”

Chris was flabbergasted, he knew that Ruth and her brother talked about a lot of things but that sort of event should not have been shared with anyone. It was his and Ruth's secret, or should have been. Now Andrew knew. It was getting a little scary. If anyone ever found out. Chris looked over at Andrew to find him smiling.

"You need to relax a little. Care to adjourn for a little snort?"

Chris couldn't believe his ears. Andrew had the same ambivalent attitude to drugs as Ruth did.

"What, at work?"

"Of course at work. What do you think; we just take the rest of the day off. It will help you to relax and get focused on what you have to do." Andrew smiled, "And besides, it's fun." Back at his desk, fifteen minutes later, with a lot of the paranoia disappearing rapidly, he found the world to be a much cheerier place. He got down to his work and the day flew by. Before long it would be time for his meeting with Ruth that evening.

He could hardly wait.

Chapter 14.

There was a surprise in store for Chris when he arrived home. Ruth was waiting for him in his apartment. He was pleased to see her but also a bit puzzled and irritated. This was supposed to be a secure building, yet Ruth was standing in front of him in the apartment. He stepped back after their first kiss and asked curiously,

“How did you get in here?”

She laughed and pressing her arms into the sides of her breasts, really accentuated the cleavage displayed by her scoop neck top. She lowered her lashes and looked up at him through them, saying in her best little girl’s voice.

“But I know Chris wouldn’t mind me being in the apartment and he wouldn’t want me to wait down here. Could you let me in please?” She pouted at him.

Chris laughed at her replay of working over the doorman but a little voice in the back of his head was sending out warnings. This wasn’t the first time she had accessed the apartment. Something was not right. His laughter trailed off as he appraised her. Ruth looked ravishing, dressed all in black with a silver belt and boots and over on the table he spotted a silver grip purse.

“Can I take you out for a meal?” she asked him. For the second time that evening he was taken by surprise.

“Yeah, sure, Where we going?” he replied, curiosity welling up within him.

“A suprise,” she replied. “Now go and get changed and I will set up a few lines of coke.”

“I already had a small taste earlier,” he told her. “Andrew offered me a hit.”

“Yeah, I know,” she replied and left it at that.

Chris ambled off to shower and change into ‘going out’ clothes. As he wandered into his bedroom he noticed that the damn light on the stereo was on again. He flicked the power switch to OFF and went and jumped into the shower. Twenty minutes later he was sitting down beside Ruth also dressed in black. It didn’t look quite as stunning on him as it did on her but they made a handsome couple nonetheless. She had put out four lines of coke and handed him the mirror and the rolled up bill. He took it from her and snorted two lines before handing it back to her. He felt his head pounding and the blood rushing through his veins as the nearly pure cocaine hit. He blacked out for a second or two before vision was once again restored.

“Damn. That is strong stuff,” he mumbled as Ruth finished her lines.

“Only the best, Big Boy. I figured it was time to get you off the stuff that has been cut with glucose and get you on to something with a bit of a kick.” Her smile seemed genuine.

He turned to face her, the room coming back into focus and no longer swirling around.

“This is great. I feel so alive and also a little horny. Driving is probably out for me though, especially after yesterday.”

“I understand. No problem lover, we can catch a cab. Probably a good idea not to have the ‘vette with us where we are going. It would not last long in that area.” She looked at him with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “Can you eat hot foods?”

“Generally, as long as they don’t remove paint,” was his reply.

After walking out onto the street and hailing a taxi, they sat in the back together as the city blocks sped by. The rush hour traffic had diminished to a light flow, no hindrance to their journey. The evening lights were noticeably bright and sparkling to Chris as he enjoyed the effects of the nearly pure coke. He felt strong and invincible and looking beside him to see his perfect Ruth sitting there made him feel pride, lots of pride. People would notice him with a girl like that at his side. Could be good for his career also. After thirty minutes they pulled up outside a non-descript building in a poorer suburb on the outskirts of the city. Chris paid the cabdriver and tipped him, then turned to where Ruth was standing in front of a painted door as the taxi drove away. There was a sign of some kind above the door, painted in some form of oriental language. Which one, Chris did not know. Ruth knocked and the door was shortly answered by an oriental looking old lady.

Ruth made a small bow while uttering a strange word, “*Annyeong haseyo*.”

The old lady’s face creased into smiling wrinkles as she bowed and repeated, “*Annyeong haseyo*.” Then she opened the door fully, allowing a view of an entrance area where there was a profusion of shoes on the floor and coats and jackets hung on coat hooks on the wall. After an exchange of more foreign words between the elderly lady and Ruth and yet more bowing, they were ushered into what Chris could now see, from the entrance area, was a restaurant. It was divided into smaller cubicle areas where Chris saw various sized groups of Oriental people, dining in relative privacy. There was some form of wailing music, muted, in the background. Ruth explained about taking off their shoes and then they stepped up to the level of the restaurant proper and padded across the wood-grained floor in stocking feet to where the old lady awaited them at the entrance to an empty cubicle. They sat cross legged on cushions on the floor, facing each other across the low table. Between them, sitting on the table, was what looked like the top of a big saucepan. Chris lifted it experimentally and was surprised to find a barbecue plate underneath. He looked up to find himself being scrutinized.

“What is that weird music that is playing?” he asked.

“*Pansori*, traditional music. Can be an acquired taste.”

“Oh, right.”

“Hungry?” Ruth asked him.

“Yes, I could eat a horse,” he replied.

“Good. We are going to have lots of small dishes and a barbecue at the table as well. It doesn’t matter if you cannot eat it all. No one gets offended.” With that she turned and the waitress came over. An attractive young woman, dressed in what appeared to be traditional clothing, stood before them. Ruth started talking to her in the same foreign language she had used before. The lady seemed surprised at Ruth’s fluency but answered readily.

Whatever language they were speaking worked for them and soon the waitress bowed once and toddled off, no doubt to relay instructions to the chef. The waitress returned shortly with ice water and two glasses then came back with a bowl of hot coals which fitted into the receptacle in the centre of the table beneath the barbecue plate. Chris sat and watched as Ruth poured water for them both before she spoke.

“It’s quite simple; we will have lots of small dishes of tasty things, sometimes even things you wouldn’t normally recognize as food. This style of dining is known as *Hanjeongsik*. I have ordered the restaurant’s specialty, *Gungjungsik*, royal cuisine. I also ordered the meat as an extra for you to try. It is brought out already cut into strips and we cook it and wrap it in a lettuce leaf, adding spices and other things, before popping the wrap into our mouths. That is the traditional way to eat. Can you handle chop sticks?”

"Yes. I learned how to ages ago," he said.

"Excellent. We are also going to have soju, a bit like vodka, to drink with our meal. It goes well with the food." Her eyes twinkled with humour as she gazed at him across the table.

Very shortly thereafter, dish after dish was delivered to the table. He lost count after fourteen, concentrating on the different tastes in each small receptacle. Some dishes had green food, some red, some with little seeds scattered over pungent smelling substances. Ruth was trying to keep up a running commentary.

"This one is green seaweed, this one is brown seaweed, salty but not hot. In this dish there are fern fronds while in here are fish fry with sesame seeds and oil. Here we have pickled cucumber which is hot, stuffed cucumber which is hot, pickled cabbage, *kimchi*, which is hot and chillies. I'll start the meat cooking while you pour the soju." So saying she occupied herself with placing the meat onto the cooking surface in the middle of the table between them, turning it regularly with the provided tongs. It sizzled away, turning brown and Chris found his mouth watering at the smell of the cooking meat. He tried the soju. It was like thick, sweet vodka served at room temperature and it slid down a treat. Easy stuff to drink. Ruth knocked hers back. He refilled both of their glasses. The meat was ready, so they set to. Although there appeared to be huge amounts of food, it wasn't long before it disappeared and the dishes were taken away. Another couple of bottles of soju came and they sat back enjoying their drinks as the food settled. Chris didn't feel uncomfortably full, although there had seemed to be a mountain of food on their table. From their private cubicle, he could hear other groups of diners enjoying their evening. There was no way he could understand what they were saying. Ruth helped now and again, telling him what was being talked about.

"What language is that?" he asked at one stage.

"Korean." she replied.

"How did you learn it?"

"When I was young, we had Korean neighbours and I used to play with their daughter.

Very rarely, we'd have sleepovers but my dad wasn't keen on that."

Chris sat back, replete. Looking over at Ruth, he saw a very slight smile playing on her lips. He knew her well enough by now to know that something was going on.

"What sort of meat was that," he asked her.

"Dog." She laughed then.

"Yeah. Right. Now tell me what it really was."

"Dog."

"Shit. You are not joking." His stomach gave a lurch. "You mean we just ate Rover?"

"No you idiot. They are specially bred for eating. This is an old-fashioned, traditional, Korean restaurant. Dog meat is usually eaten in the form of a stew and the tradition is dying out gradually in the present day and age. I ordered it fresh tonight, as I thought you would be up for trying something new. A sort of horizon expansion. I didn't think you would mind experimenting."

Chris sat back digesting this information and trying to get his rebellious stomach under control. As he sipped on his soju, he realized that if he had been told pork or beef, his acceptance of the feast would have been total. He sighed. Really, the restaurant and the food had been a wonderfull experience and he had a lot to thank Ruth for, even if she had set him up. He looked over at Ruth.

"Have you heard anything further on that incident yesterday?"

"No. Nothing at all apart from the fact it was referred to as an accident. Pretty cool that we got away with it."

Chris eyed her speculatively.

"I don't think it's cool that someone is dead. That seems to be happening around me a lot lately. If I were a superstitious kind of person, I would be getting very worried." A vision of black hair and a white face, retreating back over a balcony, flickered through his brain.

"There was a jolt, just before the explosion occurred. Did you feel it?"

"No. Just the blast wave which felt like a jolt. Sure it wasn't that which you felt and you are just mixing it up a little in your memory?" Her expression was so earnest, that Chris was no longer sure. He was having difficulty concentrating and events of late were being scrambled around in his head.

"Had enough to eat?" Ruth asked.

"Sure."

"Wanna go for a drink? I know a little bar near here. Could be fun. We could walk there in a couple of minutes."

"Fine by me. Lead on."

As they rose from their table, a very old wizened man appeared soundlessly at the entrance to their cubicle. Both he and Ruth bowed in unison. Ruth spoke rapidly in the singsong language and the old man beamed in response, bowing as he backed away.

"The owner," Ruth explained. "I was just thanking him for the excellent meal and hospitality."

After the bill had been paid, they retrieved their shoes and left the restaurant. The night air was starting to cool down somewhat and walking was exceedingly pleasant. A couple of minutes later, the lights of a bar became visible down the street. There were a couple of pickups parked nearby but otherwise the place didn't look that busy. They were a little way up the street from the bar when its door opened and a middle aged, smooth looking guy stepped out. He looked a little the worse for wear and weaved towards them. Looking up he spotted Ruth and stopped.

"Hi honey. Remember me?" he asked Ruth.

"No. Leave me alone," she replied.

"Satans. Early morning after the show," he continued.

"You should know that place doesn't exist. It is just a rumour that is not talked about and I certainly do not know you." She retorted with vehemence.

"Well you should know me. A thousand bucks is a thousand bucks but you were worth every cent." He looked over at Chris and winked. "How much is she costing you, boy?"

That was it. At some primal level, a cross between a gorilla and a leopard immediately fired up inside Chris, fueled by cocaine of the finest quality and some excellent soju. He would be unable to remember this instant at any future time. His first blow broke the guy's jaw, his second felled him and three kicks later the stranger was dead. Temple stove in and windpipe crushed. Less than thirty seconds. Ruth, nonplussed, whispered Chris' name a couple of times and he came back to reality and started shaking. Ruth was cool as a cucumber and quickly took control of the situation. Looking around for potential witnesses and seeing none, she easily rolled the body under the nearest pickup truck. There was surprising strength in that dancer's body. She wiped her hands on the guy's trousers then stood up and away from the car. There was still no one around. Taking hold of Chris' upper arm, she gave it a squeeze.

"It was an accident. Nobody saw us. Start walking back towards the restaurant. Not too fast and not too slow." She gently tugged and propelled him in the desired direction with an arm around his waist. Chris was starting to come to.

"What did he mean? How much was I paying?" he asked, his voice trembling.

"Nothing. He must have confused me with one of the callgirls at 'Satans'."

"But he seemed to know you."

"Look. I dance on the stage twice nightly for five days a week. Everyone at the club knows me. He must have confused me with one of the 'girls' who looks a bit like me."

"Do you think he is dead?" Chris asked, his voice wavering.

"Honey, I know he is dead. Didn't know you had it in you. Must say I am very impressed by how you are turning out. Makes me all wet."

Chris looked at her in surprise, a little confused also. Although he loved her dearly, he did not know her that well. Life had definitely turned into a roller coaster ride, nearly totally out of his control. He talked as they walked.

"That is two dead people in two days," he said levelly. "Until two months ago I had not even seen one dead person. Since then there have been lots."

Smiling, she looked up at him, "It is just coincidence, let's go home."

They walked back towards the city without seeing a soul. Two people, dressed in black in the dimly lit streets. Lovers, out strolling after a meal. Eventually they negotiated a back alley and stepped out onto one of the busier night time streets and hailed a cab. Inspecting his knuckles in the back of the cab, Chris found them to be unmarked. He had used palm blows. Funny how that karate he did at University just came back to him automatically like that. He sat back for the rest of the ride, holding Ruth's hand and thinking.

When they reached his apartment, the first thing that Ruth did was to take his shoes and put them in a plastic bag. He hadn't noticed the blood stains.

"I'll drop them into a dumpster bin first thing in the morning," she told him as she placed the plastic bag next to her purse on the hall stand.

Chris was still shaken by the chain of events but felt surprisingly good and not as remorseful as he would have thought. He cuddled Ruth as she prepared a couple of lines of coke, then again in the shower after the coke. Chris was worried about being arrested more than he was about the death. He could always claim self-defence. However, they had seen no one and as Ruth assured him again and again, no one had seen them.

Entering the bedroom with Ruth, he saw the red light of the stereo was on again. It really needed to be fixed. Ruth noticed it also and went over and hit the EJECT button. As the CD drawer opened, he heard an exclamation from her.

"Great. I didn't know you had a copy of this. Isn't it wonderfull?" She held up the black hole of the light sucking CD.

"Yeah, it's alright. Who's it by?"

"Oh, just some guys I know. It's sort of a demo. There are not many copies around. Mind if I play the next song?"

"Not at all," he said as he got into bed yawning and pulled the covers up. He suddenly felt really exhausted despite the recent hit of coke. He added sleepily, "Is it alright if we just sleep tonight, I feel really, really tired."

"Certainly beloved. We have had a pretty intense couple of days. I will only play one song then come to bed. It's just that I love to listen to this music."

Ruth placed the CD on the sliding drawer and closed it. Picking up the remote, she pressed the PLAY button, knowing the right track would play. Chris lay back, half asleep, as the opening bars of the music started. He was getting superstitious about this CD, so many things had happened since it had come to him, both good and bad. He half heard the music and song as sleep began to claim him.

She's a good lookin' woman, so sexy with you
 But what makes you think she can ever be true?
 You'll soon start to pay as the bills fall due
 Turning green with jealousy before you turn blue.
 She's always two faced with a mask in place,
 Standing right beside her is a dangerous place.

You should play with her just as hard as you can
 Let her drive you crazy as you act like a man
 But you got to treat her gently 'cos you don't understand
 Just who she's working for in this business plan.
 She's always two faced with a mask in place
 Standing right beside her is a dangerous place.

What makes you think you're her one true desire?
 This woman plays in flame and burns with passions fire
 Don't assume the truth the Devil loves a liar
 And this one gives it up when she finds a cash buyer.
 She's two still faced with a mask in place
 Standing right beside her is a dangerous place.

Chris drifted off to sleep as the last chorus was being sung. He missed seeing a nude Ruth dancing erotically to the music, one of her hands busy in her neatly trimmed, black pubic hair. He also missed seeing the malevolent smile on her face or the glowing red eyes above that smile. The hand that reached out to turn off the CD after the song, in the red glow from the multifaceted ON indicator, seemed by a trick of the light to be slightly scaly. She climbed into bed beside Chris, who was fast asleep. As she lay back, her hand still lazily moving down between her legs, Ruth looked over at Chris, sleeping as if dead. The only sign of life being the occasional rise and fall of his chest.

She smiled to herself.
 He was working out perfectly.

Chapter 15.

The following morning, Tuesday, Chris woke up to an empty bed as usual. For some reason Ruth always left during the night. He was becoming used to it by now and wasn't surprised when he found the note on the coffee table. This one read, 'You really do it for me lover. 'Till later. Ruth.' He screwed it up and along with the contents of the ashtray, threw it in the garbage. He was still a little tired from the previous late night and now, as the memory of those events started filtering back into his consciousness, he found that he was mentally replaying them over and over.

Going over to the television, he switched it on and turning to a local channel was just in time to catch the tail end of a news item.

“.....The man was found outside of a bar in Southside. He was apparently run over by an automobile. An autopsy will be carried out this morning. Police are treating the death as a hit and run.” The announcer moved onto the next news item.

Chris was stunned, Ruth had rolled the body under a pickup truck. The driver must have staggered out of the bar and just taken off and run over it. What a stroke of luck! He mentally kicked himself, what was he thinking? Someone was dead. How was that a stroke of luck?

Chris decided to walk to work to help clear his mind. Another beautifull morning once again, with the coolness of the night lurking in the shadows beneath the trees. September, soon harvest time would arrive and the leaves on the trees would start to change colour. As he strolled along, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was being watched. He glanced back over his shoulder but saw no one looking toward him.

Work was pretty dull that day. Andrew was away, apparently not well and not due back for a couple of days. He seemed to take a lot of sick days off work. Chris applied himself to his current project but the sparkle was gone and he didn’t make much headway during the day. Instead, he found himself becoming agitated for no reason and breaking out into bouts of sweating. A trip to the thermostat showed that the temperature setting was fine, so it must be him.

He fairly raced home after work and downed a couple of Scotches in quick succession soon after he arrived there. The bottle and he moved to the lounge where he sat in front of the large television and poured himself another drink. This was cradled in his hands for a moment before it joined the previous two. He passed on eating that evening, preferring a liquid meal instead. Anything to stop the endlessly playing movie of people dying that was running inside his head.

The signature tune for the morning talk show woke Chris at seven o’clock. He was still sitting in the chair in front of the television. A three-quarter empty bottle of Scotch stood on the coffee table beside a nearly empty glass with a small amount of the amber fluid left in it. Mute testimony to his dedicated binge. He stirred wearily and tried to remember the last time he had put himself to sleep with alcohol. He couldn’t.

A long hot shower, a shave, fresh clothes and breakfast turned Chris into an almost respectable business person. He was still giving off fumes though and if anyone got close to him they would know without a doubt that he had tied one on.

He felt weary.

Understandable after falling asleep sitting up from drinking so much. Maybe the coke was leaving his system, he felt slow and ponderous.

Work was less exciting now, even to the point of being bland some days. His project was nearly complete and tomorrow, one of the junior partners would be able to review it.

Andrew was still off work, so Chris’ day passed quietly and productively. There weren’t that many people at work to talk to and for some reason that was fine by him. Another six-pack was acquired on the way home from work but he decided against another session of drinking that evening.

Chris was just about finished eating when the door buzzer rang. Most likely someone he knew or the doorman would not have passed them. Ruth! Great! He put his plate on the kitchen bench, ran his hands through his hair and expectantly threw open the front door. Steve stood there, a six-pack in his hand.

"No need to look so stunned. Are you going to invite me in or do I have to sit out here and drink these?"

"Sure, sorry. I wasn't expecting you is all. Come in." Chris felt awkward with his best friend. He had not expected Steve to show up. In fact, most of the time he visited Steve's place rather than the reverse.

"What's the occasion?" he enquired of his friend.

"No occasion. I just haven't seen you for a while so I thought I would cruise over and check out how you are. It's not far from my house to here you know." Steve put the cans into the fridge while he was talking. Taking one for himself and one for Chris, he popped the tops and handed a can over to his friend. They stood there companionably in the kitchen, sipping from the cans.

"So what has been happening?" Steve asked curiously. "You know, since the last time that I saw you. Seems like ages ago. How is it going with Ruth?"

Chris felt awkward, furtive even. Here was his best friend who he had known forever, a real standup guy, Christian and everything else admirable and all Chris could do was think of lies and prevarications. What was happening to him? He made a decision, it may not have been the best one but he felt that he had to confide in someone. Steve was the only person he could talk to about half of what had been happening in his life.

They moved into the lounge room and he ended up telling Steve a very altered and sanitized version of the events of the previous week. He toned down his version of "Satans' but did mention getting stoned. The incident with the traffic policeman didn't involve 110mph or cocaine in the new narrative, although for some reason he did remember, and mentioned, the curious jolt before the explosion. Steve was sitting with his mouth hanging halfway open, scarcely able to believe what he was hearing. Chris was normally a quiet and thoughtfull person. At his worst, he had been known to yell at Angela, his previous girlfriend, occasionally, when they were arguing but other than that he would never hurt a fly. The incident with guy outside the bar turned into self defence after being attacked by a drunk who then fell under a vehicle, probably alive but too drunk to move. Subsequently, he was accidentally run over. When Chris finished, he looked over at Steve a little helplessly and shrugged.

"So that's it. Seems like my life has gone into overdrive. What do you reckon I should do?"

Steve's reply was immediate. "Go to the police and tell them what you just told me."

Chris shuddered, he knew he couldn't because the version that Steve had just heard was not the true one and would never stand up to serious investigation.

"I can't," he said to Steve. "I have left it too long. It would look odd not reporting it at the time. The authorities would think that I had something to hide. Anyway, two deaths in two days; they would crucify me."

"Yeah, I see your point but it bothers me that you were involved in two deaths in two days. Not from a lawfull angle of course but from a Christian one. Your soul is tainted with these deaths and I would feel a lot better if you would let me help with that aspect."

Chris was used to his friend's religious bent and usually went along with the Christian thing to humour him. It kept Steve happy and did not hurt Chris who was an unbeliever. He looked over at Steve.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Are you wearing that crucifix I gave you?"

"No. It's hanging on my bed I think."

"Would you mind getting it for me? I would feel better if I said a prayer or two for you."

Steve was serious as he said this, so Chris got up and went to his bedroom to fetch the crucifix. As he lifted it off the bed head it felt really heavy for its size and he was sure there was a faint echo of bells somewhere. Weird. He took it back to the lounge room and handed it to his friend who sat looking at it.

"I know you think that I am an old woman sometimes," he said, looking at Chris "but I would really, really, like you to wear this."

Chris sighed, the things that you had to do for your friends. He unbuttoned his shirt a couple of buttons and holding the collar back, he knelt in front of his friend.

"Okay, put it on then. I'll wear it for you," he said begrudgingly.

The instant the chain touched his neck, Chris felt really uneasy, as if a door in his mind had been opened. He could smell sulphur. As Steve let go of the crucifix, he leant back and the cross came into contact with the skin of his bare chest. The agony was indescribable and he screamed as his flesh burned, smoke rising up, smelling terrible. He grabbed the chain and flung the crucifix away across the room. The pain subsided to a dull throb. Steve was on his feet instantly, his face white as he went over and picked up the chain and cross carefully. It was cool to the touch but the back of the cross was blackened where it had come into contact with the skin of Chris' chest. He looked over at Chris who was standing dumbstruck in the middle of the room, staring at his shaking hands. Steve's gaze moved up to Chris' chest where the skin was neatly branded with the shape of the cross, seared into the flesh. It was too much for Steve. He fell to his knees with his hands clasped in front of him, holding the crucifix between them and praying loudly to his God for forgiveness for Chris. The same Chris who stood stunned, staring at his friend's hands and the dangling cross.

Half an hour later after the application of ice to Chris' chest and more prayers, the pair were once again sitting in the lounge with a beer each. Chris was visibly shaken and trembling in reaction to what had just occurred. Every so often he looked at his chest to check if the burn was still there. It was.

"What was all that about?" he asked Steve for the third or fourth time.

"I am not sure. I have never seen or heard of anything like it but I have read about it once before." Steve paused, unsure how to continue.

"And." His friend prompted.

"Well, in one book that I read, it mentioned that if a person was possessed by evil sometimes a crucifix would have that effect."

"But I am not evil." Chris quickly replied, his quavering voice threatening to break.

"I know. Remember I said 'possessed' by evil." Steve looked levelly at his friend. "How well do you know Ruth?"

"I love her." Chris whispered.

"I am aware of that but how well do you know her."

"Not all that well. She is a pretty private person, keeps herself to herself and she has got her business and stuff." Chris' reply sounded lame.

Steve looked thoughtfull. "Both Mary and I felt something odd about her when you both visited. A coldness inside of her. I know it is rude and I apologize but we discussed her after you left last week. Neither of us is comfortable with Ruth and I hate mentioning it because I know how much you love her. Do not get me wrong here. Love can be blind. I would be a lot happier if you found out more about her. What do you think?"

Deep down inside, Chris knew his friend was right. Ruth was amazing and he really did love her but things happened around her so quickly and people died. Accidentally of course. He shook his head to clear it, absently rubbing the cross burnt onto his chest.

“I guess you are right. I don’t know much about her. I will try to find out more. What do you think about this though?” He pulled his shirt back to expose the burn on his chest.

Steve shook his head dejectedly. “I don’t know. I will talk to Father O’Connor at St. Pauls in a roundabout way. You know, mention no names, just generalities to see what he thinks. There might be a way to get rid of the evil that is within you. I will find out as much as I can and we will work something out.” So saying, he got to his feet. “It’s getting late and I have to go. Mary is waiting for me at home. Will you be alright here on your own?”

Chris had also got to his feet and hugging his friend replied, “Sure. Thanks heaps for being a really good friend. Sorry I scared the shitbags out of us. I’ll drop in and see you when I find out some more about Ruth. Meanwhile, if you could visit Father O’Connor and have a chat with him..... You know I have never been one for religion but I am seriously thinking that there is a lot more to it than there appears to be.”

Chris showed his friend Steve out, thanking him again and again before finally closing the door and wearily slumping against it. Evil, lies and half-truths, he had not told Steve about the cocaine or some of the other stuff. What had actually happened here tonight? Would religion really help he wondered? With those questions running through his head he wearily staggered off to bed.

Tomorrow was another day.

Chapter 16.

Next day, when Chris arrived at work, he found Andrew sitting at his desk. He looked fit and well. In response to Chris’ query, he blamed a bout of food poisoning for his absence. As it was Thursday, Chris had his presentation to do after lunch. With Andrew’s urging and a quiet morning ahead of him, due to his assignment being finalised and ready to go, he managed to do a couple of lines of coke. It couldn’t hurt he reasoned, it made him feel good and it wasn’t addictive. He could not lose as the coke really sharpened him up. After lunch he breezed through his presentation, or so he thought, with the quality of his work being beyond doubt. However, his demeanor and attitude were noted by the executive in charge of the presentation. A small note was jotted down to keep an eye on Mr. Christopher Wilkins in the future.

Later that afternoon, with nothing to do, he sat at his desk, leaning back in his chair with his feet up on an open drawer, talking to Andrew. He was trying to find out more information about Ruth. All Andrew really did was to confirm the few facts about Ruth’s childhood and early years that Chris already knew. Chris decided on a change of tactics. He talked about ‘Satans’ with Andrew, saying how much he had enjoyed the club and Ruth’s dancing. He

also mentioned how he was worried about her leaving the club late at night because it was possible that someone may be waiting for her outside to do her harm. Andrew seemed amused.

“Nothing to worry about Chris. Look, you are almost family, so I will tell you a little secret. There is a back entrance to the club which we use to come and go. It is only known to us, the people we allow to use it and longtime staff. It looks like an old, derelict store with white painted windows at the back of the block the club is on. There is a cellar in there which connects through an underground passageway with the private part of the club. Next time you are at the club, get Ruth to show it to you.”

Chris thanked Andrew sincerely for sharing that information with him and then asked if he had any coke for sale. Andrew regarded him quizzically for a moment, then smiled and checking that no one was observing, slid a small vial of coke across the desk.

“You can have that but from now on I will have to charge you a minimum of \$250 a weighed ounce. Just to cover costs you realise. This stuff isn’t cut. You will have to cut it yourself. I usually suggest 50:50 with glucose powder or you will end up in orbit.”

“Thanks. Much obliged.” Chris said pocketing the vial.

The conversation ended soon after as they both got back to a semblance of work. Then it was time for home and as he was leaving the office Chris, with a germ of an idea forming, asked Cindy to cover for him until lunchtime the next day. By the time he got home a plan was beginning to fully formulate in his head.

Chris went to bed early and set the alarm for three in the morning but he slept only fitfully and got up about midnight. He was much too excited to sleep and kept thinking about his plan. He snorted a couple of lines of the cocaine he had procured from Andrew and sat watching television restlessly. About three thirty that morning, the ‘vette burbled out of the underground car park of his apartment building and he turned it towards the south side of town, heading for ‘Satans’. He was going to an unsavory part of town and did not want to take the big red car but his chance of catching a taxi later was extremely poor. Parking on a side road, away from the back entrance to the club and out of sight, he locked the car and furtively crept to a position across the street from the old storefront. The darkened doorway, in which he stood, provided good concealment from prying eyes and an excellent view of the backdoor to ‘Satans’. He waited.

Just after four o’clock that morning, a couple of people came out and locked the door behind them. Chris recognized the barman as one of them. None were Ruth. Then about half past four the door opened again and Ruth stepped out. She looked gorgeous and his heart leaped in his chest only to crash and burn as she was followed out of the door by a large distinguished looking man, expensively dressed in a tuxedo. They were laughing and he put his arm around her as a large black limo pulled up to the kerb. The driver hopped out and opened a rear door for them. The older gentleman handed Ruth into the vehicle and then hopped in himself. The driver shut the door and got back into the driver’s seat. Chris made a decision and sliding out of the doorway he raced around the corner to where the ‘vette was parked, quickly getting it going and then following the limo discretely. This was not an easy task but he did not have far to go until the iron gates of an expensive townhouse closed behind the limo. He could not follow in there, so parked down the street where he could keep the gates in view.

Chris waited and waited, then waited some more. Finally, at about ten in the morning, a taxi pulled up in front of the townhouse. The pedestrian gate opened and Ruth, his Ruth,

looking a bit touseled, came out and hopped into the cab. He followed it back to the rear door of ‘Satans’ where she got out, paid the cabbie and headed back into the club. Chris did not know what to feel; jealousy, anger, betrayal, rage, hurt, they were all mixed up inside, churning around. There may possibly be a simple explanation for the events which had occurred and he should give Ruth the benefit of the doubt but she was in that guy’s place for five hours. He suddenly remembered that it was Friday and he had to put in an appearance at work. So he drove home, showered and changed, did a line of coke and went to work. He picked a dozen roses up for Cindy, at the florists in the lobby, along the way. She was delighted with them. Andrew seemed to accept his explanation of dropping his car in for a service and the rest of the day flashed by, helped by the little snooze he took later in the afternoon.

Chris was agitated when he arrived home. He tried to relax but thoughts of Ruth and the old man kept intruding into whatever he did or thought. Relaxation was impossible as jealousy ate him up inside. Ruth, his true love, with another man.

Very early the next morning found him once again concealed in the doorway opposite the back of the club, just before four o’clock. Once again the two employees left first, and then at approximately half past four Ruth appeared followed closely by a man. Not the same man from the night before. This fellow was younger and flashier but looked just as rich as the previous one. As he was watching, a taxi drove up and they got in. He had to race around the corner to get his car and nearly lost them. He caught up to the cab after three blocks and knew he had the correct taxi as he could see their heads together through the rear window. He followed; at what he thought was a discreet distance, travelling further than the previous night, to a very desirable area of the city. They were set down outside of a very exclusive set of apartments which Ruth and the stranger disappeared into. At approximately nine thirty, in the bright sunlight of Saturday morning, a taxi arrived and Ruth appeared from within a few minutes later. She jumped into the cab which took her back to the rear entrance to ‘Satans’. Chris was dog tired in spite of the coke which had helped to keep him awake. He had not had much sleep for the past couple of days. Feeling confused, he drove home, parked the ‘vette in the basement garage and headed upstairs for some sleep. The instant his head hit the pillow Chris was out like a light. He slept nearly twelve hours straight, waking a little after 10pm.

Chris did not know what to do.

He sat on the edge of his bed thinking for over half an hour, his head in his hands, running all the options and possibilities back and forth, back and forth. What was Ruth up to?

Finally he reached a decision. He would go to the club and confront her with what he knew. Give her a chance to explain.

After getting showered and dressed, snorting a couple of lines of his fast dwindling coke supply and finding a cab, he arrived at the club around twenty minutes to midnight. He was quickly admitted and entered into a Bacchanalian gathering. There were naked bodies everywhere, male and female rutting openly. Male with female, male with male, female with female in various combinations and numbers. Alcohol was flowing freely, the music was pounding and someone thrust a large joint into his hand. Good stuff he decided after his third hit and he passed it on. He spotted Philomena, half dressed sitting on someone’s lap, his naked breasts being caressed from behind. Chris waved. He did not know what to think. Two months ago he would have been horrified by what was happening around him. Now it just seemed like a bunch of adults having fun. He felt chilled at the thought. Then

the tempo of the music altered and the lights dimmed some more. A throbbing half recognized beat started, one Chris felt he should know and a spotlight hit the stage, highlighting a pyramid of red cloak as the curtains parted. A loud cheer rose from the crowd and the pyramid started to move. As the gyrations became wilder, the cloak was flung aside to reveal Ruth in all her splendour, going through her dance routine. He was aroused in spite of his feelings. Hell she was good, or bad, depending on your point of view. After fifteen minutes, with her stripped down to next to no clothing, her number came to an end and the next dancer hit the stage for more erotic dancing. How did she manage to keep the tail on with so little clothing he wondered? Ruth went through the curtains at the back of the stage then quickly appeared around the side of it, dressed in a flimsy wrap and made her way through the crowd of ecstatic well-wishers until she stood before him. He noticed that she had quickly shed the tail.

"Well Big Boy, what do you think?" she said as she reached out and fondled his crotch expertly.

Any thoughts connected with his rehearsed speech instantly left his brain. The coke, the dope, the action taking place around him and his body's jolting reaction to Ruth, rendered him incapable of any thought other than that of hot pumping sex. Ruth's eyes glowed slightly and taking him by the hand she drew him through the noisy crowd to a door marked, 'PRIVATE'. Opening it she pulled him through into a darkened room and closed the door behind them. Ruth kissed him fiercely as her expert fingers undid his zipper and released his pulsating erection. She slid down the front of his body and took him in her mouth, sliding him in and out in time to the music, occasionally taking him all the way down her throat. Chris did not have a hope of lasting any length of time and came quickly and copiously. Ruth did not stop, just swallowed and kept going. To his amazement, he was hard again almost instantly. Five minutes later, after being sucked, nibbled and pumped he came again. She never missed a drop. Sliding back up him, she kissed him passionately before whispering in his ear.

"Love you Big Boy."

His knees were buckling and he needed to sit down. Ruth switched on the light and he saw they were in an office. He went and sat on a couch feeling a little tired. Ruth seemed to be overflowing with energy and looked at him with an amused expression on her face.

"Aren't you tired after a full day at work and following me around at night?"

He looked at her in amazement. "You know?"

"Of course I know. Not much escapes my notice. Somehow I know when you are around, my crotch acts like a Chris detector."

"Well who were those guys that you left with?" Chris asked, unable to keep the jealousy out of his voice.

"Business," she replied. "It's what I do. I dance here and for certain regulars offer other services. I go home with them to play for three to four hours. I get paid \$1000 for a bit of enjoyment on their behalf. It pays for 'extras' like the coke we use, among other things."

Chris was totally stunned. Maybe he had suspected as much but her casual statement of betrayal knocked the stuffing out of him.

"How could you do that to me," he moaned. "I thought we had something special."

"We do have something special. I was living like this a long time before you turned up on the scene. You are the first steady boyfriend that I have had in years. I do love you Chris but I am not going to give up my lifestyle and income for a fledgling relationship that has

only been going for a few weeks. You will just have to get used to it. I make the clients wear condoms, you are the only bareback rider I have sex with, believe me. So relax.”

“I can’t relax,” he replied. “It is just not right that I can feel so much for you and yet you can go to bed with other guys and” His voice trailed off and he shuddered, pictures of Ruth and other men wandering through his mind. She leaned over and gently inserted the tip of her tongue in his ear. His penis stirred.

“It won’t be for long Chris,” she purred into his damp ear. “I have nearly paid for my share of the club and have enough saved so that I won’t have to worry about the future. All you have to do is accept me as I am for a little longer, then everything will be fine. It was okay with you when you did not know about it. Just pretend that you don’t know about it now.”

“But I do know about it now. How do you think I will feel when we are out together and someone else comes up to us and asks me how much I am paying? I killed a guy on Monday night! I have no idea why. I just thought he was insulting you and lost it. How do you think that makes me feel? I cannot stop thinking about it.”

She stared at him from the depths of her red flecked, green eyes. They seemed to glow slightly with a life of their own, then she smiled a slow, predatory smile.

“Yes you did kill someone. The police think it was an accident and I did not like him anyhow. Believe me when I say he was not a nice person. He even boasted about the unspeakable things he was into with children. You did the world a favour. Relax.”

Standing in front of him, she started to massage his neck and shoulders. Chris felt the tension draining from his body. He looked up at her, black hair, green eyes, pale, pale skin, full lips, beautifull breasts and his heart melted. He was, he realized, hopelessly and foolishly in love with Ruth and would do anything for her including ignoring her liaisons. She seemed to intuit this and led him through the back door of the office to a large, well lit bedroom. The walls were hung with drapes and the room contained a massive four-poster bed on a raised dias. The bed was fitted with red satin sheets and tied-back embroidered hangings.

“This is my own personal bedroom. No one comes here but me. I never have strangers in my own bed and only myself, Andrew and a couple of other people know this place exists. The bathroom is through that door there. It has a small spa bath in it as well as the usual things a bathroom has. Make yourself comfortable, I’ll be back in about three hours.” With that she left him and returned to the club which could be faintly heard through the walls. Chris was reflecting on the quality of the soundproofing as he wearily lay down on the bed, clothed and fell asleep.

He was asleep when she came into the bedroom later in total darkness but not for long, waking up as she was undressing him. Despite their earlier encounter he found his equipment was in perfect working order and judging from the squeals and gasps emanating from Ruth, she found it to be in good working order also. Their passion wore off about seven o’clock that morning and they dropped off to sleep.

Chris woke around three in the afternoon on Sunday and awakened Ruth by gently sucking her nipples. She languorously leaned over and switched on the light in the underground bedroom and turned back to him. Her eyes widened and an involuntary gasp escaped her lips.

“What is that?” she demanded, pointing to the red burn mark, in the shape of a cross, on his chest. It was the first time she had seen it.

Chris was a bit stunned by the ferocity of her reaction to the mark but hid his surprise.

"I told Steve about some of the stuff that has been happening to me. Not all of it. I did not mention cocaine and the other stuff, just about how people have died. He suggested I wear a crucifix. You know what he is like about religion and stuff. Anyway, to please him, I allowed him to place the crucifix over my neck. When the cross came into contact with my chest it just started burning the flesh. Man it hurt. I, I mean we, cannot understand why. It is really, really weird. I had to just rip it off as quickly as possible. The chain was starting to heat up as well. Funny thing though, was that Steve picked it up straight away and it wasn't hot." He looked at her to see what her reaction was to the information he had just given her.

Her response amazed him. She gazed at him in a way he had never seen before. It could be construed as love or, his brain chimed in, a predator gazing at its next meal.

"I love you Christof," she said as she took his hands and leaned over him to lick the burn mark on his chest. It immediately felt better than it had. Chris put it down to the moisture. "But you must not talk to Steve about us any more. I do not like my private life being discussed. He may even talk to the filthy priests about me and then I will have problems with my club."

Chris was surprised at the vehemence in her voice and was about to interrupt when she placed a finger on his lips.

"Listen to me. This club, my way of life, how we do things, you and me, are not acceptable to a lot of people. We like to have fun and most of the time it is harmless. However, there are a lot of people out there who believe that our fun is evil. They would try to stop us by using any means. Close the club, stop the coke, police the action. It has taken too many years of work bribing city officials and policemen, who allow us to operate and have fun, to have it ruined if those religious types and do-gooders get together and unite against us.

Don't you like what we do?" She mischievously ran her fingernails down his stomach. "We could lose it all if people start gossiping. So please. Don't talk to Steve about our life. I don't mean you have to stop being friends with him, just keep us private. Please."

He lay there and thought about it. It would be like having two lives. One, Chris Wilkins, advertising man and cool dude who would not hurt a fly. Two, Christof, the super stud with the spunkiest bad girl and the big car. He liked both he reflected and Ruth was right.

Religious types were a pain in the arse. Ruth was very convincing.

As he was a little sore from the excesses of the previous night, he suggested they get dressed and head back to his apartment where he could change his clothes prior to them going out for a meal. Ruth thought that was a great idea being a Sunday and they went and jumped into the shower next to the bedroom, soaping each other all over and generally having fun. Then they had a soak in the spa bath for a while. It was only as he was drying himself that he noticed that the burn on his chest had disappeared. Not healed, there was no scar. It had disappeared, his skin was unmarked. He was just about to mention this to Ruth when he realized that he could not remember what he was about to say. Oh well, it would come back soon.

While Ruth was applying makeup and doing other feminine things, he wandered out into the club. The professional cleaning crew was hard at work, giving the place its Sunday spit and polish. Lifting a weeks worth of ingrained dirt and whatever else that got stuck to the carpets and upholstery. Judging by the numbers the previous evening, this place must make a fortune. Ruth stepped out of the office to come and get him. She had chosen a long

sleeved blouse, waistcoat, hot pants and mid thigh boots. He almost choked, she looked that gorgeous.

“So. You approve Big Boy?” Holding her arms out, she turned left and right, smiling as he nodded, unable to speak for now.

He took her hand and she led him through to the passageway that exited from the rear of the club via the old store.

They took a taxi to his apartment.

Chapter 17.

When Chris and Ruth walked into his apartment together, they found Patricia there, pottering around in the kitchen. Chris greeted Patricia cheerily but she just stood there, staring stonily at Ruth with undisguised dislike. There was one of those long strained silences, eventually broken by Patricia.

“Hello Ruth,” she said in a very flat voice.

“Hello Patricia,” was the equally flat reply and spinning on her heel Ruth headed out of the apartment. As she opened the door, Ruth turned to bite off a few words in Chris’ direction. “I’ll be down waiting by the car Chris. Don’t be too long please.” With that she slammed the door behind her as she left.

Chris went bright red with embarrassment. He did not know what to say or where to look.

“Sorry,” he muttered to Patricia. “I didn’t know you were home.”

“I’m not your mother Chris. You choose your own friends. Just be carefull as far as Ruth is concerned. I believe she is dangerous.”

“Where do you know her from?” he enquired, guardedly curious.

“She was a friend of Sally’s before.....you know, the accident. Sally only knew her a couple of months before it happened. Ruth used to come over now and again. Personally, she is not my cup of tea but I can see the attraction. I am sorry.”

Chris nodded. “I am surprised to see you back,” he said.

“Oh! I have been trying to get you on the phone for the last couple of days but there was no answer. I even left messages on the message machine for you to ring me but you don’t seem to have checked it. Mother is much improved and can be left on her own now and I am expected back at work. I have to take a flight out Monday. Tomorrow,” she corrected.

He nodded. "Nice to see you happy again Patricia. Sorry once again about Ruth, I didn't know how you felt. I won't bring her around again while you are here. Now if you will excuse me." With that he headed off to his room to get changed.

The last Patricia saw of Chris that weekend was as he headed out of the door fifteen minutes later, still thinking about a white face surrounded by black hair withdrawing over the balcony. It was starting to eat at him.

He arrived at the basement car park a few moments later to find Ruth sitting in the passenger seat of his beloved Corvette. He momentarily forgot about the face on the balcony in his amazement.

"How did you get into the car? With the alarm on," he asked, pressing the remote switch for the alarm system. The big car responded by beeping at him as the alarm system deactivated.

Ruth smiled but it never reached her eyes. "I have that effect on electrical stuff," she replied a little coolly. Then she added. "You could have told me that bitch Patricia would be there."

Chris was a bit stunned by the vehemence in her voice. "I didn't know. Anyway, what is it between you two? How do you know her?"

"I used to know the girl who lived there, Sally. She and I were good friends but Patricia was always interfering when she was around. I am sure the bitch fancied Sally. I bet she's a lesbian. She always acted jealous and tried to separate Sally and me."

Chris slid into the driver's seat and considered Ruth. She looked angry. He debated not carrying on with the conversation but decided to anyway.

"Why didn't you tell me you had been in the apartment before?" he demanded.

"Because I fancied you and in the beginning I thought it would affect our relationship. Like it is doing now and I wanted you. I really love you, you big oaf."

He considered her reply but could just not help himself.

"That was you I saw leaning over the balcony the day she died. Wasn't it?"

"To be honest, yes," she replied, "but I did not have anything to do with her death. She had been very upset because her boyfriend had dumped her and she had just missed out on a big modeling assignment because she had gained a couple of kilos. She owed heaps of money around the place and didn't look like scoring another job. She was a mess. I offered to lend her some cash but she refused. I was in the kitchen making a coffee when I heard the sliding door to the balcony opening. I looked up and saw her start to run through the doors but by the time I got there, it was all over. I looked over the balcony, realized she was dead and panicked. You know I would not stand up to being investigated. We had gone up to the apartment from the basement carpark where she left her car. No one saw us and we had not seen anyone. So I grabbed her garage key card out of her purse and left the same way, so the doorman would not spot me. I did not realize that it was you on the sidewalk below where she landed."

Tears welled in her eyes and overspilled to run down her cheeks. Chris felt like a complete arsehole as she pulled some tissues out of her purse and wiped her eyes.

"I'm sorry," was all he could think to say as he started the engine and looking ahead, completely missing the little smile that played over her lips. He drove out of the basement carpark after keying his card for the gate. It was evening and the temperature was a little cool so he put the convertible top up and went looking for a restaurant.

After a very pleasant meal with good wine and stimulating conversation, Ruth had calmed down a lot. She coyly suggested that they go back to the club and watch a movie from the four-poster bed. He agreed but could not remember a television much less a DVD player. When they arrived at the back door to the club he expressed reservations about leaving his car out on the streets in that area of the city. She looked at him, staring into his eyes as she said.

“Believe this. You are with ME now. Around here everyone knows not to mess with me or my stuff. Your car will be fine out here.”

It must have been the way she said it. He believed her utterly and after getting out of the car he set the alarm and followed her toward the back door of the club without a qualm.

Inside the bedroom, she pressed a switch on the wall and a concealed television projection unit swung down from the ceiling, its exterior paneling matching all the rest of the panels up there. Cute. Next she went to what appeared to be an old-fashioned sideboard and swung the whole front down. What looked like cupboards and drawers was a false front. In behind this was some sophisticated audio and visual equipment along with hundreds of CD's and DVD's.

She turned in time to catch his surprised look.

“There are some perks to not being poor.” She laughed. “See if you can spot the mini Bose speakers around the room. I have all the latest equipment. Why do you think the wall opposite the end of the bed is blank and white?” She chose a DVD and inserted it into the player.

“Get undressed and jump into bed. I will join you in a moment.” Then she placed the remotes on the bedside table and went into the office. Chris got undressed and hopped into bed. The sheets had been changed since the previous night and felt delightfully clean. Ruth returned with a small package in her hands and placed it with the remotes on the bedside table. She got undressed, starting with the mid-thigh boots and ending with the tiny black thong. Jumping into bed, she kissed him lightly then picked up the package and handed it to him.

“This is for you because you have been so good about what I do and I appreciate it. Be carefull with it and I hope you enjoy.”

Chris took the small package from her. It was not very heavy. He carefully undid the deep red satin bow and unwrapped the crimson wrapping paper. Inside was a silver box with his initials, C.W. engraved on the lid. He opened it. It was three quarters filled with a white powder and a silver spoon was cleverly clipped onto the underside of the lid in its own little compartment.

“Is that what I think it is?” he asked.

“Yes. Two ounces of number one ‘A’ grade Columbian coke. Be very, very carefull. This stuff is dynamite.” She reached over, unclipped the tiny spoon and dipping it in the white powder, held it out to him. He took a hit and as he did she lifted the box out of his hand, dipped the spoon in again and took a hit herself, quickly placing the box on the bedside table before the rush hit. It was good that she had taken the box from him, this stuff was devilishly strong. It took a number of minutes for him to be able to cope with his surroundings. What a present! He loved this woman, even if she did sell her body now and again. He turned to her and grinned, she grinned back.

“Don’t get any ideas. Movie first. We have got all night; you do not have to be at work until 9.30 in the morning. We have plenty of time. I know this is an older movie but it is one of my favourites. Shame about the ending though.”

Ruth picked up the remote, pressed a button and the whole of the far wall became a movie screen. The surround sound was magnificent with rich and complex audio through five channels.

“As you probably guessed, this place is pretty well sound proofed,” she said, just as the movie started. Of all the movies that it was possible to choose, he least expected “Bedazzled” with Brendan Frazer and Liz Hurley in the lead roles. A comedy about a nerd and a female devil. He liked it though and in his present state was happy to watch it again. Later, during the movie, the thought crossed his mind that, pretty as Liz Hurley was, she wasn’t a patch on Ruth. He felt truly blessed.

The next morning he left Ruth asleep in the four poster bed as he left for work. He felt really good after a night of movies, coke and sex. He had hardly slept at all and didn’t feel like he needed to. The present of the silver box was tucked into his pocket and his other present, a set of keys to the rear entrance of the club were in his hand as he turned from locking the door of the fake store to walk over to his car.

He stopped in his tracks.

There was a dead dog lying by the rear wheel of the ‘vette. He inspected it. It looked healthy enough, lying there on its side without a mark on it. He noticed that the wheel was wet. It must have had a heart attack while peeing on his wheel. How weird. He jumped into the car and drove off, leaving the dog lying there.

Parking the car in the basement garage, he went up to his apartment to stash his coke. Patricia had already left for her flight out, so he stashed his stuff in his room and walked to work. He greeted Cindy as he stepped out of the elevator and went over to her desk in response to her motioning.

“Are you alright? she enquired. “You seem a little jumpy this morning.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Probably lack of sleep.” He winked at her and wandered off, wiping his nose with the back of his hand as he went. It would be a good idea to purchase some handkerchiefs.

Andrew smiled at Chris from behind his desk as Chris sat down.

“Sis tells me that you and she are getting really tight. Good to see. You look like you could use a line.”

Truth to tell Chris was starting to feel a little tired, so he and Andrew adjourned for a line. Later that morning his new assignment came through and he started doing a bit of research to help him get started. It was a difficult one. It didn’t just fall into place. Still he had two weeks to do it in and Ruth to look forward to at his place this evening. He leaned back with his feet up on a drawer, thinking about Ruth. His eyelids drooping. A polite cough from behind him jerked Chris awake. How long had he been asleep? He looked around to find one of the not so junior executives standing beside his desk.

“We pay you for your creative abilities, not to sleep on the job Mr. Wilkins. You have a home, hopefully, to do that in. Now about your current assignment. We need a classical approach, as this is an older, established company. I want to see some ideas by next Friday. Report directly to me. Okay.”

“Yes sir, Mr. McGregor. I’ll get on it right away. Sorry I drifted off. Busy weekend.”

McGregor nodded and walked away.

Andrew pulled a face. “Sorry Chris, he just appeared out of nowhere. I did not have time to warn you.”

"No problem," Chris replied following McGregor with his eyes as he disappeared around a corner heading for the reception area.

Bastard.

When Chris arrived home that evening, his stereo light was blinking at him again. He walked over to the stereo and hit the EJECT button. The black hole of the CD lay in the tray. He removed it and stood staring at it. The warning read, '**18 years and over only.**

Lyrics have been harmful when listened to!' That was weird, nothing had happened to him. He had a job, car, apartment and a great girlfriend, although the song he half remembered from the other night was a bit odd. He felt sure there was some connection between the songs on the tape and his run of good fortune. Every time he had heard a song from side 'A', something good relating to the song had occurred. Side 'B' had begun with a song about cocaine but that was cool. It was recreational and he could stop anytime he wanted to and as for Ruth selling her body, well he wasn't happy with that at all but it would not be for long. He smiled and inserted the CD back into the player and closed the drawer. It had almost become his good luck charm. No matter how he had come by it. He suddenly thought about Steve and Steve's reaction to the whole thing. He hoped his friend was being discrete in his search for information. Chris was not really perturbed by this chain of events, it was all good for him.

There was a knock on the door and Chris left his meanderings and went and opened it to find Ruth there. They embraced warmly and he invited her in.

They decided to stay in, so he cooked her a meal. She was very bright and happy this evening. Almost as though the air between them had been completely cleared. After the meal was eaten and the washing up done, he put some music on and they snorted some of his coke. After his head had settled down they took their brandies out onto the balcony. They stood together, leaning against the railing in the chill evening air, looking out over the city lights to the north. It was very pleasant with the music playing in the background. Ruth embraced him and he felt her stiff nipples poking into his chest. His body responded instantly. They adjourned to the bedroom as desire turned to lust. Lying in a sweaty pile of well used bedding, Ruth asked if she could play another track from the CD. It was fine by him; the CD was a good deal. He was so exhausted that his mind was already drifting when the song began. He only vaguely heard it all before he fell into a deep sleep.

Your work to you has become a real pain
 You don't want to be in the adman game
 All they do is nag you and nag you again
 You're sick and tired of the same refrain
 "You're paid to work," it's always the same
 You don't do your tasks, they take down your name
 They sayin' to your face and make it real plain
 That you ain't worth the money that they bin payin'.
 So why do I work? I hear you sayin'
 When I could be using my time to play in
 Don't worry none, there'll be no delayin'
 To get this deal there's no need for prayin'.

When you work for me, it'll be real plain
You'll very soon realise it's not a game
I'll beat you black and blue again and again
These words will haunt you, a simple refrain
"Your life as you know it won't be the same."
You won't want people to know your name
As you descend deeper to a world of pain
And you find out the cost as you start payin'
"This ain't no joke," you can hear me sayin'
It's time for my fun an' I'll start playin'
Your suffering is coming, ain't no delaying
You'll soon find out it's no use prayin'.

Ruth lay in the dark, her fingers tapping the beat, while a smile was fixed on her beautiful face beneath her glowing eyes. After the song ended she reached over and pressed the STOP button.
She was rather glad she was handling this one personally. There was something about Chris that struck a chord in her.

Chapter 18.

The bedside alarm clock went off loudly on a rock and roll radio station and Chris turned to see 'Tues. 8.00' on the screen as he switched it off. Ruth lay beside him, just starting to stir. Unusual, normally she was gone by now. She was simply stunning, even half asleep, her black hair fanned out on the pillow, framing her perfect features. She slowly blinked and opened her emerald green eyes, making little kitten noises at him. As she stretched, the covers moved down to expose her bare breasts. His body stirred in reaction as he bent over to kiss her full red lips.

An hour later, after disentangling himself from her body, he quickly threw his clothes on, dispensing with a shower and a shave and forced a cup of instant coffee down as he hurriedly made ready to leave for work. As Ruth was still in bed relaxing, he asked her to slam the door after herself when she left, gave her a quick kiss and raced off to the office. He arrived there late, unshaven and looking slightly disheveled, a fact that was not missed by McGregor, who happened to be standing by Cindy's desk just at that moment. Chris slunk past them and found Andrew in a cheery mood when he arrived at their work station. "You look like shit." Andrew said to him, unable to hide the ready grin.

"Yeah, Ruth stayed over last night you know." Chris' face lit up at the memory.

"Say no more," Andrew said. "What about a heart starter?"

Chris considered the implications for all of five seconds. "Sure. Why not," he replied.

They adjourned to a stationery store room for privacy.

For the rest of that day, Chris was unable to concentrate on work at all. His thoughts kept slipping back to Ruth. Ruth dancing, Ruth with other men, Ruth laughing, Ruth, Ruth, Ruth. In every way that she could intrude into his thoughts, she did. His mind could not leave her alone. At the end of the day he realized that he had accomplished nothing. Shit and double shit, he had preliminaries to present on Friday and here it was Tuesday evening and he had zip, nada, nothing, not even an idea to start working with. Maybe if he got a good night's sleep and snorted some of his pure coke Wednesday morning, he could really get going and cream the project in one day. He pushed back from the desk and stood up.

"I'm bushed. Home time for me Andrew, I need some sleep". He picked up his jacket,

"See you tomorrow." he offered as he quickly left the office.

That night sleep would not come. He lay tossing and turning in a bed that smelt of Ruth and sex and although tired, his brain just would not stop. When he closed his eyes, visions intruded on the back of his eyelids. Some were replays of recent events, some were entirely fictional and some were really horrible and macabre. He had no idea where all this stuff was coming from. About three in the morning, still unable to sleep, he got up and had a

glass of warm milk before heading back to his tousled bed and eventually falling into a troubled sleep, tossing and turning as though in the throes of a nightmare.

Reality slowly filtered into his brain and he wearily opened his eyes to find out that he had slept soundly through the alarm clock signal and he was now over an hour late for work. Bummer. He leapt out of bed and phoned Cindy to get her to cover for him but the news was not good.

"I don't know why but McGregor has been on your case already. I told him you could be doing some work at home but he didn't buy it. He wants to see you when you get to work. Sorry, I tried." She sounded genuinely sorry.

"That's okay. Thanks. I know you did your best. It's my own fault anyway. See you in a while."

Chris sat back and considered his situation. If he was going to see McGregor he would have to look clean and tidy and be as sharp as a whip. He took out his coke and had a small hit, felt his brain light up and get faster. Good, that was a positive start. Showered, shaved, wearing clean clothes and with a cup of coffee under his belt, it was a new Chris that bounced into the foyer of the Fleeting Image Ad. Agency on the fourteenth floor.

"Morning Cindy."

"Actually Chris, it is technically afternoon."

He looked at his watch and swore. "Where is McGregor's office?" he asked her.

"Sixteenth floor, just head up and Louise will point it out for you. Watch him, he is next in line for promotion to senior executive level and likes to make a show of running the company. The real big guys don't have time for running the staff but McGregor likes being bossy and is always trying to prove himself." Then she smiled a radiant smile at him as the lift doors opened and Chris entered.

"Good luck," she whispered to his back as the lift doors closed.

Louise pulled a face and pointed out McGregor's office to him. He went over and knocked on the door. Behind his back, Louise had an amused smile on her face. Almost as if she was enjoying the train of events which were unfolding.

"Enter." A gruff voice said.

He went in and was motioned towards a chair. He sat and waited while McGregor finished off some work on his computer. McGregor then turned to him.

"I am not an unreasonable man but I have a lot of responsibilities. One of those is to make sure this company functions. We pay above the industry norm, we are pretty relaxed and work starts at nine thirty. In the morning. For that we expect you to turn up on time, do your work with a bit of flair and do not sleep on company time. Got that."

All the statement required was a simple, 'Yes sir,' in reply but Chris was all coked up and pumped. He was not going to take that from some executive. He was Chris Wilkins, the guy with the beautiful girlfriend and the big Corvette. Chris sniffed.

"Sir, I have been doing some work at home and have been working late to put in extra time. I fell asleep because I was tired from doing that. I am making really good advances," he lied.

"Okay, what have you got," McGregor asked.

Chris sniffed again, unconsciously.

"I would rather present the whole package on Friday," he lied again. "It will come across better."

McGregor looked at him speculatively. "You either have a lot of balls or you are full of shit. Your previous efforts have been good, I will grant you, but remember this company does

not employ deadwood. Now get to work and I expect really good prelims by ten thirty Friday. Shut the door on your way out."

Chris almost, almost, came back with a retort but sanity intruded and he got up and left the office, closing the door behind himself.

"Bastard, how dare he talk to me like that," he muttered to himself. "I don't have to work here; I could get a job anywhere." He passed Louise's desk on his way to the lift but she was not there. However, two floors down he passed Cindy at reception, surprising her with his odd behaviour, mumbling to himself as he went to his own desk.

Andrew was waiting for him when he arrived back and they had a lively discussion regarding bosses and workplaces which carried on over a late lunch and beers at the bar down the road. Suddenly it was three in the afternoon and Chris was feeling woozy. Coked, drunk and tired. If he went back to work in his present state and McGregor spotted him, he would probably be fired. Wiping his nose again, he borrowed Andrew's mobile and rang Cindy.

"Hi Cindy, Chris here. Look, if anyone asks for me, I have a touch of food poisoning and have gone home. They can ring there to check if they wish. Thanks Cindy, I owe you one." He hung up before she could reply and handed the phone back to Andrew.

"I am off home, I really need to sleep. See you tomorrow," he said as he wandered off unsteadily, heading for home. He didn't see the secret little smile that fleetingly crossed Andrew's face.

The late afternoon sunshine was bathing the front of his apartment building when the taxi dropped him off. He weaved his way to the lift and headed upstairs to his apartment.

The coke was still running around Chris' system so he had no hope of sleeping just yet although he felt really weary. He decided to prepare for his early night by having a long soak in the bath as a starter. Around seven o'clock, clad only in his dressing gown, he wandered into the kitchen and prepared a light snack which he ate in front of the television. At seven thirty, Patricia rang to say that she would be flying back in Friday evening. She sounded fine and chatted about how her mother was doing really well and coping with being back at home. After the telephone call Chris decided to go to bed. He had just dropped off to sleep about eight o'clock when the damn telephone rang again. It woke him and he stumbled out to answer it groggily. Ruth was on the other end and he became wide awake instantly.

"Hi Big Boy, Andrew told me that you weren't that good this afternoon so I thought I'd ring and see how you are. You know I worry."

"Ah, Ruth my sweet. How kind. I am fine. I just need a good night's sleep and I will be great. Thank you for ringing, it makes me feel extra special but really I just need to hang up and head for bed."

"Okay, sorry, hope I didn't disturb you. Bye lover." With that she hung up. Chris was wide awake. Bugger. He went to the bathroom and checked the bathroom cabinet in the hope of finding sleeping pills among the many bottles and vials belonging to Patricia. He got lucky and discovered what he thought were sleeping pills, took two and went back to bed. In twenty minutes he had fallen headlong into a long, sound and refreshing sleep.

At eight the following morning he was up and feeling really refreshed. Today was the day. He was going to attack his work and knock the project on the head. Showered, shaved and breakfasted with an hour to spare before work, he retrieved his silver box from its hiding place and did a line of the powerfull coke. Supercharged, he headed off to work at coke

speed. He would work wonders. His nose was totally numb as was part of his face but that would wear off soon.

Cindy noticed the difference in the Chris that stepped out of the elevator from the Chris of a few weeks ago. He was sharper, more alert, jumpy even and full of confidence. A lot more outgoing but the little sniff now and again was a dead giveaway. Her eyes widened as she read the signs and hoped that McGregor, who was standing behind her, didn't put two and two together. He did. McGregor had been in the industry for quite a while and had seen coke-heads before. He did not say anything, merely nodded in Chris' direction.

"Nice to see you here on time Mr. Wilkins," was all he said.

Chris hit his work station like a whirlwind and kept the pace up most of the day. His only break was to have a small snort with Andrew in the afternoon. He worked well and was really satisfied with his advertising copy and the three different styles of advertisement he had come up with for the same product. They were all good he thought and would really show those management gurus just how capable he was. By five that evening they were printed and bound and sitting on his desk ready for the next morning. He went home in a buoyant mood and celebrated with a bottle of wine and a couple more sleeping pills.

It was a sorry, thick-headed Chris that awoke the next morning. "Sleeping pills and wine are not a good mix," he thought to himself. "But I know how to fix that."

At ten thirty on Friday morning, he knocked on the door of McGregor's office and entered. McGregor looked up from his work and smiled at Chris.

"Good morning. I see you have the preliminaries for me to look at. Excellent. If you could leave them with me please, I will get back to you." He looked up and peered at Chris. "Do you normally suffer from nosebleeds Mr. Wilkins?" he asked.

Chris put his index finger crosswise to his nose, it came away bloody, so he pulled one of his new handkerchiefs from his pocket and pressed it to his nose to try and stem the bleeding.

"Err, yes. When I get stressed I occasionally have nosebleeds," he lied.

McGregor looked up and picking up a file from his desk he said, "I have been going over your company records and note that you still have not had a medical for your life and health insurance covers, which we provide. Now would be a good time. As you have nothing to do for the moment, I took the liberty of booking you in for an appointment with the medical practice on the fourth floor. We use them for all our routine medicals." He looked at his watch, "Your appointment is for eleven o'clock which gives you about five minutes to get down there. You had better get moving. Oh, by the way. I'd like to see you back up here at four thirty to talk over your effort. After I've had a chance to look at it of course."

Chris was confused, he had expected to spend some time going over his work with McGregor now, not be virtually ordered to go for a medical by this bastard. He hesitated for a moment, clutching his bloody handkerchief to his face, undecided whether to argue and cause a scene or just go and get the medical over with.

McGregor looked up and smiled, shark-like. "Sorry for the short notice. Insurance you know. Might as well get the doctor to look at your nose while you are there. The company will pay. Was there anything else?"

Chris was disarmed by his unusually pleasant attitude so merely nodded and left McGregor's office. Louise was not at her desk as he headed for the elevators. Arriving at the fourth floor medical centre he was shown to a small room with a cluttered desk where he had to fill out a medical history questionnaire. A doctor arrived shortly thereafter to give

him his physical examination and take blood samples. He was also asked to provide a urine sample, which he did. All standard. An hour or so later Chris was down in the foyer eating lunch with Andrew.

“Yeah, he just took the preliminaries to look at and sent me off for a medical. He reckoned it was for insurance purposes,” he finished saying.

“Well, we do have to have a medical and if you hadn’t had yours, it may have been routine,” replied Andrew. “What time did you say you had to see McGregor this afternoon?”

“Four-thirty, to go over the prelims.”

“Bummer. Looks like you will be working late on a Friday afternoon.” Andrew grinned at him, amused.

Four-thirty saw Chris knocking on McGregor’s door for the second time that day.

“Come in.” Brusquely.

Chris entered.

“Mr. Wilkins, have a seat. Comfortable? Good. First of all, these preliminaries are crap. Utter crap in fact. I would expect better from a seventh grader in high school. Must have been a bit delusional when you wrote them.”

Chris was stunned. This wasn’t at all what he had expected. He had expected to be talked to like a colleague, treated with a little respect. He leapt to his feet, ready to defend his work.

“SIT DOWN NOW!” McGregor exploded in a tone and volume that brooked no resistance.

Chris sat.

“Nose better?” the question and the tone it was asked in caught Chris off guard. He nodded, wondering where this conversation was going.

“Good. I had your medical tests rushed and the results sent up immediately. You’re fired. Clear out your desk and leave the building immediately and do not come back.”

Chris’ jaw dropped open as a whole host of emotions rushed up and down his spine and through his brain. His face flushed and then went chalk white. What? Why? How?

Bastard, he couldn’t, he has, good job, crap place to work. He looked up to find McGregor studying him.

“Cocaine Mr. Wilkins. Clouds the judgment of reality. There was enough in your urine to get half the staff high. Its use can be quite common in this game but not at this firm. We won’t inform the police, that is not our policy. However, I suggest that you book yourself into a detox. clinic pretty soon. If you are clean for six months we will look at rehiring you. I can’t be fairer than that. You do have a talent, you know.” He got up, came around the desk and opened the office door. Chris rose shakily to his feet and the last he heard from McGregor as he exited was, “Sorry Mr. Wilkins, that is how it is. Please give your company keys to Louise on the way out.” With that he shut the door behind Chris.

Chris could not believe it, just like that. Fuck, fuck, FUCK! Louise’s eyes were downcast as she accepted the door keys from him. All she could allow herself to say was.

“Shame.”

“Yeah, no comment. Been really nice knowing you Louise, you are an exceptional woman. Bye.” With that he entered the lift and went down to the fourteenth floor. Cindy looked up at him expectantly as he walked over to her desk.

"I've been fired. You may as well know. I have to clear out my desk and leave now. If anyone asks, you might tell them it was a difference in creative opinion." He looked at her hopefully.

"I sort of expected it," she said. "The sniffing is a dead giveaway but I will tell people creative differences."

"Thank you Cindy; you are a really special girl. If Andrew asks for me, I am in the bar downstairs." With that he turned around and caught a lift downstairs so he could have a beer or two to drown his sorrows.

There was nothing he wanted from his desk anyway.

Chapter 19.

The bar downstairs in the lobby of the building was fairly empty when Chris arrived. The Friday afternoon crowd had headed off home and the evening partygoers had not yet arrived. He was on his second beer when Andrew turned up, his usual grin firmly in place.

“Fucked up eh?” was all he said as he slipped onto the stool next to Chris and signalled the bartender for a beer. Chris did not immediately reply to Andrew’s comment as he was still fuming about his dismissal. His work was good. There was nothing wrong with his presentations, sure they had been put together quickly but they were good solid work. McGregor had caught him out with that ‘medical for insurance’ ploy and Chris had fallen for it hook, line and sinker. He was furious because he had been maneuvered so easily into a position where McGregor could fire him.

He looked up at Andrew.

“McGregor’s a bastard. I hate him. He arranged it all on purpose. Couldn’t bear the thought of anyone having fun, the sour old prick. I wish he was dead!”

“That bad huh. Well, I’ll see what I can do.” Andrew downed his beer in one gulp and stood up to leave. “Sorry I can’t hang around; I have work to do shortly. See you later.” With that he turned and threading his way through the tables, left the bar.

Chris watched him go. He liked Andrew, not just because he was Ruth’s brother, more because he was Andrew and nearly always happy and smiling. The words ‘brother-in-law’ wafted through his mind but he frowned and chided himself for being forward.

Back to the beer.

A few of his co-workers dropped in for a quick after-work drink. He did not know many of them very well, as he had only been employed for a relatively short period of time, six weeks in all but he chatted with a few of them about creative differences and the directions art could take. The usual adman jargon.

About six that evening, as the light was beginning to fade, he left the bar to walk the nine blocks home. About three blocks along from the bar was a pretty major intersection which he had almost reached when he heard the squeal of car tyres, the blaring of a truck horn and the crunch of vehicles colliding. Up ahead he saw a truck lurch sideways, somehow loosing the container it was carrying which slid off the truckbed and ended up at a crazy angle half on and half off the truck. He trotted the rest of the way to the intersection where a crowd was starting to form. The police were already there, a couple of uniforms must have been sitting watching the traffic flow in case of problems occurring during the rush hour traffic. One policeman was attempting to keep people back from the accident scene while trying to do something about the traffic building up. The other policeman was over beside the car involved in the accident, talking to the occupant inside. Chris saw that the corner of the container, as it slid off the truck, had speared through the roof of the car, crushing it into the ground and pinning the driver up against the inside of the windscreens. He looked closely at the occupant. It was McGregor of all people! Trapped inside his car and scrunched up against the windscreens. The very same McGregor that had fired him about two hours ago. Chris smelled gasoline and saw a trail of the stuff coming from the rear of the car. It started from where the container had the car pinned to the ground then headed off down the slope of the road right across the intersection. There was a person standing there, just at the end of the gasoline trail. Chris was sure it was Andrew and was just about to wave when the figure pulled a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches out of its pocket, placed a cigarette in its mouth, lit it and then flicked the burning match away. Straight into the gasoline trail. It whoomphed into flame and a tongue of fire raced for the trapped car which instantly burst into flames. The policeman scrambled to safety away from the burning car and urged the crowd back, fearing an explosion. The onlookers could only watch as the car was engulfed in flames and many turned away, sickened at the sight

and sound of McGregor, screaming and struggling to get out of the burning car. He couldn't though, as he was securely trapped in there by the container.

"BACK! BACK! GET CLEAR." The police were yelling. **"THIS CAR MIGHT EXPLODE."**

People were scrambling over each other to get away from the burning car. Chris stood rooted to the spot, unable to tear his eyes away from the sight of McGregor caught in the car, burning. A sickening satisfaction rose in Chris. A sense of rightness in the world. Someone getting just what they deserved. Just at that moment, the gas tank in the car blew and the car disintegrated. Pieces were blown high into the air, some whistling past Chris and quite a few onlookers around him were injured by flying debris but not Chris. He saw, in slow motion, McGregor's body blown up through the windscreen, twisted and flung in his direction to land with a loud thud at his feet, smoking, charred and obviously dead. The smell of burnt flesh was heavy in the air. The accident scene had virtually turned into a disaster area with quite a few of the onlookers now lying on the ground injured and bleeding. The remnant of McGregor's car was burning fiercely as fire truck and ambulance sirens could be heard in the distance. The rescue vehicles trying to get through the snarled traffic, without much luck. Already the news helicopter was overhead capturing the chaos below to feed to thousands of television screens instantly.

"You there. Get back now!" The policeman's shouted command tore Chris out of his reverie and taking one last look at McGregor's burnt body right in front of him, he backed up and resumed his walk home.

"Serves the bastard right," he thought to himself as he was walking along. "I have no sympathy at all for him. Stuck up, big-headed, executive arsehole. Correction, dead executive arsehole." Replaying the scene over in his memory he came to the part where the fire was lit. Was that really Andrew? It sure looked like him, the same little smile, the same build and similar coloring. Surely Andrew could not have caused the crash but he was there though and it looked like he had lit the flames that killed McGregor.

Chris started thinking, he was pretty naive but not dumb and his brain went off, processing events from the last six to seven weeks looking for connections. Threaded through all the events were Ruth and Andrew but both of them had been really good to him. Ruth, he was madly in love with and besides Steve, Andrew was his best friend. He did not know what to think and soon reached his apartment building, no further forward in solving his dilemma.

He discovered Patricia was home when he let himself into the apartment. Bugger, he had forgotten that she was due home today and he didn't feel in the mood for chit-chat at the moment. She was standing at the open door to the patio watching the pall of smoke rising from the accident scene. She seemed quite excited.

"Hello Chris. There has been an accident about six blocks up. Someone has been killed. It was on the television in a news flash. You can actually see and hear the news helicopter from here." Her sentences were delivered short and sharp in a slightly high voice. "Did you see anything on your way home?" she asked.

"Yeah, most of it," he replied laconically.

"Well."

"Oh, this guy got trapped in his car; some of the leaking gasoline caught fire then the car blew up and the guy was killed."

"How horrible," she said.

"Yeah, poor guy didn't stand a chance." Chris smiled to himself.

"Was it anyone we knew?"

"It turned out to be McGregor from Fleeting Image, you know, where I work." He let that stand for now, not correcting himself. There would be time later for explanations of his job loss. "One of the big guys," he added, "from upstairs."

"Oh, right. Louise would know him then," she said. "A few of us girls are getting together for a girl's night out later. I will ask her then."

Chris' ears pricked up, he had forgotten that Patricia and Louise were good friends. That was how he had come by the apartment in the first place he remembered.

Chris excused himself, claiming tiredness and went to his room to lie on his bed and think about what the future held. As he entered the bedroom, he noticed the red stereo light was on again, demanding his attention. Sitting on the edge of the bed he took his shoes off and lay back feeling a little tired from the day's events. A hit of coke might get him going again. Waiting until he heard Patricia go into the bathroom and the sound of the shower running before getting out his silver box, he opened it up and took two generous snorts from the silver spoon, quickly putting the box down before the second snort hit. When his mind returned to something like normality a few minutes later, he realized that he was staring at the red light of the stereo. It occupied his attention fully, as his mind raced at breakneck speed over the options available to him in the future. The CD had been pretty good for him so far.

"Might as well listen to another track," he told himself. "The way things are going it may even help out." The action followed the words and he reached over to the remote, which had already selected track four, and pressing PLAY, lay back on his bed to listen to the next song on the CD.

So what you doin' livin' in this hood
 The people roun' here just too damn good
 This ain't no place for a dude like you
 So listen up whitey an' I'll give you a clue.

Ain't got no money to cough for da rent
 Everthin' you got has already been spent
 Just take the car and the stereo
 Don't look like that, you know where to go.

The girl with the dances, got all the moves
 Use yer little needle to bust her groove
 She'll take you in, got plenty of space
 And bumpin' with that chick sure ain't no disgrace.

What you waitin' for, lyin' on yer bed
 Ain't this little story gettin' through yer head?
 Get up you dozy fuck and go for a drive
 Remember it's you who keeps this story alive.

Chris turned the CD off at the end of the song and then turned off his stereo. Things were definitely getting weirder and weirder. Now a tape was singing personal songs to him. He really did not feel like staying in tonight and Ruth probably had a customer. Steve's face popped into his memory, he had not seen Steve in what seemed like ages. He made a decision. Grabbing some beer out of the fridge he yelled a farewell to Patricia on his way out of the apartment, heading for Steve's place.

Steve opened the front door and smiled happily as he welcomed his friend. Mary was there also, they really did make a beautiful couple Chris thought, so caring. After the initial pleasantries were over and a beer was in their hands, Chris could contain himself no longer. He dropped the bombshell about being fired, making out it was due to 'creative differences'. Steve looked at him levelly.

"How long have you been using coke Chris?"

"What do you mean?" Chris prevaricated.

"You know what I mean. I may appear slow and boringly religious but that does not make me dumb. I can read the signs, your nose is running and you sniff a lot. You are a bit evasive and you come across as being fast and confident even if what you are saying is not correct. I have been noticing the changes for a little while now but let it go 'cos I thought you may be experimenting."

"Well I am," Chris said, wiping his nose. "I can stop any time I like."

"Except now. I would not mind betting that is why you are out of work. No one likes employing coke-heads, they are just too unreliable." Steve looked at him. "I heard on the news a few minutes ago that an executive from Fleeting Image was killed in an auto accident earlier this evening. Know anything about that?"

Chris opened up and shared with his friend the story of the accident and who it was that was involved. He shied away from mentioning Andrew's involvement but it made no difference, Steve knew there was something going on. Mary brought them another beer and then went to leave but Steve called her back and asked if she would sit in. When she went to fetch her coffee, Steve said levelly to Chris.

"You're my best friend and I think you are in deep shit. I want Mary to sit with us because there is not an evil bone in her body and she is very wise for her years. Before she found God she was a junkie and, apparently, a very good thief. She is intelligent and knows a lot about life at the street level. It can only help. Do you mind?"

Chris just shrugged; he was almost on another planet with all the coke he had buzzing through him. What did he care? Mary returned and sat down beside Steve who started reiterating points one by one, keeping count on his fingers.

"I talked to Father O'Connor and he told me that either demonic possession or conversion to evil cause crucifix burns to appear like that and it is only blessed crucifixes that can cause that effect. Apparently, if they are not blessed, the phenomenon does not occur. You showed me the CD and tried to play it for me but I heard nothing on it. Can you? Your coke habit is only recent but it has cost you your job. People are dying around you. Lots of people. You used to be innocent and carefree, now you cruise around in that big, red car with Ruth, who owns or part owns a nightclub called 'Satans' and you poke coke up your nose all the time. What is happening to you? I suggest that for the sake of your soul, you take God into your heart and denounce the devil. Pray with us now. I will get a bible."

Rising from his seat opposite Chris, Steve went over to the bookcase and picked up a bible. As he started back toward Chris, bible in hand, he noticed that his friend was visibly paling.

Chris started feeling nauseous and uncomfortable. When his friend was only half way back to his seat with the bible, Chris suddenly felt fire running through his veins like acid, burning. He leapt to his feet as if on springs, backing away from Steve, screaming at him to come no closer.

"Stay there! Stay there! Don't bring that thing any nearer to me. Please." He sobbed, backing towards the door, bent over with the pain and pointing at the bible in Steve's hands.

"It burns. From the inside out. Take it away." he wailed.

Steve stopped and looked at a very shaken Mary who shrugged back at him.

"I don't think we can help," was all she said.

Steve stood looking in Chris' direction and then put the bible back on the bookshelf, well away from where they were sitting. He motioned Chris, who looked visibly relieved, to sit down again. When he had, Steve took a seat opposite him beside Mary.

"It has gone too far Chris. It has gone beyond our simple abilities. We cannot help you anymore. Soon it will be too painful for you to even set foot inside this house or be near us. The blessed crucifix on the wall, the religious texts and our faith will all be too much for you to bear. You are my friend and I will do what I can to help you but you have to want to change. Only the Church can help you now but we will pray for your soul. Please, think about what is happening to you. Give me permission to make an appointment for you to see Father O'Connor; it is the only thing I can think of." Steve lowered his gaze in sorrow and Mary placed her hand on top of Steve's to lend him moral support.

Chris sat stunned. This was the last thing he had expected to hear from his friend. All this religious mumbo jumbo. He had never believed in it, religion was just for people that had to believe in something greater than themselves. No, he couldn't explain the crucifix burn or its equally rapid healing, right at this moment. Nor could he explain his sudden physical aversion to the bible. He could feel it right now, at least three metres from where he was sitting, lying on the bookcase like a chunk of warm iron. Maybe it was all psychosomatic, brought on by Steve's excellent performance. He grew angry, denial rising in him, fuelled by coke, fuelled by his love for Ruth and fuelled by his sudden hatred of all things religious. He suddenly saw Steve for what he was; a poor little rich kid who'd got religion. Got it bad, all at once.

Chris now saw Mary as Steve's prissy, pious girlfriend, clutching to a harmless, rich crank. The pair of them were boring, living dreary little lives with their bible groups, Sunday worship, picnics in the park and gifts for the homeless.

On the other hand, Chris' life was now, he and Ruth. Excitement, sex, rule breaking, good food, good music, full on fun and entertainment. That was living. He felt sorry for his friend and looking down from his lofty mental perch, suddenly realized that he was far better off than Steve. He could stay with these boring people no longer and standing up, excused himself and went to leave. He saw the dismay on Steve and Mary's faces as he backed over to the lounge room doorway making his goodbyes. They jumped to their feet and scrambled after him to catch up as he reached the front door.

"Chris! Don't go. Please. Stop and talk. We can work out a way to solve the problem. Please do not leave like this; we may never get another chance to help you." Steve begged and implored.

Chris ignored his friend and turning in the open front doorway, spoke to them both. "Each to his own. Thank you Steve, thank you Mary." Nodding at them both, he left without sparing a backward glance. If he had, he would have seen both Steve and Mary in

the doorway, heads bowed, hands clasped in front of them, praying for his soul. They could both feel and almost see the evil aura starting to tighten its grip on Chris. “I will always be your friend,” Steve whispered after the departing figure.

Chris was oblivious to the darkness surrounding him and closing in..

Chapter 20.

Chris slowly came to, stretching as he awoke peacefully. No alarm going off to get his attention. No need, it was the weekend. He lay in his bed, getting the feel of the day. The stereo light was on but he ignored it as a commonplace occurrence now. He had the whole day to himself so he lay there comfortably, considering how he was going to spend it. The weather was still fine, the Indian summer stretching through into the latter part of September, so he thought he might take the ‘vette out for a run. Inland, up through the hills, put the car through its paces, rev it a little. The change in altitude meant the leaves were changing colour up there earlier than in the city and would be nearly at their best about now. If it was really pretty up there he could rerun it tomorrow for Ruth’s benefit. She would enjoy the drive, especially if he made it a quick one. Getting up, he flung on a robe and wandered out to the kitchen.

Patricia was pottering about out there when he arrived, turning as she heard him.

“Morning. Would you like a coffee?”

“Yes please. How was the night out with the girls?”

“Fine. Quite an enjoyable night out really but you and I have something to talk about.” She said this while not quite looking at him. Avoiding eye contact.

Chris was curious, this was not like Patricia.

She took the two steaming mugs of coffee into the lounge area, placing one down in front of the couch and seating herself in the single armchair opposite. Chris sat on the couch and picked his coffee up, waiting with interest to hear what Patricia had to say to him. She settled herself, took a swig of coffee and looked directly at him.

“What I have to say is not easy for me. It brings back painfull memories. I was married once, as you know, to a pilot of all people. Our first couple of years together were wonderfull. Then he stumbled into cocaine. After that, my life turned to shit. I have been divorced for four years now and am doing quite well.”

Chris looked up, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach; he thought he knew what was coming.

“I know things like medical records are supposed to be confidential and I realize it could create trouble if you wanted it to but Louise glanced over your results. She was curious as to why you were fired. She and I go back a long way, so she told me of the positive test results for cocaine. I am sorry Chris, you are such a nice fellow but under the circumstances I must ask you to move out. I cannot have cocaine in my apartment and I do not want to live with a user ever again. I think a week, if you don’t mind.”

Chris sat silently, even though he had suspected what was coming, it still left a bad taste in his mouth. Where could he go? He doubted Steve would want him in his house and he did not know if he could physically live there anyway.

Ruth.

He would go and see her later on to ask if it were possible for him to move in with her. Actually, this whole thing could be a blessing in disguise. If Ruth would allow him live at the club, it was possible she may also have some work for him to do. There had been a couple of hints. He smiled to himself at the thought. This situation could work out quite well after all.

“Are you all right?” Patricia asked.

“Yes, why?”

“Oh, you went all quiet. It worried me a little,” she said, taking a sip of coffee.

“No, I was just contemplating what to do. As Louise also probably told you, I was given instant dismissal yesterday, so I am finding myself at a bit of a loose end.”

“Chris.” The sound of her voice made him look up. “You are taking this really well but there is something I feel I have to add. Louise said she has known Ruth for only three to four months. She met Ruth about the same time Ruth started seeing Sally over here. She doesn’t know much about her at all. However, she did say to me that Ruth was played by her own rules. I have my own suspicions. Be carefull of her. Please.”

Chris felt the colour rise to his face as anger took hold. He thumped the coffee mug down onto the table, splashing it with coffee and jumped to his feet. Pacing up and down the room he spoke angrily to Patricia.

“That’s fucking great, coming from you,” he snarled. “First you throw me out then you put shit on probably the only person in this city that really gives a fuck about me. I accept that I need to leave and I fucking understand your paranoia but leave Ruth out of this. Bitch.”

With that he headed for his room.

Half an hour later, showered, shaved and still fuming, he was out on the highway heading for the hills as he had planned. No point in moping around, he couldn’t see Ruth until about six that evening. So he would go for a blast and clear some of the cobwebs out of his brain. He soon had the ‘vette up in the hills with the stereo turned up, playing his new music, loud. The sunlight flickered through the multi-colored, leafy branches as he zipped

around the many corners on the winding road, squealing the occasional tyre and generally enjoying the morning. The coke he had snorted before he left was thrumming through him. He could feel it like liquid magic in his veins. He felt bigger and stronger than he had ever felt before. "Getting a job would be no problem to someone like me," he thought to himself as he wrestled the 'vette left, right, left through the corners.

Thoroughly enjoying himself.

Several hours later he pulled up at the back door to the club and let himself in. He surprised Ruth, who had just climbed out of the shower and because he hadn't seen her in a while and because he was buzzing from his drive, they somehow ended up in bed for an hour or so.

"Wow," she said after he eventually slid off her an hour later. "You really were pumped weren't you? Excuse the pun."

He nodded in response, a smile on his face. "You are simply the best thing that has ever happened to me," he said, "and I've got a couple of things to tell you."

"Okay," she smiled. "Let's get showered and dressed and you can tell me over a drink. This is a working night. Remember?" Saying that, she slid out of bed and he watched as she walked, in her magnificent nakedness, toward the bathroom for her second shower that afternoon. Chris joined her and a lot of water went down the drain before they got out. Later, over a drink, he told her about losing his job, McGregor's accident and having seen Andrew there and then finished up with a tale of woe regarding losing his apartment. Ruth didn't seem fazed at all. "Andrew told me about the job thing and mentioned he had rewarded McGregor but losing your apartment is news to me. No biggie. Move in here. Have you got much stuff?"

Chris was amazed. It was all so easy. She had invited him to live with her, just like that. Ruth must really love him. "No, just clothes and stuff and my stereo," he replied to her question about possessions.

"Great, we'll move you in tomorrow. Save some rent, you don't have to work Monday so that is no problem and I'll take care of that bitch Patricia."

He looked up, surprised at the vehemence in her voice. "What do you mean, take care of her?"

"Oh, nothing really. Just make my feelings known about the way she has treated you and demeaned me."

He wondered what she meant by that but didn't want to ask right now. No doubt he would find out in due course.

"What about my car on the street?" he queried.

"Do not worry lover. I will guarantee that nothing will happen to it. As I said before, people round here do not fuck with anything to do with this club, including cars parked outside. Relax." She grinned at him and took another sip of her drink.

The club was really alive that night. People started rocking up in droves right from the opening moment. Chris coked up, smoked a couple of joints and was really flying when Ruth started her act at midnight. Even amongst all the debauchery that was occurring, her act was a tremendous success. She seemed to have such power on the stage as she danced, and the costuming! He thought the tail with the arrowhead on the end was a cute touch, marveled at the red glowing eyes and the horns and reminded himself to ask her how she got the scaling effect on hands, arms and legs under the spotlights. It was brilliant and very realistic. After five minutes of her dancing, all the patrons in the club had stopped what

they were doing and were intent on what was happening on the stage. It was very erotic, the way she moved and the tiny costume barely covering her strip of black pubic hair and large, stiff nipples. She appeared to expand and grow in the spotlight, the tail taking on a life of its own. The music was great and he recognized one of the tunes from the black CD.

At the end of her number, the cheering was deafening in the dark when the spotlight snapped off and by the time it came back on for the next dancer Ruth was standing right in front of him. He was filled with pride at the thought that he, Chris Wilkins, was her boyfriend and chosen partner. It made him feel great that people noticed him as being ‘the’ guy that Ruth was with. She touched him and the electric thrill of it sparked off lust. He was greedy for her again but would have to wait. They wandered around together, having a drink, chatting to patrons and observing the goings on. He was amazed at some of the things he saw. He knew people were depraved but some of those antics went way beyond anything he could imagine or knew about. Some of the people he saw were well known public figures. He saw the Mayor’s assistant on the end of a lead, naked apart from the studded collar around his neck. The man holding the other end was obese, masked and dressed in black leather from head to foot. It was almost comical if not for the red wheals across the naked man’s back, arms and legs. Chris caught Ruth’s attention.

“What’s all this about?” he asked, nodding at the Mayor’s assistant.

Ruth laughed and went over and scritched the naked man under the chin.

“Who’s been a naughty puppy then?” she asked and the man hung his head, looking for all the world like a chastised dog. She laughed again and came back over to Chris’ side.

“He’s a regular. Loves being treated like that. If you are not carefull he will try and fuck your leg.” With that she wandered off, Chris in tow. Her next act was at 2am and after it was over she once again sought out Chris. This time she took him into the office and sat him on the chair in front of the desk then sat on the desk in front of him with her legs open. He could feel the heat emanating from her crotch and the smell of her damp pussy was wonderfull. He was feeling horny again and reached out to touch her. She caught his hand.

“I’ve got something to tell you honey. I have a gig tonight. It is worth \$2000 for about four hours work so I didn’t think you would mind. Anyway, you had some of this,” patting her pussy, “not eight hours ago. You don’t really mind, do you?” She leaned forward, stroking his face, kissing and cajoling him. Any reservations he may have had, fled. How could he refuse her anything?

“Thank you Big Boy. We’ll go and get your stuff tomorrow and move you in. Now, let’s get back to the action.” With that she took his hand and led him back out into the club. The action was a little less frenetic than it had been and later on Chris saw Ruth talking to a rich looking older guy. He suspected that the old guy must be the evening’s bankroll. Whatever, it was a situation he was rapidly becoming less uncomfortable with and the money was great.

The doors closed behind the last of the patrons at 4am and Chris headed off for bed to avoid Ruth and her mark. He didn’t see them leave, instead falling into a deep sleep in the darkened underground bedroom. Some time later he was awakened by the feeling of a warm mouth sucking his by now willing erection. It felt wonderfull and he lay back thinking how lucky he was to have a girl as avid for sex as Ruth. He was hard and horny as she moved up his body and impaled herself on his hardness. Not a word had been spoken. Chris reached up to caress her breasts and cupped one in each hand. His hands relayed

the message to his brain that these weren't Ruth's breasts. Shit! He twisted sharply and throwing the hungry body off, reached for the bedside light. There on the bed beside him was a blond girl who he had seen in the club earlier, she was well put together and had a shaved pussy. His hands, he realized, had picked up the feel of the breast implants that caused her breasts to jut out toward him taughly.

"What the hell are you doing in this bed?" he growled at her.

She smiled at him. "That would seem pretty obvious, and Ruth was right, you are a big boy."

"No, what I meant was why are you here?"

"To do what I was doing," she teased. Then on a more serious note. "My name is Dixie, I work for Ruth. She treats me real good and I get snort too. She said she was working tonight and that you might be lonely or horny so I should come and keep you company. She was not wrong, you have a great dick."

Chris was amazed, obviously Ruth thought that if it was okay for her to sleep with other people she would apply the same rules to him and even supply the partner. What a woman! He found he had more reasons everyday to love her, even as he was reaching out for Dixie to try her out. He wasn't disappointed.

Much later in the morning he was woken by Ruth sliding into bed beside him. Dixie had gone.

"Did you like my present?" she smirked at him, giving his now softened penis a tweak.

"Oh yes but I would rather have you any day," he replied as she nestled her head onto his shoulder. Comfortable, they drifted off to sleep.

Later that afternoon they went over to his apartment to collect his things. He felt great. Ruth was the best. Hell, she had even promised to find him work at the club. Life was really improving for him. Shame about the apartment though, it was a little bit of independence. They went up together in the elevator and entered the apartment. Patricia was there but after a brief hello and explanation he was picking up his belongings, there was nothing further to say. Ruth however glared at Patricia during the exchange with Chris. Her eyes seemed to glow and tension lines appeared around them. The temperature dropped and Patricia colored, got up and went to her room, firmly closing the door behind her.

"And good fucking riddance." Ruth smiled as she turned and followed Chris to his room. It did not take them long to pack Chris' clothes into his suitcase, throw the rest of his stuff into a cardboard box or two and dismantle the stereo.

"I won't bother packing this up," he told her. "It's too much hassle." So they carried it down to the car piecemeal, along with the boxes and the suitcase. Three trips later and they were done. Chris took a last look around the apartment, then taking his keys off his key ring, placed them on the kitchen bench beside the telephone and called out to Patricia who was still in her room.

"I am going now. The keys are on the kitchen bench, thanks for everything. Sorry how it worked out." He half heard a muffled reply and walked out of the apartment for the last time.

Ruth greeted him with a big smile when he got back to the car and as they were leaving she said, somewhat mysteriously, "Don't worry Big Boy, she'll get what's due for treating you like that. I will see to it."

He pulled the car up to the card slot and inserted his access card, the metal gate slid up and he removed the card, handing it to Ruth to put in the glovebox. He did not see her palm it and put it in her pocket.

She had plans.

Later, back at ‘Satans’, with Chris’ belongings safely ensconced, they got stuck into the good coke. The cleaning crew had finished in the club so they wandered out into the dark, deserted, echoing room. Ruth slid behind the bar, switched on a couple of lights, mixed them both a drink and put some music on. It felt good to sit in the empty club, just the two of them, knee to knee with soft music in the background. Chris almost recognized it. He gestured with his glass, taking in the whole room. “So what made you get into this?” he asked. She gave him an appraising look.

“I like dancing. I am good at fucking and have no morals. I guess I wanted to combine my talents, enjoy what I do and make money. Andrew came in with me because he is better at the business side of things and also has no morals. Handy in this line of work. It is a good arrangement for us. Now that you are here, we will have to find a job for you to keep you out of mischief, or in it.” Her eyes twinkled.

‘What did you have in mind?’ he queried.

“Well, there are certain women who come to the club that are very rich and also very particular. They are looking for sex with a younger man. Most of them are not that old but they are desperate. I was thinking of hiring you out on the nights that I will be working. Between us, we could make a lot of money and have a really good time. Besides it will give Dixie a rest from you.”

Chris thought about it, surprised at his lack of negative reaction to the idea. In fact he sort of fancied it. Getting paid to lay women. Way to go. This sure was going to be fun. He looked up at Ruth. “Sounds okay to me. If you are working, I may as well work too. You are not going to set me up with wrinklies though, are you?”

“No, of course not. I will pick you only the finest younger women, some with older, rich husbands who can’t deliver much in the way of excitement. That will be your job. Sure you can cope?”

Chris smiled, relieved. “I think so. Should be good. We’ll make heaps of dough and neither of us will be sitting at home waiting for the other.”

Ruth went behind the bar again, opened a secret compartment and coming back around the front of the bar with the makings, rolled a couple of joints.

“Stupid barman thinks I don’t know about his stash.” She winked at him and placing a joint between her lips, fired it up. “Fancy eating Korean food again tonight?” she asked.

“Yeah, okay but not dog. Why do you like Korean food?”

“Because it’s hot,” came the enigmatic reply as she leaned back against the bar inhaling smoke and weaving to the music.

Much later that evening Chris sat back from the low table at the restaurant and uncrossed his legs, smiling at Ruth. The meal had been wonderfull, the table was buried under a huge amount of side dishes of intriguing tastes and textures, mostly empty now. This style of meal she told him was known as ‘*Hanjeonsik*’. He had eaten mostly the same foods as Ruth including a very spicy seafood casserole, ‘*Haemuljeongol*’ which along with all the other hot foods had numbed his lips and mouth. The soju seemed to help. Ruth loved the really hot foods, picking out the really burning ones and munching on whole fresh chillies

both red and green throughout the meal. It amazed him how the hot stuff didn't seem to affect her while he sweated profusely after eating it. He felt replete, contented.

"This is the way to live," he said, "on the underbelly of society, like a fat tick sucking what you need from those that have it. To hell with the responsible nine to five 'thou shalt do no wrong' bullshit."

Ruth looked up from her food. "Ataboy," was all she said.

He loved this amoral woman who could fuck him for pleasure and other guys for money. He enjoyed his car and the coke and the thought of being paid to make love to other women. He smiled darkly to himself and wondered just how far he would go on the downward spiral into depravity. It seemed as though his conscience could not care less and he was certainly enjoying himself.

The whole thing seemed to have started the week that the colored guy was bowled over outside of Tonies Coffee Shop and he had acquired that weird tape. What was that, eight short weeks ago? He was certainly a very different person now from the young innocent who had witnessed his first death. He felt like his eyes had been opened up and he was able to see and feel far more of the spectrum of life than he ever had before.

"Where you at, Big Boy?" Ruth asked from across the table.

He looked up, drawing himself back to the present before answering. "Oh, just thinking about how far I have come in the last eight weeks and trying to remember all that has occurred in that time. It has been the busiest eight weeks of my life. If someone had told me that it was going to unfold as it has, I wouldn't have believed them."

"Didn't it all start about the same time you acquired the Black CD. You know, the one I like, the demo."

"Yeah, I guess it did," he replied. "When the colored guy died."

"That was a good one," she giggled.

"Pardon."

"I mean from what you tell me, it was a pretty spectacular accident," she corrected. "You ready to go?"

"Sure," he replied, standing and stretching out the stiffness from an hour on the floor. They reclaimed their shoes, paid the bill and left. Strolling along in the chill night air, she rested her head on his shoulder and he put his arm around her as they walked, each lost in their own private thoughts. He felt like a king but didn't see the cold little smile that flitted across her face. It was evil incarnate, accompanied as it was with the red eyes and skin that looked scaly under the occasional orange street lights.

'This one was really enjoyable,' Ruth thought to herself, glancing over at Chris. 'It was always fun playing with them first but this was the best one yet, she almost had an unexplainable bond with it. It wouldn't be long until all seven deadly sins had been committed by it though and then she would strike.'

It would be soon and it would be delicious.

Chapter 21.

Chris woke with a start in total darkness. It was Monday morning; he had to get up and go to work. Then he realized there was no work to go to and lay back in the silence of the underground bedroom, broken only by the whisper of the air-conditioning and Ruth's gentle, regular breathing. He switched on the bedside lamp and studied her.

Ruth was as beautiful in sleep as she was awake, her generous breasts rising and falling in time with her breathing. It was almost a shame to move and spoil the moment. No work to go to, no responsibilities for rent, just a free and easy existence. A totally different feeling from when he had lived with Angela. She had always goaded him to look for work and brought out feelings of guilt in him about being supported by her. In retrospect, not a good relationship at all.

There was nothing like that with Ruth. Just kindness and honesty. He felt her stir beside him and his gaze traveled up her body to find her dark green eyes watching him, almost reading his thoughts. She smiled, stretched and opened her legs with a smiling invitation he could not refuse.

Later that afternoon they rose and after showering and a quick breakfast they went for a drive up into the hills where Chris had been on Saturday, just a couple of days before. He couldn't resist showing off, the coke made him feel invincible and he drove as if there was no tomorrow. Ruth loved it, sliding around corners with the rear wheels spinning, four wheel drifting around others, it was as if the big Corvette had a life of its own. Chris loved this car. He would never have been able to afford it on the salary he was on. He was so fortunate he had decided to buy a ticket in the raffle and so, so lucky to have won it.

Besides Ruth, this car was his most favourite thing in the whole world.

They made it back to the city eventually and ate out in a small Mexican restaurant before going to the movies. Chris was totally amazed at how Ruth spooned huge quantities of the hottest chili sauce onto her food and ate it with obvious gusto.

"Doesn't that stuff burn your throat or upset your insides?" he couldn't help asking.

"Not at all, the hotter the better," she answered.

Their meal finished, they went to the movie. Ruth liked slice and dice films, not quite Chris' cup of tea but she enjoyed them. Lots of killing and horror and bloody messes involving intestines and other soggy bits. At times she was the only person chuckling in an otherwise quiet movie theatre. Some of the other patrons turned to stare at the inopportune mirth but Ruth didn't seem to notice them or let it interfere with her

enjoyment. Chris thought it a very strange sense of humour but made an allowance for nervousness, maybe.

From that day on, life became an extremely relaxed affair for Chris; very comfortable and lazy. He arose late, his food was supplied for him and he had little to do. Ruth was an extremely good organizer and the household chores in her private underground rooms were all taken care of by only one of the cleaners. A strange old lady who seemed to have more than a passing interest in him but never talked, not even to say 'good morning'. She just nodded her head in his direction when she passed by. The rooms were always spotless and tidy, the bed made, sheets changed and fresh towels in the bathroom. The old lady also prepared the meals they had when they didn't eat out and did the washing up as well. She always seemed to be around when needed. There was space in the built-in wardrobe for his clothes and stuff and because Ruth's stereo was so good there was no need for him to keep his stereo. He removed the black CD from the unit and put it away in the CD rack in Ruth's entertainment centre. Then he piled his old stereo and speakers into a cardboard carton and dropped it outside of Steve's place with a note attached explaining that he was alright, for Steve not to worry and that Steve could do whatever he saw fit with the stereo. He did not leave a phone number or address, as Ruth had been very specific about keeping the club ultra low key and out of the attention of the church. Chris did not quite understand why and thought she was a bit paranoid but it was her club so he did as he was asked and left no contact information, just a promise to telephone occasionally.

Chris received his first assignment in the very early hours of Thursday morning. Ruth had an assignation with some visiting bigwig who was a friend of a regular client, so she set Chris up with Alicia, a thirty something, single, career woman who had never been married.

Alicia didn't look too bad, she was a little out of shape but dressed extremely well in designer clothes. She hadn't wanted to chance picking someone up in the club as she did business on a fairly high level in town and wanted to be able to cut and thrust with everyone, without worrying about blackmail. Business was business, so Alicia had asked Ruth in passing, if Ruth knew of anyone for hire and here he was. For his first assignment it went pretty well. He did not know if he would be able to perform at will but a good snort of coke helped and he left Alicia soundly asleep in a pile of tangled bedclothes three hours after arriving at her apartment. The sex had been okay. Alicia was very appreciative and fairly naive. He smiled to himself, amazed at the difference nine weeks had made to his outlook on life as he opened her front door to leave. The suburb where Alicia lived was just coming to life as people began their new day in the early morning chill. His day was almost over so he caught a taxi home.

Home!

A club called 'Satans'. What would his Grandmother think? Well, she wouldn't find out. Ruth was at the club when he arrived and they showered together before turning in for some well earned rest. Between them they had made an extra three thousand dollars for their early morning's work, easy money.

There were no 'extras for early Friday morning so, as a special treat and a reward for the glowing report Alicia had given Ruth about him, Dixie was invited to join them in bed. Chris was shocked and amazed. He had never participated in a threesome before, it was one of those dreams that most young males have, and it had never occurred to him that it would happen, but here he was, sandwiched. Ruth seemed to think it quite natural that he

would enjoy such a thing and didn't make a big deal out of it. Chris needed no urging and after a round of coke each they got into every conceivable permutation imaginable. Ruth and Dixie had done this before, many times. It was obvious by their relaxation with, and hunger for, each other. Dixie, blond haired and tanned was a direct contrast with Ruth, black haired and white skinned. It was an amazing sight for him to see their bodies twined together and Chris took every available advantage of it. He woke up Friday evening totally sated and a little sore.

Ruth came out of the shower drying her hair, "You seemed to enjoy that," she smiled. "Oh yes," he grinned back at her.

"Good, because now and again we'll have other little interludes. Now hop up, have a shower and get dressed. We'll just have time for dinner before the club opens."

The club employees started at half past six in the evening and left at four to four thirty the next morning. Ruth usually had the strange, silent old woman prepare them a meal for about eight o'clock if they weren't going out and they ate together at one of the tables near the bar. It was totally fantastic to eat prepared meals in the club with Ruth. They were restaurant quality and he could have whatever he fancied to drink with them. It couldn't get any better than this. The barman brought him another beer.

He had only seen Andrew a couple of times during the last week, mostly going in and out of the office at the club. When possible they had stopped for a chat. Once Chris had mentioned the accident involving McGregor and asked Andrew if he had seen it. Andrew had looked at him, smiled and winked, then said.

"No I wasn't there. I heard he got burned alive. Funny that, he burned you then got 'burned' himself." After which he turned away and entered the office. Ruth had mentioned that he looked after the business and he seemed pretty dedicated. The next time they bumped into each other, Chris asked Andrew how he managed to work all day at Fleeting Image Ad. Agency and most of the night at 'Satans'.

"I don't. I quit the ad. agency, just did not turn up for work last Monday. They do not know it yet and wont until they try and contact me. All the addresses, phone numbers etc. are phony," and he chuckled to himself with an evil air. In fact it was almost the same chuckle that Ruth had. Definitely brother and sister.

Saturday rolled around and the club was busier than ever. There was no shortage of people who loved rude, lascivious, immoral and illegal behaviour. The club catered for them all. It had private function rooms which could be hired out at considerable expense and although the patrons did not know about it, all the rooms had discrete, built-in video cameras. Ruth had shown him the narrow hidden door behind the bookcase in the office and admonished him to always shut the office door before opening it. It was accessed by reaching up and tilting a copy of "Dante's Inferno" which released a catch and allowed the bookcase to swing back on well-oiled hinges. Through the little door was a room with four monitor screens, one for each 'private room, each hooked up to a recording device. Here, he had seen a few things so far off the scale of human behaviour that they were beyond his belief. Over the next few weeks he would see far more of the seamy side of life than most people ever saw or heard in a lifetime.

"This is where we get our political protection from. It is amazing what a little emotional blackmail can accomplish. Any problems I have with authority simply disappear and get forgotten about. Very handy on those rare occasions." She grinned at him. "All the rest I will probably sell in a couple of years. The porno market is always on the lookout for fresh, weird stuff and I have recorded hundreds of hours of it."

They had gone back out to the main area of the club where people attired in various costumes and stages of undress mingled together, dancing, feeling, squeezing, smoking, drinking and generally having a riotous good time. Chris had never noticed any violence at the club, a few raised voices here and there was about the most it ever got to. The extremely large doorman on the way in may have had something to do with that, but Chris thought it was mostly because people were having too much fun to bother. He sat up the back of the club at one of the tables he had taken a fancy to and just watched the crowds. Some of the patrons he recognized now but most he didn't.

Ruth cruised over. "Penny for your thoughts."

"Oh, just wondering if you ever take a holiday and whether the club is like this all the time?" He asked. "Although this is like a holiday," he added as an afterthought.

"Yes and yes."

"Great, when is your holiday?"

"Not long actually. We really don't have many but there is a week coming up soon when we close the club all week. It is the first week of November, about a month away. I want to spend it with you, your soul inspires me."

His eyes were drawn to hers.

"What's the occasion?" he queried.

"The holiday begins the day after Halloween. All Souls Day. We have a huge party for Halloween night then close for a week. Gives us time for a break. I usually go somewhere hot for that week. It will be good to have someone to go with for a change."

Chris bathed in the warm glow of her approbation, lapping up the compliments like a hungry puppy.

"Got to go lover, I am on again in ten minutes." She whisked off to get changed into her skimpy outfit as he sat nursing his beer, waiting for her dancing on stage, which he loved.

For the next three weeks life was idyllic, he ate, partied, imbibed cocaine, serviced women for money and loved Ruth every which way he could. Dixie joined them occasionally when Ruth was in the mood and time permitted. Chris didn't complain. He was initially worried about the Corvette being left on the street and checked on it regularly but it was always pristine, not even a speck of dirt to mar its beauty.

On one occasion when he went out to go for a drive, he found a young man lying beside the car unconscious. There was a flat strip of metal poked down beside the driver side window, the sort of tool that car thieves use to open locked doors. Chris bent down beside the crumpled form to check for signs of life and at that moment the young man came to with a startled cry, jumped to his feet and took off down the road like all the hounds of hell were after him.

Chris retrieved the tool, which tingled in his hands and decided that the guy must have fainted or been really drunk the night before. That was the only logical explanation. No matter, his car was fine.

About a week before Halloween, on a Sunday, Ruth told him that she had to go off with Andrew on business for most of the day as there was a lot of 'special' purchasing for the Halloween party night. She didn't elaborate and Chris got her drift. After the cleaning crew had left, Chris found himself moping around the empty club, drink in hand, missing Ruth. The weather was lousy out so a movie seemed like a good way to chew up some of the time until she returned. He went into the bedroom and pulled the front of the dresser down to expose the movie and sound system. The black CD caught his eye, sitting in the CD rack

like a mini black hole. He had played most of the songs on it and Side 'B' was nearly finished.

Chris grew curious.

He and this CD had come a long way in a relatively short space of time and good things had happened. Might as well listen to another track and see what eventuated. It could be cool. He plucked the CD from the rack and put it into the machine pressing the PLAY button on the remote. How did it always know to go to the next song?

This particular piece of music had a long introduction and the words cruised through and into the music slowly and gradually, building in volume as he listened with growing apprehension as the words of the song unfolded.

So little time to realize your mistake
 So little time 'til your love to turn to hate
 So little time 'til all you got's your car
 Then time won't matter 'cause you won't get too far.

The world just turns and night it follows day
 The world just turns, you cannot get away
 The world just turns you'll be drivin' in your car
 'Till that final moment when you're a flaming star.

All the good is gone, you had time to play
 All the good is gone, no reason left to stay
 All the good is gone, time to travel far
 I'll get really nasty when I pluck you from your car.

I have accommodation for that coming day
 I have accommodation where you will have to stay
 I have accommodation, we'll treat you like a dream
 It may not be the Ritz but I'll love to hear you scream.

Chris shuddered, a really creepy feeling edging down his spine as he turned the CD off. It was only a recording, no need to get hysterical about the music, just a bunch of musicians. Without thinking, he removed the CD and automatically placed it into his shirt pocket.

Man that song was morbid. He had to get out of this place; the walls were starting to close in on him. Who cares if the weather is shit, a drive would do him the world of good.

Maybe he could drop in on Steve and Mary. With any luck Steve might have a room with no religious stuff in it and he wouldn't feel uncomfortable being there. He just wouldn't talk about the stuff that Ruth didn't want mentioned. He collected his keys and went upstairs.

The weather was terrible, still blowing a gale and hosing down with rain. The Indian summer was long gone and most of the trees poked bare branches at the leaden skies, their leaves whipping past in the wind to pile up in doorways and sheltered spots. The 'vette was frisky on the wet roads as he aimed it towards Steve's place. With no conscious thought, he reached into his pocket and withdrew the CD, partially inserting it into the car's CD stereo machine.

He would never remember those moments of picking up the CD or subsequently placing it into his car's music system.

When he arrived at Steve's, he battled through the weather to the front door, thankful for the porch which kept the worst of it off and rang the bell. There was no answer so he banged on the door. Still no answer. Damn, it was Sunday, Steve and Mary were probably at some bible-bashers' gathering.

Running through the rain he jumped back into his car and sat, pondering. He had no friends anymore. His whole life now revolved around Ruth and his feelings for her. The club, his little universe. His feelings for her ruled his actions. Slight misgivings over the way his life was going rose into his thoughts.

Shit!

Enough of all this thinking crap, he was hungry and a burger would really hit the spot. Just for a change.

An hour and a half later, burger under his belt, feeling much better and resolved to cultivate some friends away from the club, he headed back home. The storm was still blowing and the howling wind was making quite a bit of noise as he entered the club and wandered into the bedroom wrapped in his thoughts. He was totally unprepared for what he saw. Andrew and Ruth, on the bed, their bed, making love doggy style, going hammer and tongs. He felt gut-punched. They hadn't heard him come in and were facing the other way. Brother and sister, his Ruth.

Someone was screaming and both Andrew and Ruth turned, surprised, falling apart. Chris dimly realized it was himself screaming. Ruth had a smile on her face which matched the one that Andrew was wearing. It was too much. Way too much for him. He ran through the office into the club, kicking over tables and throwing chairs around in his anguish until his senses recovered somewhat and he shakily went behind the bar to get himself a stiff drink. Tequila, two shots in one glass, straight down, then another to back up the first. He had no idea what he was going to do now but going back into the bedroom was not an option. With shaking hands he raided the barman's stash and rolling himself a big fat joint poured yet another double tequila into his glass and wandered over to one of the only upright tables, sobbing, to sit and smoke and drink. The drink and smoke gradually removed the extremely ragged edge from his mixed-up feelings, leaving him numbed and feeling totally betrayed.

Chapter 22.

That was where Ruth found him when she came out from the bedroom thirty minutes later. She surveyed the damage to the club and took in the tear stains on Chris' face, then sat down opposite him, took the remains of his drink and drank it straight down.

"Don't be such a baby; you know what I am like. I came back and you weren't here. I was horny. It's not as if Andrew and I haven't fucked before. We used to do it all the time before you showed up. Do you think I am going to totally change my life because of your moralistic outlook?"

She got up and went behind the bar, filled two glasses with tequila, then came back and sat down putting one glass in front of Chris. Reaching out, she took the makings to roll herself a joint.

"But Andrew is your brother and you are supposed to be my girl and he is supposed to be my friend and you were fucking together." His shoulders heaved and a couple of sobs escaped as he stared bleakly away. Anywhere but looking at Ruth.

"Didn't seem to worry you when Dixie joined us," she came back at him with.

"That is not the same. Andrew's your brother, that's disgusting.

"No it's not. We actually have different mothers so we are only half brother and sister. We keep each other company from time to time as our needs dictate. He is quite good at doing it, all things considered. Not as good as you are though lover. Look, as I told you before, it is my life and I was living it perfectly well long before you came onto the scene. I told you I was going to keep living the same way as I have been. If you don't like it you can always leave." She threw the ultimatum at him.

"But I thought you loved me," he wailed.

"Oh grow up. We are good for each other and I have developed a soft spot for you but that doesn't mean that you own me or can tell me what to do. If you can't cope with me as I am there's no point in you being here. Is there?"

Chris sat stunned. He had always had the impression from Ruth that she cared about his welfare deeply but now he was seeing a different side to her. It was a side that scared him. A totally self-centered, selfish person with no thought for any other individual but herself. What had he done? He needed time to think, to work out his priorities.

"I need time to consider all this stuff, it is too much too quickly. I need to get away for a few days so I can get my head around it all. I can't stay here. How can I sleep in the same bed where you and Andrew....." His voice tapered off as he choked up. Then he raised his tear stained face to meet Ruth's unwavering gaze. There was no comfort there.

"Look, I don't have any money of my own. Could you give me some cash, please, so I can stay at a hotel for a few days until I have worked out what I am going to do?"

Ruth smiled at him, "I was kinda hoping you'd stay but I understand. You are growing up pretty quickly Chris. Let's hope you can complete the process. I'll go and see how much cash is available."

With that she got up and went into the office, returning shortly with a bundle of notes in a paper sleeve which she threw on the table in front of him.

"There is about \$2000 there, which should keep you going for three to four days."

He sat staring at the money for a couple of minutes, amazed that she would just dismiss him like that, with no argument or pleas to stay. With no choices left, he picked up the barman's stash of dope that was sitting on the table and the bundle of cash and after putting them in his pocket walked through the office to the bedroom without a backward glance.

The bed was made, the bedroom was tidy and Andrew was gone, so Chris grabbed a bag, threw some clothes and his coke box into it and left by the back entrance. He didn't go back into the club nor did he say goodbye to Ruth.

He couldn't bear to look at her for now, it would break his heart.

It was still stormy outside but he didn't care, he needed to get out of town for a while. Without thinking, in a daze of confusion, he drove down the coast road on autopilot until he started to feel tired and only then started looking for a decent hotel. He found a multi-storey one which looked okay, just across from the beach at a seaside resort. As it was the off-season and the hotel was under occupied there was enough money in his pocket for a good room with room service and anything else he wanted, so he decided on the fifth floor penthouse with ocean views. As he was booking in, his attention was drawn to the date, October 27th, four more days to Halloween. He and Ruth were due to have a week's holiday together then. Another of the things he had to think over. Feeling tired, half drunk and a bit stoned still, he went to bed shortly after checking in.

Chris woke the next morning feeling surprisingly refreshed. He had slept for fifteen hours straight. The DO NOT DISTURB sign he had hung on the door seemed to have worked and he had been totally undisturbed.

He rang room service and ordered a late breakfast then got up and putting on his hotel dressing gown, sat at the table in front of the broad expanse of windows watching the angry ocean. This late in the season it hadn't been difficult getting the best room in the hotel and he was glad he had. Breakfast came and he ate it while staring morosely out of the windows, not really seeing the heaving, pewter colored sea and grey skies. The weather was wild and wonderfull but he was in no mood to enjoy it.

He felt hollow, used up.

The cocaine box sat waiting for him but he wanted a clear head and resisted the temptation to have a snort or two. Television and a late lunch provided some distraction and he managed to hold out until about four that afternoon. Then he had to have a hit as his thoughts were fragmenting and he was getting jittery. Bad news, he was definitely addicted to cocaine, so much for it being non-addictive.

He passed the remainder of the late afternoon of October 28th quietly in his room, pondering over some of the problems going on in his life. As he sat looking out of the window, daylight gradually faded to black until the only indication of the sea was the sound of the waves crashing on the shoreline across the road from the hotel. Sitting in the now dark room, he started to feel a bit claustrophobic and decided to go for a drive to clear his head. The desk clerk was the only person who saw him leave the hotel and only noted the time because it was near the end of his shift which finished at six that evening.

Chris headed off down the coast, driving to the sound of music playing on the radio, the car headlights picking out the twists and turns of the highway. He had the road to himself. The weather was still stormy, cold and blustery but thankfully, the rain had stopped.

Chris arrived back at the hotel about nine thirty and feeling hungry, ordered a meal from room service. He tipped the waiter well for bringing the meal up and after watching television for half an hour while he ate his meal, he went to bed, thoroughly tired and emotionally drained.

The next day he was woken by bright light streaming through the penthouse windows, the predominant grays of the previous week had been replaced by the brilliant sunshine of a late autumn day with clear blue skies. The sea had become somewhat calmer and less

angry and foreboding, still running well up the beach but not violently crashing onto the sands anymore.

The good weather had an immediate effect on Chris; he was feeling a lot better than he had for ages. The previous day had been remarkable in that he had had only one hit of coke. Soon he would be able to kick the habit if he worked at it hard enough. October 29th passed uneventfully. Room service provided his meals and a bottle of tequila and Chris went nowhere and did nothing more than laze around the room, devoting his time to thinking through his problems.

Ruth was too much for him, it was obvious. As much as he loved her and thought she loved him, he wasn't going to be able to live that life. It was unthinkable, sharing her sexually with her brother Andrew, even if he was only her half brother. It was disgusting and against every taboo he had ever been brought up with. He couldn't quite go that final step into total depravity. He would just have to try and rebuild his life as best he could and use some of the recent experiences in his life to hopefully mature more. Lord knows, he felt a lot older than he did three months ago. Had he really been that innocent and naive? Clearing through his problems helped with the need for drugs and he got through the day without using cocaine at all, managing with just a couple of joints and a shot of tequila or two. He slept well that night, untroubled by the bad dreams which had been haunting him lately. The start of his third full day away from Ruth was also bright and clear. The view from his lounge room window was beautiful and Chris felt tremendous. He was starting to realise how foolish he had been in falling for Ruth like that and how easily he had been led around by the nose, or maybe another part of his anatomy. Spending this amount of time away from her had been beneficial for clearing the fog out of his mind. He was starting to see things more clearly now and the road ahead of him, although not easy, was becoming more sharply delineated.

He would go back to town and try to patch things up with Steve first and foremost, then maybe go and see a priest about the crucifix thing, it couldn't hurt to do so and it may even be good for him to unburden his soul. He picked up the complimentary newspaper that was left outside his door each morning and began to read. He was becoming interested in the outside world once again. Today was October 30th. Shame about Ruth and him really, a week's holiday would have been fun. She really was a most interesting and uninhibited person. He tried not to dwell on the uninhibited bit as his body started to react. The rest of the day was relatively uneventful, sliding by in blissful and peaceful relaxation, reading the paper, ringing down for food and drink and watching television. That is, until the evening ten o'clock news program on the television. The leading item was a report about the murder of a woman at the Cobb apartment building. She had been discovered after police had called at her sixth floor apartment and broken the door down because her mother's telephone calls had gone unanswered for two days and none of the doormen had remembered seeing her leave the apartment building. She had been dead for at least that long. Police believed it was a ritual killing, as the woman had been hacked to pieces with great violence and three rooms were covered in blood and had body parts in them. Her name wasn't released by the news program but further details would be forthcoming in the morning news show. Chris was floored. That was his old apartment building and the only other residents on the 6th floor were a couple of gay guys. It was Patricia, someone had killed her. Shit. He hoped like hell his name wouldn't come up. Nervous energy started flowing through him and he couldn't relax, pacing up and down the room, changing channels, trying for more information, worrying. The coke box came out and he had a

snort or two. Then he sent down for another bottle of tequila and started drinking. By the time six in the morning on the 31st of October rolled around, half the bottle of tequila was gone and Chris had not slept a wink. The weather was once more breaking and rain was gusting against the windows in the predawn grayness. The television was on and the news program started. It could not have been worse. Once again the story of the murder was the lead item. It was presented by a female news reader, with a suitably horrified face, who attempted to appear quite shocked.

"The woman, who was horribly murdered in an apparent ritual killing at the Cobb apartment building, was Patricia Simpson, a thirty six year old air hostess. An autopsy has confirmed she was murdered on the evening of October 28th."

Damn, he thought, his mind racing, that was the night I went for a drive down the coast. No alibi. Damn and double damn! The news report continued. "It is believed the perpetrator or perpetrators gained access to the apartment through the locked basement garage using a key card belonging to a previous flatmate of the victim. Police would like to interview this man, Christopher Wilkins, in connection with the murder." A picture of Chris, from his driving license, was flashed onto the screen. "He is most likely driving a car similar to this." A picture of a red Corvette, same make and model as his own, appeared on the screen.

"No charges have been laid at this point in time but the public are advised not to approach this person and to inform the police immediately if he is spotted. Now for the rest of the news."

Chris panicked. He ran around the penthouse throwing his clothes into his bag along with the cocaine and the dope. The hotel staff would realise soon enough, he had to get out before one of them called the police. He pulled his wallet out of his pocket to check how much cash was left from the two thousand dollars Ruth had given him and as he opened it, a small piece of blue paper caught his eye. Of course, Detective Mike Carruthers, the Detective Chris had spoken to ages ago when he had called regarding Sally's death. Could he help?

He quickly crossed to the telephone and obtaining an outside line, rang the number on the piece of paper. The telephone at the other end rang five or six times before a sleepy voice answered.

"Yo."

"Detective Carruthers?"

"Who is this?"

"Chris, Chris Wilkins, remember? We talked about Sally's suicide a few weeks ago."

"Ah, Mr. Wilkins. Lucky to catch me, I was just about to go home. Night shift you know. You are quite a popular fellow at the moment. I have to advise you to turn yourself in as you are a suspect in a murder investigation."

"I can't. I didn't kill Patricia but no one will believe me. I've gotten involved with some pretty bad people recently. Not on purpose, it just happened." He was thinking of some of the patrons at 'Satans' and what they were probably capable of. Maybe one had followed him home when he still lived at the apartment and lined up Patricia for later, when she was on her own.

"Sorry son, if you could provide some information or get some evidence to help us find the real killers, I could go to bat for you but at the moment, you are looking pretty good for this one."

"But I didn't do it," repeated Chris through gritted teeth. "I liked Patricia. She was a lovely person. I am just as interested in finding her killer as you are. I want to help. What sort of evidence would help me to prove my innocence?"

"A tape recorded confession would be ideal. We could fit you with a wire. Where are you calling from, we could come and do it there?"

Chris hung up the telephone, breathing hard. He had nearly fallen for that one, had been a hair's breadth away from revealing his location. The call was probably being traced as they spoke. His mind desperately sifted through the available options left open to him. He couldn't stay in the hotel much longer and would have to leave very shortly.

Steve! He could contact Steve. His best friend knew what sort of problems he was having and being the sort of person Steve was, help would be forthcoming. He rang the number. The phone at the other end rang and rang. Finally, Steve's voice answered.

"You have rung Steve and Mary; sorry we are not in right now....."

Damn and damn, they were probably at some Bible class or other.

".....Please leave a message after the beep; we would love to hear from you." A loud beep followed.

"Steve, this is Chris. I am in a heap of trouble. Someone has brutally murdered Patricia and they are blaming me for it. I didn't do it. I am going to try and sort it out. I have talked to a Detective Mike Carruthers, he seems okay and has given me some advice but the police want me to turn myself in. If I do....." Beep...Beep...Beep... sounded through the phone as the machine stopped recording, announcing that the recording device was full. Chris hurled the phone at its cradle in frustration.

It was time to go.

Now!

Grabbing his things, he went down to the lobby in the lift, an embryonic plan forming in his mind. No one appeared to be paying much attention to him. Good. He purchased another two bottles of tequila, charging them to his room and then paid the whole of the bill for his stay with cash. Then he left.

It was by that time seven thirty in the morning and the day was just beginning to lighten up, he would need to hide out until dusk and think his plan through carefully. Luckily the car had nearly a full tank of gas, so he drove up into the hills behind the ocean on little used country roads, looking for a hiding place. He found one, an overgrown private lane going back into a pine forest. He backed down it, heedless of the branches scratching his pride and joy, just happy that they sprang back in front of the car, effectively hiding it from the road and the rest of the world.

Damn it was cold. He fished around in his bag, pulling out a warm jacket and retrieving his coke, immediately snorting up a super hit then starting in on the tequila. His brain was lit up and he suddenly remembered handing Ruth the key card for the underground garage, to put in the glovebox for him. The very last time they left his old apartment building. He checked the glove box, no key card. She must have it. Ruth! Not Ruth, surely not. As he sat there, gazing into the empty glove compartment, little fragments of her conversation and comments came back to him. Ruth! She had threatened Patricia and obviously they disliked each other but his fingerprints were the ones all over the apartment. The police would have so much circumstantial evidence on him, they would probably shoot him on sight.

He would have to get Ruth to admit she had killed Patricia and tape the conversation. One of those little voice-activated tape recorders would probably be okay to record an admission

of guilt on. He could hide it in the breast pocket of his jacket. Ruth may even have been involved in Sally's death also. Less than a week ago he would have had none of these thoughts but after being away from her for four days he could see a pattern emerging. The bitch had been using him. She had used her gorgeous body to get him to do whatever she wanted. He would get her for this. Oh yes, she would pay for making him look stupid. Wait until dark, drive up to the city and find an open store that sold electronic stuff. He had an idea where he could find such a store open late and it was on the way to the club. Perfect. He could buy a small tape recorder and a tape there then cruise over to "Satans" and take Ruth for a drive under some pretext or other, get her talking and tape the conversation. Hopefully she would say something he could use and then he could turn himself in with his evidence and let the law sort it all out. He had time to figure out the details before dark.

Good plan.

Only five more hours to wait.

Chapter 23.

Three hits of great quality, number 1, A-grade cocaine and a bottle of tequila later, a sleepless Chris nosed the car out of its hidey hole, under the cover of darkness, about five thirty that evening and headed for town. Travelling by backroads until he reached the city and then keeping off the main thoroughfares he found the store he was looking for without too much difficulty, parked the car and went in.

Before long the attractive assistant was demonstrating a number of the smaller recording devices. Chris was pleased that things were going well and chose one of the better devices which had the greatest pick-up range. He asked the assistant to put a tape and batteries into the one he had chosen so that it was ready to record when he turned it on. Just as he was about to pay for his purchase, a look of consternation passed over the shop assistant's face and she backed away from him and the counter where he was standing. Turning, he saw his face plastered across every television set in the store. Oh no! Not now of all times. The shop assistant had recognized him. He threw the requisite amount of money for his purchase onto the counter, tucked the recorder into his pocket and left in a hurry. Running

for his car, his head spinning from the drugs and tequila, Chris tripped and fell, breaking his fall with his hands and badly grazing them.

No time, no time.

He fumbled his keys out and got the car started, leaving with a squeal of tyres and heading out in a direction opposite to that of ‘Satans’. Hopefully that would throw the cops off his trail for a little while. He headed around the block, trying to stay within the speed limit while he transferred the tape recorder to the top pocket of his jacket. Blood from his grazed hands stained his shirt but he had no time to worry about minor details like that as he checked that the voice activation function would come on with one press of a button. Chris arrived at the back of the club around nine o’clock and parked the car on the street outside the old store front. He heard a couple of police cars with sirens wailing but they faded into the distance and he was pleased that they hadn’t got onto him yet.

Maybe, just maybe, he could get a confession from Ruth before he got arrested. If he couldn’t, he would be in a whole heap of trouble. Did they still have the death sentence in this state?

He entered the club by the back way and found Ruth in the main room overseeing the decorations for the Halloween bash later. She spotted Chris and her face split into a delighted smile as she came running over to greet him. It even appeared genuine. As she got closer, she saw the expression on Chris’ face and the condition he was in and slowed down to a quick walk, eventually to stand facing him. His face wore a puzzled expression as he looked at her, drinking in this beautiful, exotic woman who had stolen his heart.

“Have you seen the news lately?” he asked her, his voice slurring slightly from the effects of the drugs and booze and lack of sleep. He reeked of alcohol.

“No, why?”

“The police are after me. Patricia, the lady who owned the apartment where I used to live, was brutally murdered and they think that I did it.”

She took his hands and looked at the grazes, concern written on her face. Then she licked the wounds and ran her tongue over her lips.

“Stay here; no one will know where you are. We can hide the car and in a few months when you have grown a beard and we get the car resprayed and you can get back to having a life.”

He grabbed her arm and looking around the inside of the club at the staff who were watching them he said. “I want you to come for a drive with me. I need to talk to you but not here. The car is outside and I can’t leave it there. The police are hunting for me. It would be best if I went away for a while and that will require some cash if you have any spare.”

She looked him up and down, as if weighing up the options, then she made a decision.

“I will go get my jacket and some money for you and we can leave almost immediately. I don’t have to be back until midnight for my first number.”

She called one of the club employees over and informed him that she was going out until about fifteen minutes before midnight then turned and headed for the office. As she brushed past Chris he felt sparks of electricity jump between them. Five minutes later they were in the car. She took his hands and studied them as he spoke to her like a broken man.

“I thought I would make a run for it, you know, get on a major highway with lots of traffic and just cruise. Maybe sell the car tomorrow and buy something a little less ostentatious.” Ruth looked at him and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"I can't stay at the club," he continued. "You know why. All this stuff has hit in the middle of me trying to sort my feelings out, which I haven't done yet. I would rather chance running for now. Maybe come back in a few months when the heat dies down" Chris was lying through his back teeth and hoped that his storey sounded plausible enough to convince Ruth.

"First thing I need to do is top the car up with petrol so I don't have to stop for a long time. Then I will probably head west, skirting around the south of the city by backroads and then taking the Freeway. I could be four, five hundred miles away come morning." With that he set off, looking for an out of the way gas station. Before long he found one and filled the petrol tank to the brim with premium unleaded.

As he headed for the cashier's window he noticed the pale-faced cashier hanging up the phone and quickly locking the door to the office. She looked really scared. Shit, the girl had made him. He threw a handfull of bills in the general direction of the cashier's window and ran back to his red Corvette. He jumped in, gunned it to life and took off in a haze of burning tyre smoke, trying to get as much distance between himself and the service station as he could in the shortest possible time.

"I got spotted," he told Ruth, who did not seem at all perturbed. In fact she looked quite excited by the turn of events.

About two blocks along, he was just starting to relax when he heard a siren behind him and looking in the rear-view mirror, saw a police car pull out of a side street in obvious pursuit. His only hope now was to lose the police car and get a confession from Ruth. He reached into his pocket and as surreptitiously as possible, switched on the tape recorder at the same time as he sped up to escape the following police car. Ruth seemed amused by the pursuit and was tapping her fingers on her leg in time to some unheard beat or other. Chris looked over at her and asked.

"Did you know Patricia was dead?"

"Yeah. I killed her." She replied.

His head snapped around. "WHAT!"

Quite conversationally, Ruth replied. "I used your card to get into the underground car park then took the elevator up to the sixth floor. When she answered the door, I kicked it really hard as it opened. I think being smacked in the face by the lock stunned her."

Chris felt sickened by Ruth's easy confession. At the same time, he was trying to stay ahead of the police car which was right on his tail. Another police car had also joined the chase but was lagging behind a little.

Luckily traffic was light around here but Chris had already run two red lights and was starting to run out of options for escape, so he headed for the city overpass which eventually joined up with the west bound freeway. The overpass would allow him to use the 'vette's speed and maneuverability and with any luck at all, he could be down an 'off' ramp and gone before the police knew where. All he needed was a little space between him and the police for it to work. He swung right around the next corner and floored the accelerator. The rear wheels spun and then the car jumped ahead as the tyres bit and he made the next on-ramp of the city overpass, flying up it at ever increasing speed, fighting to keep the car under control.

"What happened next?" he asked Ruth, almost conversationally. Surprising really, considering what was happening at that point in time.

"It was easy; I put some duct tape over her mouth and just started slicing pieces off her with a straight razor. Made a bit of a mess though, I left pieces of her all over the place. It took her a while to die. Then I chopped her head off." Chris gagged.

"So you are saying that you killed her all by yourself?"

"Fucking A. Interfering old bitch deserved to die." Having said that, she leaned forward with a strange grin on her face and pushed the black CD, which had been sitting in the car stereo for days, fully into the CD player. She then turned the volume switch until the music at the start of the song was unbearably loud.

The police cars were gaining, so Chris accelerated while debating whether to pull over or not, as he now had the evidence he needed on tape.

He was too slow.

Ruth grabbed at the outside of the jacket pocket that contained the miniature tape recorder, closing her hand over the device inside. In a split second Chris realized her intent and they started to fight over it. The car was now swerving from side to side as they tussled inside it over control of the recorder in his pocket.

His only hope of proving his innocence.

The music had started off loudly and as they were struggling, the final song of the CD started.

Words, clear as a bell.

Slowed motion.

Hardly moving.

Thick syrupy feelings again.

Time was standing still.

At last I'll introduce myself
The major player in this crazy game
The one that has the blackest heart
Everyone shakes when they feel my flame.

You want another little war, industrial grade violence
You wantin' lies and hate, witnesses silence
Pain and fear and killin' without license
Murder, torture, governmental silence?

No church can get involved in this act
Nothing can stand up to me. That's a fact.
I'd be pleased if you'd call me Mr. D
Short for DEVIL with a capital D.

At last Chris fully understood and as the truth dawned, Ruth started changing.

The world shifted back into real time and he was suddenly at the wheel of a car travelling way too fast. He had to stop her getting at the tape recorder, his whole future depended on it, on the evidence it contained.

Her hands became red scaly talons, one gripping his jacket pocket while the other slashed at his face.

"Chris. Don't make me hurt you. I do like you but I can never be other than what I am." It was bizarre, surreal, her talking to him while they were locked in an escalating struggle

while she was ‘changing’. He put up his arm to ward off some of the blows and stole a glance at her face. Her eyes glowed red above an open fang filled mouth and two small, red growing horns protruded through her black hair. With an evil chuckle, she ripped the pocket, containing the little tape recorder, completely off his jacket and his attention followed the scaly hand containing it, as the hand glowed a fiery red. The tape recorder burst into flames, filling the car with thick, acrid, burnt-plastic smoke which caused Chris breathing difficulties.

The Ruth being sat back laughing, opened her hand and threw the white hot, metal remains of the tape recorder at Chris. As the metal sprayed and burnt him, his attention was totally diverted from driving the car. He didn’t see the red traffic cones and the orange warning lights which blinked to alert drivers that the inside lane was closed. He didn’t see the approaching bend where the wall was being replaced on the curve, due to an accident involving a semi-trailer a few days ago. The fifteen metre gap was filled by wooden formwork and reinforcing mesh, waiting for concrete to be poured. It was no barrier to a Corvette travelling at that speed. By the time Chris looked up, all he could do was watch in horror as the big car punched its way through the wood and steel mesh in a shower of broken fiberglass and sailed through the retaining wall of the overpass, heading for the shopping precinct far below.

The large, steel, modern work of art sat right at the entrance to the pedestrian mall. An empty attempt at making the place appear classy. Most of the shops were closed, only the fast food outlets were open but doing a steady trade. The Corvette fell out of the sky overhead, directly onto the art work below, which impaled it through the passenger compartment missing both Chris and the Ruth being. The airbags went off as fiberglass was flying all around and the front of the car was instantly crumpled into more of the work of art. The steel had penetrated the car just behind the seats and it sat twelve to fifteen feet above the ground. A fire started under the bonnet and Chris could smell the smoke.

He had to get out.

He could not move, his legs were trapped under the dashboard, movement was impossible. Looking over at the thing that was Ruth, he pleaded with her for release as the cabin area filled with smoke and it became hotter. The convertible top was gone, ripped off in the impact and his legs were starting to burn. The pain was indescribable.

The Ruth being just smiled at him and pressed the EJECT button. The black CD popped out and she removed it and threw it into the gathering crowd of onlookers where it was picked up by someone who looked like a college student. The young man examined it and with a blank expression on his face, pocketed the CD.

Chris was screaming as his flesh burnt and looking over he saw Ruth’s hair burn off. Then her skin cracked, peeling back and disintegrating as did her clothes, revealing red, scaly skin and a thrashing tail. The fiend was obviously female and still beautifull in all its glory, even with the horns. Chris was in indescribable pain when she blew him a kiss, just as the full petrol tank exploded. He didn’t die instantly but was consumed in a ball of burning petrol.

The pain was hideous.

Suddenly, Chris was standing beside the car with the Ruth being, watching the car’s single occupant, his body, burning.

The Ruth being looked at him, smiling darkly.

"I had fun with you. I really do like you, you know. Pity you couldn't go all the way. We could do with a few more trusted minions. The CD was Andrew's idea. He's right into marketing. We are trying to get away from the signed contract thing, very old fashioned. A human soul cannot be taken without permission and it has to be given up. You were warned three times in the second song on Side 'A', as the rules require. You know, just before you got the job at Fleeting Image. The idea of a CD doing our recruiting for us seems to be working out rather well. The Old Man is very pleased with the way things are working out."

"What do you mean?" his spirit asked, "and what is going to happen to me?"

"Well, Big Boy, I have to get back to the club, it is Halloween you know and there are souls waiting for us to collect or get down payments on. And you? You are off to see my Old Man, or as he likes to be known these days, Mr. D."

Epilogue.

Chris was insubstantial. He didn't know where he had been. There were vague memories of fire. He looked around himself and saw an indistinct group of people and the view out of the window. Memories of a place where he had once worked, surfaced. They were on the sixteenth floor of the Fleeting Image Advertising Agency.

The group of people became more distinct as he solidified slowly. He felt uncomfortable.

"What is happening please?" he croaked. "Who are you?"

Ruth strode into his field of view. Black hair, white skin, almost oriental emerald eyes.

"Hello Big Boy, remember me?"

"Yes. I have memories of loving you and also of conflict."

"Excellent. I came to ask for you, as a special favour. Highly irregular but within the rules."

The rest of the group moved into focus. He recognized Andrew and Louise but he didn't know the tall man in the three-quarter black coat and wide-brimmed Stetson hat. The long, thin face below the shading brim of the hat looked distinctly evil and the red eyes bored straight through him. He felt like a book that had just been read.

Ruth moved beside the tall man and put her arm around his waist giving him an affectionate squeeze. "This is my Father. You would know him better as the Devil. Louise is his current favourite, maybe his next wife, who knows. You already know Andrew. My other brother and sister are busy elsewhere. As to what is happening. Well, we moved our centre of operations to the surface. We own half shares in this company, what better way to recruit more souls to our aid."

"ENOUGH." The Devil spoke. "WE ARE NOT HERE TO PRATTLE."

"Don't be like that Daddy. Chill. You are so old fashioned."

“ATTEND TO THE BUSINESS THAT BROUGHT IT HERE,” the Devil said pointing at Chris. **“WHAT DO YOU WANT DAUGHTER?”**

Ruth stepped back and faced her Father. “I want his soul Daddy. I liked this one. Lots. If I take his soul inside me it will increase my powers. I can use his soul energy when I need it, so I can be better at what I do.”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN? LIKE. THAT IS NOT A WORD FOR EVIL DOERS.”

‘Sorry Daddy. What I meant was that he gave me more pleasure than any human has in the hundred or so years since I was born.’

“AH. THAT I UNDERSTAND. DO YOU THINK IT IS WISE? REMEMBER THAT A SOUL INSIDE OF YOU CAN BE A DANGER IF IT CAN GAIN CONTROL.”

“Yes. I know that Daddy but I am a Devil’s daughter and you have trained me well. I think I can cope with it.”

“WHAT DO YOU THINK ANDREW?”

“If Sis reckons she can do it, I would be inclined to think it would be okay.”

“AND YOU LOUISE, MY LITTLE TORMENT.”

Louise glanced over at Ruth and seeing the look on her face, gave her assent.

Chris plucked up his courage and spoke. “Don’t I get a say?”

The Devil smiled a really wicked smile. **“IT SPEAKS. IT MUST HAVE BALLS AFTER ALL. YOUR CHOICE SONY, IS ONE OF TWO THINGS. EITHER YOU AGREE TO JOIN WITH RUTH OR YOU SPEND THE REST OF ETERNITY IN THE FIRES OF DAMNATION UNTIL YOU ARE CALLED UPON TO FIGHT FOR ME IN THE FINAL BATTLE.”**

How does a semi-substantial spirit gulp? Chris did. “Well if you put it that way, I guess being with Ruth is my choice of two evils.”

There was no great flash of light, no chanted spells, not even any gestures made but suddenly Chris was looking at the room from a different perspective. It took only a fraction of a second to realise that he was not alone. A warm sensual feeling engulfed him as Ruth’s spirit slid around his and meshed everywhere. The body he was in groaned with pleasure. He looked through eyes not his own and realized with a start that he was now in Ruth’s body and she was enjoying his presence.

“BE CAREFULL DAUGHTER. YOU MUST ALWAYS BE IN CONTROL!”

Chris felt himself mentally handcuffed, patted on the head and shackled to a heart made of stone.

“I am Father. I am.”

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