Saturday Nights Alone

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SATURDAY NIGHTS ALONE

By

Daniel C. Roberts

A thesis presented to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

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of a thesis submitted by

Daniel C. Roberts

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has found to be satisfactory.

________________________________________  ______________________________
Date                                                John Bennion, Chair

________________________________________  ______________________________
Date                                                Bruce Jorgensen

________________________________________  ______________________________
Date                                                Douglas Thayer
As chair of the candidates graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Daniel C. Roberts in its final form and have found that (1) its formats, citations, bibliographic style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

Date

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ABSTRACT

SATURDAY NIGHTS ALONE

Daniel C. Roberts
Department of English
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This novel blends first-person narrative prose with conventions of screenwriting to create a voice consistent with its main character, Rick Morgan, who’s trying to escape his life as a real estate agent by becoming a screenwriter. As Rick struggles to write a new screenplay he finds it difficult to divorce his creative mind from the troubles of his personal life. As a result his preoccupations with destroying his boss and taking back the girl the boss stole from him, work their way into Rick’s new project. The motif of art imitating life imitating art forces Rick to question long held beliefs on business, women, and the creative process as he realizes that life is not like the movies even though the movies are often like life.
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Chapter 1

Saturday

INT. BLOCKBUSTER VIDEO STORE—NIGHT

It’s Saturday, the holy night of romance, so walking into the video store alone is like Clint Eastwood entering an unfriendly saloon. Not something I’d usually do, but Jerry wants me to have a new idea for class on Thursday; however, his critique of my last screenplay, “emotionless and unrealistic,” and his suggestion that I scrap the whole thing and start over has me second-guessing every creative impulse I have. I was tiring of the blank computer screen, so it was either kill myself or come here.

I’m already questioning my decision.

Jerry says I should write something from my life, but a man whose only motivation for living is the commission isn’t as interesting as a group of criminals having to pull off a job because they’re in debt to the world’s most notorious crime boss. Movies are my inspiration; sometimes just being in the video store is enough.

The line to the horseshoe-shaped checkout counter is almost as depressing as an empty computer screen.

“Welcome to Blockbuster,” the slack-jawed high school kid behind the counter says. Years in real estate have given me a bad taste about transparent salesmanship, and the phony greeting you get at Blockbuster is the epitome. I curse him silently, grin, and move on.

Through the river of bodies passing in the store’s open annex I see the drama section, my promised land. My eyes burn from the noxious amalgamation of perfume, cologne, and sweat, but with the bulletproof confidence of the Terminator I steam forward.
I scan titles and cover art not blocked by meandering morons. I move as quickly as I can, while still giving proper consideration to each possibility.

Jerry says when you’re writing you should think about nothing else, so I try to stay focused in spite of all the voices around me, but I still catch a few sound bites:

“Al Pacino hasn’t done anything worthwhile since *Godfather II.*”

“I hated the ending.”

“Everything he does is so predictable.”

“Can’t we get something with Adam Sandler?”

“We’re in the market for a new house.”

I stop and look at the two businessmen disguised in Saturday attire: khakis and golf shirts. I pick up the first reasonable film I see, *Fargo,* in a vain attempt to resist my training, but the preset script starts running through my head anyway: *Sorry, but I couldn’t help overhearing that you were looking for a new home.* I grip the case, pinching my eyes shut. I’m here to get a movie idea, so I can get out of real estate—I’m a trapped animal chewing off his leg.

“I mean, I’m an executive now,” the tall guy says. “I’ve got to start living like it, right?” He lets out a smug chuckle, lightly smacking the other on the arm, who gives a chuckle back. They’re like stock comic bullies—the tall, slender one excessively confident and overly sinister, the short, fat one weak-willed and grateful to have the illusion of friendship.

“Are you using an agent?” the short one asks. I glance up from the video case.

“Not yet. We’re just kind of looking on our own, but what do I know about real estate?” Another chuckle. I turn the video case over to read the synopsis. I’m hearing
what could have been one of the golf analogies my former boss and mentor liked to use: 

*Swing while the wind is taking a break. Drive it to the green.* Big Al loved golf and real estate—he taught me everything I am trying to forget.

I start to read the *Fargo* video case again, remembering the criminals and their disconnection from the circumstances that surround them—a consequence-free vacuum.

“Do you know any agents?” The tall man asks.

This is one I can drive to the green. I lower the case. “I’m sorry,” I say, “but I couldn’t help overhearing that you were looking for a new home.”

“That’s right,” the tall man says. He looks at the short guy, then back at me. “Do you know someone?” I wonder if he would better hide his desperation if he knew what I was. I crack a smile.

I nod in a funny-you-should-ask way. I go for one of the business cards in my pocket, as a desperate William H. Macy stares at me from the back of the video case.

Not every character in *Fargo* is disconnected; some are victims of their choices. The two men watch me, their strained patience with nowhere to go making them look like the kidnappers from *Fargo*. I envy the disconnection, and I fear the trap of choices.

“No,” I say, replacing the video case, and move further down the aisle. I watch the two men reflected in the dark window in front of me. They are looking at my back, and I can hear them muttering with clenched teeth.

I pull out the 3x5 cards Jerry has us carry to record “snippets of existence” and write:

*A MAN BECOMES A VICTIM OF HIS CHOICES.*

It’s nothing specific, but it’s an idea from real life, the way Jerry likes it.
The two men walk into the comedy section. I’m sure their conversation revolves around the wackos you meet at the video store. I flip to a new blank card and write.

*AN IDIOT ACCOSTS STRANGERS IN A VIDEO STORE.*

It’s a character flaw more than a story. I move it to the back of the stack.

“Maybe you should try another section,” someone says behind me. I stuff the cards in my pocket and turn around. Audrey.

Audrey’s usually here when I come in during the day. She’s cute, young, flirtatious—weapons she uses to her advantage. Like many women, she knows she can get her way if she throws her sexuality around. She’s fine to talk to, but I don’t trust anything about her, and I don’t let myself be blinded by sex.

“I didn’t think you’d be you here tonight,” I say.

“But you came anyway?” Already flirtatious.

“Yeah, but I’m glad to see you.”

“Really?” Her eyes glint, like an X-man about to use a mutant power. “Couldn’t get along without me?” She folds her arms and bumps me with her body, making sure her breast rubs my bare arm. I don’t move.

“Something like that.” I cringe and look around the store. “Actually, I needed a favor.”

“I’m intrigued.” She says it like a line from *Basic Instinct.*

“I thought I could use you to get out of here quicker.” I motion to the long line. She looks at it. “See, this is what the recruiter meant when he said people would try to take advantage of me because of my position.” She looks around and then takes a step towards me. I stand strong. “If I’d known he was only talking about videos, I
wouldn’t have been so enthusiastic to join up.” She leans to my ear. “There are better ways to take advantage, Rick, much better ways.” She looks me up and down. “I bet you can think of a few.”

Sometimes the only defense a man has is his emotional brick wall.

She smiles, and the seductress in her dissipates. My muscles relax. “No?” A light laugh. “Okay, then, we’ll just go with the video help tonight.” She steps away, just another video store clerk. “What were you considering?” She’s talking like a waitress, but she maintains some sensuality.

“Fargo,” I say, turning back to its location as I motion. The two businessmen are still in the comedy section, but now they are three. “I was thinking about Fargo.” The mysterious third person is demonstrating a golf swing, and from my angle it looks like Alan, my boss.

“Oh, yuck,” she says. “You really need another section.” She looks at me, waiting, but I’m thinking that can’t be Alan—not in my video store, not on a Saturday night. “Fine, you can have Fargo.” She snatches my hand and pulls me back into the shelves.

The businessmen are laughing. The third man still has his back to me, but he’s no longer swinging; he’s given a business card to the tall man, who considers it. It’s Alan—that bastard, picking up clients in my store on Saturday night.

Audrey pulls me along the aisle to Fargo. I let my hand fall from hers. Alan’s not here to pick up clients. I start to look around the store, careful not to lock eyes with anyone.
Audrey lifts *Fargo* off the shelf, holding it like a dead fish. I can see William H. Macy’s stunned face again, as if he too is reacting to Alan being here on a Saturday night. We both know that if he’s here, Jeannine must be here too. I try to fill myself with the kind of cold professionalism I use at the office, but my stomach is quaking too much. All I wanted was a video.

“Well, here it is, but I really think you should reconsider.” Audrey hands the case to me. “What you really need is a romance.”

“What?” I ask, breaking off my search for Jeannine—the one woman whose wiles worked on me—my romance turned wood-chipper.

“A romance.” She holds out her arm like a circus ringmaster drawing my attention, but I don’t follow her direction, afraid that Jeannine might be at the end of it. “Maybe next time,” I manage to say.

“I’m going to hold you to that,” she says, poking her finger at me. I’ve lost track of Alan, but I don’t want to find him if he’s with Jeannine. I avoid seeing the two of them together even more than I avoid seeing her alone.

“Yeah, next time, romance, whatever,” I say. She smiles as if she’s just beat me and I don’t know it. “Can I get out of here now?”

“Sure.” She steps past me, still beaming.

Audrey’s pace is quick, but graceful in the most seductive way, a dominatrix leading a john into the heart of a bordello. I take a few quick steps to keep her between me and the shelves, while I look for Jeannine. If she is here, I want to avoid her, so I can frustrate her plans to once again show off that she is over me.
I’m safe once I reach the counter. I turn my back to the crowd, only a few steps from escape. Audrey takes the video, shaking her head at it. I get out my membership card and five dollars and slap them on the counter.

She looks at it, then at me. “You really do want to get out of here,” she says, scanning my card and the video.

“Yeah,” I say.

“I won’t take it personal.” She smiles and hands me my change. “Well, enjoy the movie, if that’s possible.” With my video in her outstretched hand, she motions me through the security gate. “Come again when you can stay longer,” she says, handing me *Fargo,* “and we’ll get you a romance.” She winks, and I give her a placating grin as if she were a client trying to be funny.

I put my back to the exit and face the crowded video store one last time, still full of masochism—payoff.

My knees go weak and my stomach turns the way it always does. She’s wearing a light green t-shirt and faded blue jeans. I never see her in casual clothes anymore; I miss that. She brushes a strand of light brown hair away from her face, revealing deep blue eyes that are already locked on me. We stare at each other like strangers experiencing love at first sight, but I’m outside before anything can come of it.

I stand on the sidewalk and watch her through the glass door. She seems to be trying to see me through the glass, as if she really wanted to see me and not just hurt me. I step back, my interpretation becoming less likely, as Alan wraps his arms around her waist, nestling his nose into her hair.
I continue to step away from the store, not wanting to watch, a dull ache in the back of my head and an emptiness in my stomach. Jeannine looks to where I was last standing, but I can’t read her face. Then she turns to Alan and they kiss. That’s what she wanted me see. When she breaks the kiss, she looks back to the door. I turn from the scene like an innocent boy who has witnessed a violent crime.

I open my car door and throw *Fargo* into the passenger seat. I plop down behind the steering wheel. I would have taken that client if I knew he’d go to Alan. _A MAN BECOMES A VICTIM OF HIS CHOICES._ It happened to William H. Macy; it happened to Steve Buscemi, and it happened to me long before tonight.

I look back at the glowing Blockbuster. I take out my note cards and tap my pen against them before writing

_A MAN LOSES THE GIRL OF HIS DREAMS TO A MAN HE HATES BECAUSE OF BETRAYAL._

I consider the card and then shake my head, throwing it in the seat with *Fargo*, as if that’ll make me forget what I did to lose her. I grip the steering wheel and start the car. All I wanted was a video. I squeeze my eyes shut—Alan puts hands around Jeannine and they kiss. I look down at the cards scattered over the top of *Fargo*. Jerry’s right, I need to focus on writing. I drive away.
Chapter 2

Monday
INT. DAILIES DINER—MORNING

The air is noticeably cool, and all the light comes from the windows and skylights. I take off my sunglasses and pause to let my eyes adjust. The only customer is a man in a tan suit at the counter. The hostess is straightening and cleaning tables. Mike’s in his usual spot, leaning over his notebook, concentrating on the man at the counter, who stares into his coffee. Despite his suit he seems unkempt, distressed.

I met Mike Birch when I was in Jerry’s workshop the first time. Most of Jerry’s students, like me, believe that screenwriting is art, a belief that Jerry advocates, but Mike was never that serious—a genre writer from the start, a traitor to legitimate cinema. His work always stirred heated criticism, but he’d just smile, returning insults with a “we’ll see who’s right” egotism. His last act of defiance was his final project, a graphic horror movie. Everyone said it was the worst thing they had ever read; Jerry just threw his hands up. A few months later Mike’s movie was in production, and Jerry, in spite of all his rolled eyes and attempts at redirection, had used his connections to produce it. In the end, Mike’s infidelity to art got him the one thing we all wanted: a foot in the door.

The hostess notices me, but I wave her off, pointing to Mike; she nods with a smile and busies herself with salt and pepper shakers.

This diner is how Mike invested his Hollywood cash. His brother Dave does all the work, but I think it was Mike who insisted the diner have the feel of Hollywood’s golden era—a 50s throwback where Marilyn Monroe or James Dean would have gone to lie low. Mostly it’s just a place where Mike can hang out and gather material, which is
all he’s done since he sold his first script three years ago—he’s been unable to sell anything else, and it’s starting to get to him.

There’s a half-eaten piece of pie and a cup of coffee pushed to the side of Mike’s table. He’s got a pen in his hand, watching the man without looking away or blinking. I wait for him to notice me.

“What do you think that guy’s story is?” he asks, still looking at the man in the tan suit.

“What?” I ask, surprised he noticed me already.

“I’m thinking about writing a movie that has multiple stories all tied together by a diner.” He looks at me and then back to the man at the counter.

“You mean Pulp Fiction?”

“More like Four Rooms, but more or less, yeah.” He looks at me. “Would you go see something like that?” There’s a hint of desperation uncharacteristic of Mike.

“I saw Four Rooms, and I went to Pulp Fiction I don’t know how many times. Hell, I even saw Magnolia.”

“Yeah, we all kind of got suckered by that one,” he says, already turned back to the man at the counter. “So what do you think?” There’s a tension in him indicative of a writer who is blocked and knows it.

“Just got fired?” I ask.

He looks up at the ceiling. “That’s boring, Morgan. What else you got?”

I shift from one foot to the other, shoving my hands in my pockets. “Cheating on his wife?”
He shakes his head. “Too obvious.” He looks up at me. “But I like the sexual component. Producers love that. What else?”

“I don’t know.” I yank a chair away from the table.

“Well, you’re a writer. Aren’t you?” He watches me sit. “Come up with something.” The hint of fear in his voice keeps me from telling him the same thing.

“What’s he do?” I ask, sliding forward in my seat.

Even from the side I see the smile creep across his face. “Real estate agent,” he answers without looking. “A broken real estate agent in a diner on a Monday morning.” He finally turns to me, an evil grin. “What do you think the story is there?”

My job has always been a source of humor for him, and that’s one reason I’ve grown to hate real estate.

“Maybe,” I say, “he’s a one-hit screenwriter who’s just been turned down again.” I use the same wall I used with Audrey.

His grin fades. “Alright, let’s not get personal.” He tries to chuckle off the comment, but it stings. “I didn’t know you were so touchy—” he looks back at me. “—still.” He goes back to watching the man at the counter.

The man is still lost in his coffee, which reminds me why I have to be here. “So if he is a real estate agent, what happens next?”

Mike smiles—lips pressed together. “The key to the future is in the past.” His head turns from me to the man at the counter and then back to me again. “So what brought him here?”

“He hates his job.”

“Obviously,” Mike says, meaning how could he not.
“So he looks for something that will fill his empty life—”

Mike jumps in like a contestant on *Win, Lose, or Draw*. “Drugs? Sex? Fight club?”

“No.”

“Not even sex?” More disappointment than disbelief.

“No, Mike. Not even sex.” His head falls back like he’s a teenager in a science class, but I continue. “He seeks escape in something he loves.” Mike’s head pops up. “Painting,” I say before he has a chance to add anything. His head drops again. “He goes to museums; he takes classes; he talks to other painters, but nothing helps.”

“Maybe he just not a good . . . painter,” Mike says, rolling his head around to me.

I take a deep breath, not wanting to get into another round of insults. “He can paint, Mike.” I lean towards him, sitting on the edge of my chair. “He just can’t express himself correctly, so he wanders through life, frustrated that he has to do a job he hates, and depressed that he’s incapable of doing what he loves.”

Mike leans forward again, stroking his chin. “Let me get this straight,” he says. I sit back in my chair. “Your guy is going through all of this and at no point does he go out and just get laid to forget about it just for a little while?”

I rub my eyes. “It’s not about sex, Mike,” I say through my hand.

He leans back, shaking his head. “Then your story stinks.” I stare at him. Mike stares back and then leans forward again. “Here’s the problem. A: the story’s too cerebral. B: your character doesn’t seem likable. And C: you don’t even have a meaningless sex romp to distract the audience from A and B.” He leans away again. “No studio would touch that idea.” I continue to watch him. “You need some sex, pal.”
I open my mouth, but he cuts me off. “I know what you’re thinking, but everyone wants sex.” I close my mouth. “The audience wants sex, Rick. They need it.”

“You don’t get it, Mike.” I shake my head. “Not all of us can sleep with the notion that surrendering to base human desires is the only thing that makes a story good.”

“It’s not what makes a story good, Rick; it’s what makes a story sell.”

“I don’t believe that.” I turn from him, and he starts to laugh.

“See, this is why you’re still going to that stupid workshop.” He stops laughing. “It’s always about what the audience wants.” I stare at him. “Until you learn that, you’ll spend your life trying to please Jerry.” I look at the blank notebook in front of him. He closes it.

He sounds like someone at an intervention for a drug addict, but before I have a chance to find out if he’s trying to save me or mock me, soft tapping on tile floor draws my attention. A young waitress coming to our table. Mike watches his pen as he smacks it against the notebook like he knows what’s coming but he wants to ignore it.

“What are you boys so serious about?” she asks with a smile. “How are you, Mike?” More familiar than I would expect their professional relationship would be; she reminds me of Audrey in that way, but Mike seems more annoyed than discomforted, so I think this is deeper.

“Fine.” He stops tapping on the notebook but doesn’t look at her.

It’s like that scene from Grease when Danny Zuko sees Sandra Dee for the first time after their “summer loving.”

“That’s good,” she says. Then there’s silence while she stares at him and he stares at the man at the counter.
“What are you doing here?” Mike says, looking past her. “Where’s Amy?”

“She wasn’t feeling well.” Her voice is light, unsure. “So I came in to cover her shift.”

Mike grunts, smacking his pen again. He looks at me. His tapping slows and he gets the same look he used to get when the class was about to read his newest screenplay.

“Jamie.” He finally locks eyes with her. “This is my friend, Rick.” It’s interesting that he referred to us as friends.

“Good to meet you, Rick,” she says. Her smile makes me feel like an intruder.

“Is there something I can get you?” she asks Mike.

He looks at me, but her eyes stay fixed on him. “Rick?” he asks.

“No thanks,” I say, but she doesn’t even know I’m here.

“What about you, Mikey?”

He cringes. “No, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? I can . . .”

“No.” He flares and then cools, again like Zuko—all he’s lacking is the greased hair and leather jacket. “Just a little privacy.” He gives her a quick smile, and she smiles back.

He watches her tight, black mini-skirt shift with each step. “Rick, if you’re looking for a good sex scene, that’s your girl.” He looks at me. “Trust me.”

“I’m not looking for a meaningless sex scene, Mike.”

“Oh yeah that’s right, you’re looking for meaningful . . . painting, was it?” He snorts, looks down at his notebook for a second, then looks up at me. “No offense, Rick, but your desperate hold on screenwriting is pathetic.” He drops his pen on the notebook.
and pushes it towards the coffee and pie. I fall back in my chair. “It’s not going to save you. I know.”

“All you know is prostitution,” I say.

He laughs. “Is that right, real estate man?” He says it as if the irony had escaped me. I keep my head down. He leans closer. “Then why did you come to a pimp like me?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“I do.” He taps his hand on the table, and I’m interested again. “Look at your escapist painter.” He motions to the man at the counter, still keeping his eye on me. “What’s he trying to paint?”

“Anything but houses,” I say.

“He’s trying to escape from his life by painting, so he misses the point. See, art’s not replication. It’s interpretation. Life’s the idea, not the finished product.”

“So what’s the finished product, Mike?”

“A collage of odd-shaped truths fitted with bold-faced lies.” He smiles, considering his words. “Hey, that’s pretty damn good, huh?” Impressed by his own philosophy.

I’m doubtful, but he remains confident. I reach into my pocket and toss my note cards on the table, like a rounder showing a winning hand. “There are my odd-shaped truths, and there’s not a thing worth writing.”

He scoops them off the table. “Let’s see about that.”

I move to stop him. “There’s nothing . . .” He silences me with his hand and then starts to read. I lean back and watch.
“No,” he says, moving a card to the back of the stack. He reads the next one.

“No.” He moves that one back, too. “No.” He moves another one. I watch the pile move behind itself, each rejected card a punch in the face. He stops. “Here we go.” I lean forward. “This one has potential.” He lays it on the table in front of him. A MAN BECOMES A VICTIM OF HIS CHOICES. “Every good story puts a character in a position they can’t get out of, and it’s best if they’ve put themselves there.” He eyes shift to the waitress and then back to me. I look at the card on the table. He glances down at the next card. “And here’s a perfect example.” He lays it next to the other card. A MAN LOSES THE GIRL OF HIS DREAMS TO A MAN HE HATES BECAUSE OF BETRAYAL. I lean away from the table, my eyes away from Mike. “This is good. The only thing worse than doing something stupid, is when it robs you of something you love. That’s full of all kinds of regret.” I listen, my stomach knotting. “Your character is going to have to deal with that. It probably tears him up, especially if he’s constantly reminded of it.” I look at the two cards lying side-by-side. “Do you want to brainstorm it?”

“No thanks.” With clenched teeth I try and hold back the image of Jeannine and Alan kissing in the video store.

“Why not?” He slaps the rest of the cards on the table. “This could be a great idea.” He prods me as if our fates were intertwined.

I shake my head. “I don’t want to write a melodramatic romance.”

“Why not? There’s good money in romance pictures.” I look at him. “Oh, hell.” He falls back, rubbing his brow. He brushes the coffee, the pie and his notebook closer to the edge of the table and leans towards me, over the cards. I sit away from him. “Would
you forget the notion of high art, dammit? People want something visceral. They want
to feel happy, or sad, or scared, and, yes, Rick, they want to feel horny. They want to feel
something they don’t feel on a regular basis.” He puts his elbows on the table, his hands
up. “That’s why it’s popular, because people like it.” He drops his arms and sits
sideways in his chair. “And that’s something you won’t learn in Jerry’s class. You have
to learn that on the streets.” His last line is over the top, but he covers it by picking up
his coffee and nestling into his seat. He watches me as he takes a drink. His face
contorts, and he looks down into the cup. He puts the cup on the table. “Damn cold
coffee.” He wipes his mouth with a napkin, his face bitter. He looks at me, still shaking
off the bad taste. “Besides, Rick, how do you know this is a melodramatic romance?”

“It just sounds like one. Doesn’t it?”

He shrugs. “It’s only a melodramatic romance if he goes after her and gets her
back. Is that what you see in this man’s future?” He points to the card.

I wring my hands and cross my arms. “No.”

“Then why worry? I’m sure there are all kinds of stories surrounding this guy,”
he says. I shrug. “How does he react when he sees her? What does he do to make up for
the loss? Like that, and if all he does is accept his loss and move on, that says a lot about
him. It’s strong character development.”

“Yeah, he’s pathetic,” I say to myself but loud enough that he can hear.

“Maybe he is, but something like that is going to have an effect on other parts of
his life.”

I look at him. “Maybe he keeps all the parts of his life separate?”
“Yeah, right. Is he a robot?” He picks up his coffee again and looks into it.

“You should rent *Falling Down*. Now there’s a guy whose choices totally screw him up, and he can’t get away from them.” He points his finger at me. I look down, wondering if I’m going to end up wandering a crowded freeway with an Uzi. Mike continues to look at his coffee cup. “Man, I need some new coffee.” He drums his fingers on the table looking at Jamie who is talking to the hostess. Mike looks at me when she tries to make eye contact. He pauses for a second. “You think Jamie’s cute, right?”

I lift my head, shaking the oddly gratifying image of Michael Douglas threatening people with a baseball bat. “Mike, I really don’t want to . . .”

“Just tell me.”

“Fine.” I look at her. “Yes, Mike, she’s cute—young, blonde, perky—who doesn’t like that? But . . .”

“You should ask her out.” He reaches across the table to grab my wrist.

“No.” I pull back, tipping away from him. “What the hell is with you and this waitress? Are you running some kind of Hollywood call-girl ring from the diner here?”

“No.” He smiles. “Dave would never let me do that.” I don’t return the smile. He sits down again and brushes his hands through his hair. “I slept with her.” He doesn’t seem sorry about doing it, but there’s more. “And now she’s pressuring me for a relationship.”

“So you slept with one of your employees, and now you’re trying to dump her off on me?” He shrugs with a smile like some kind of Macaulay Culkin character. I shake my head. “You really do live in a Hollywood dream-world, don’t you?”

“Just ask her out.” I shake my head. “She’s an actress.”
“They all are,” I say. “Besides, what makes you think she’ll go out with me?”

“Just tell her you’re a writer, too.”

I shake my head. “You’re disgusting.”

He lifts his cup up as if making a toast. “It’s what I love about this town.” He sips his coffee again, and then spits it out. “Dammit.” I smile. He looks at Jamie. “I can’t live like this. Do you believe I’m afraid to get a cup of coffee in my own diner?”

I look at the cards. “I believe anything that makes life a nightmare,” I say, scraping the cards together.

He sits up straight as if hit by an upper-cut. “That’s bleak.”

“That’s life for a painter without a subject,” I say gathering up the last of my odd-shaped scraps of life.

“Don’t you mean a painter without the right subject?” He slides me the card inspired by Alan’s hands on Jeannine and my own stupidity.

I take it off the table. “Maybe I do.” I put it on top of the stack.

“Then you’ve got to keep on looking.” His attention wanders towards the man at the counter. I stand.

“Wait, I think I’ve got it.” He puts his hand on my arm, his face alive. I sit, waiting. “How about this—he just lost the mortgage payment at the dog track.”

“What?”

He focuses on the man. “I’m not sure why the suit just yet, but I’ll figure it out.” He looks at me. “What do you think?”
“Yeah, I think you might have something there,” I say, rolling my eyes while his attention is elsewhere. He smiles and reaches for his notebook. “Except, why not change dog track to underground cock fight.”

He pokes his pen at me. “You’re joking, but I’m going to write that down.”

“Thanks for the help,” I say, pushing my chair in. He’s already started writing.

“No problem. Give my best to Jerry.” Just as sincere as my thanks.

I start towards the door. Jamie and the hostess are looking at Mike, whispering to each other. I wonder if they are both in the same situation. Jamie looks at me. I give her a nod, but she just looks away. No meaningless sex romp today. I push open the glass door and stare into the blue sky, unsure of my next move. Maybe I will rent Falling Down—the hard-core violence could make a nice distraction.

INT. BLOCKBUSTER—AFTERNOON

A warmth rises in me as I enter the empty store. I breathe the vacant air and make slow steps past the deserted check-out counter. I feel like I’ve entered a cathedral: there is only silence, and sunlight, and long-awaited faith. I fill my lungs again and hold the empty breath. This is the feeling I wanted on Saturday night.

I’m alone, and it feels right. I slide my hand across the counter as if I’m experiencing smoothness for the first time. Every noise I make is amplified: my shoes on the carpet, my breathing, even my heart beating could shatter the tranquility.

I step towards the drama section with a renewed hope of inspiration. I could have a rough outline and maybe even an opening scene by the end of the day.
“Back again?” I turn around expecting to see doves flapping in the background like something from a John Woo film. It’s Audrey, no doves hovering, but she is getting a strangely angelic backlighting from the front windows, a glowing goddess in the Blockbuster palace—the irony is almost funny.

“What?”

She smiles. “I said back again.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I look behind me to the drama section.

She follows my glance, and then looks at me with raised eyebrows. “I thought we agreed that you were going to change genres. Remember? Romance from now on,” she says, pointing her finger at me.

“I never agreed to ‘from now on,’” I say.

She has the same “we’ll see who’s right” look as Mike. “Let’s see,” she starts, turning her back on me, “what would be good for you?” She strides away like a model on a runway.

“You know what?” I say. “I’m really not in a romance mood right now.”

“This is to get you in the mood.” She winks, but I dodge it. She turns from me again. “So what kind would you like?” She snaps her head back to me. “Boy and girl hate each other, but then find out they really love each other, like You’ve Got Mail? Strangers destined for each other, like Sleepless in Seattle?” She swings her leg around in a slow step towards me. “How about lovers overcome impossible odds to be together, like City of Angels?” Her eyes are locked as she continues towards me. “Or would you prefer a classic fantasy love story, like Kate and Leopold?” She stops right in front of me, inches between us.
“Does every romance movie have Meg Ryan in it?” I ask. She’s not amused, but I smile. She drops her delicate hand in the middle of my chest.

“No, but she has done some good ones.” She pushes me away and steps back, to look me up and down. Her crooked smile concerns me—something knowing about it.

“I’ve got it.” She points at me. “An underdog love story. The beautiful girl with a jerk of a guy, but she doesn’t see it until the one who really loves her makes some romantic gesture that shows her who she should be with.” I look to where Jeannine was standing on Saturday night.

“What kind of romantic gesture?” I ask, turning to her.

She smiles. “The more romantic, the better, Rick.” I’ve always wondered if Jeannine would be attracted to an artist. “Interest?”

“You have a suggestion, I assume.” I try to sound uninterested.

She smiles. “Come with me.” She walks into the video aisles, and I follow her.

“What you need is a good teen romance.” I stop, and so does she.

“A teen romance?”

“Don’t be such a baby.” She grabs my wrist and pulls me along. “It’ll be good for you.”

“How?” I ask, not wanting this game to get out of hand.

She stops, but doesn’t turn to me. “This is Blockbuster—anything is possible.” She sounds like a Tim Burton character.

“You think sappy romance will be good for me?”

“Sappy teen romance,” she corrects me. “Yes, it’ll be good for you.”

“Oh, really?”
“Yeah, wiseass—they keep you from getting jaded.” Now she turns to me.
“Especially when it comes to love. For them, love is new, it’s mystical, not cynical.”
There’s something appealing about that notion. “Not like that crap you usually check out.” She pokes me in the chest. “That stuff makes you believe in life more than yourself.” I never guessed that under all of her sexual bravado she was a pie-eyed romantic. She snatches a case off the shelf and hands it to me. I take it, feeling like an unsuspecting customer in a witchdoctor’s shop.

“Can’t Hardly Wait?” I read aloud. She nods, rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet—a motion that makes her look like a teenage girl, brimming with ironic innocence. “This is going to inspire me?”

“Yeah.” She stops rocking. “If you’re looking for inspiration in love.” For a second she stops using her sexuality to sell me.

I manage a one-note laugh. “I’m not.” I look at the video case.

“Really?” The question sounds like a setup; I don’t respond. She folds her arms across her chest, cradling herself as if cold. “What about the good-looking girl with brown hair, faded blue jeans, and green shirt?”

My stomach falls—Jeannine. “I don’t know anyone like that,” I say, but she cuts me off before I can change the subject.

“She was here on Saturday. I saw you looking at her,” she says with intonations that imply secrecy. “So what’s going on there?” She watches my body language to see if I’ll give anything away. I don’t.

“Nothing.” I keep my eyes on hers—real estate has given me a great poker face. I lift the video up. “Can I check out now?”
She continues to watch me, but she’s out of her league. She nods. “Ok, you may check out.” She sounds satisfied and doubtful; I haven’t heard the last of it.

She walks past me, snatching the video case from my hands. Her walk is smooth, effortless, boastful in its grace—concealing her intentions by smothering them with sensuality, and making me wonder why she cares.

“Are you coming?” she asks, looking back at me like I was a straggling puppy, beckoning with a come-hither finger.

“Do you have your card?” she asks, stepping onto the platform behind the counter. I give it to her, along with a five-dollar bill.

“What’s this, a tip?” She holds up the bill.

“For the movie.”

She laughs and holds the money out to me. “This is an investment.” I hesitate. She leans towards me. “I’ll find another way for you to repay me.” I pull away from the money. She thrusts it towards me. “It’s my good deed for the day.” I take the bill and pocket it, still watching her.

She meets me on the other side of the gate. “I hope this inspires you.”

I look outside then back at her. “Me too,” I say, wondering if she knows I’m not looking for love.
Chapter 3

Tuesday
INT. JEFFERSON AND ASSOCIATES REAL ESTATE—MORNING

The moment I walk in the door, Claire, our rotund and obnoxious secretary, greets me with her same tired joke: “Decided to do some work today, huh?” She snorts.

I give her a quick look of strained tolerance and keep moving.

“Oh, someone’s grumpy,” she says in a deep, gruff voice, and then giggles. I stop and turn. She switches to sweet and off-topic. “It’s Abby’s birthday, by the way, so it might win you a few points if you wish her . . .”

“Claire,” I hold up my finger. “I’m not interested in winning points.” I start to walk away again, but then stop and turn back to her. “Plus, I don’t even know who Abby is.” I smile, thinking that would shut her up.

“Alan’s new assistant,” she says. My smile fades. I should have known that nothing shuts her up. “She’s worked here for almost three weeks.” She ends with a lilt of condemnation. I sniff in the stale office air, choking back a cough of revulsion. Of all the people who stopped talking to me in the office why couldn’t she be one? “She’s real nice, and she seems to like Raymond quite a bit.” She seems most pleased by the last tidbit. Claire assumes that part of her job is to dispense company gossip, because somehow she knows everyone’s business.

“That’s great, Claire.” I walk away.

Near the pit of cubicles, which Alan refers to as the beehive, because it’s where the junior associates and support staff drones mindlessly buzz about, I see a bouquet of balloons rising from a unit belonging to a young, red-haired girl with a brilliant smile. She is animated as she speaks to Raymond, who is seated on her desk. He looks up, and
before I can look away we lock eyes. I curse myself as he ends his conversation with Abby, hops off her desk, and rushes over.

Raymond’s a sparky little go-getter and my assistant. He also works with Jeannine, which is good, because in an effort to isolate myself from the office, I don’t give him much to do, but that doesn’t keep him from trying to gain my approval—a fine line between humorous and annoying.

“Good morning, Mr. Morgan,” Raymond says, speeding up to catch me.

“Morning, Ray.”

“I was checking the listings this morning, and I think I found a place the Garners might like.” I stop and look down at him. He shrinks a little, worried about overstepping. He doesn’t get that he cares more about this job than I do.

“Thanks, Ray, but I already found them a place.”

He starts to breathe again. “Well, I wasn’t saying you couldn’t find one . . .” He pauses, his eyes darting around, moisture appearing on his forehead. “I mean, I knew you could find them one. It’s just that . . .”

“I know, Ray.”


“No, I can get it myself.”

“Oh, I know.” He starts stumbling over his words again. “Ok.” He fidgets. “I’m just going to be at my desk if you need anything.” He motions to his cubicle. The birthday girl is watching us, waiting for Raymond’s return. I nod at Ray, and he gives me an unsure smile and starts towards his desk.
Then he stops and turns back. “Just so you know, that listing, the one I was
telling you about, I know you don’t need it, but I printed it out and left it on your desk.”
He points to the hallway that leads to the senior associates’ offices. “So you can do what
you want with it. I guess you can just throw it away. Whatever.” He avoids my eyes as
if frustrated by the rambling, which is beyond his control. “It’s a nice place. It’s one of
Miss Randall’s listings.” I again look at the hallway when he mentions Jeannine. My
stomach tightens.

“Thanks, Ray.” He nods and walks towards the smiling redhead. “Hey, Ray,” I
call. He turns and bounds towards me like a trained hound.

“Yes, sir?” he says. I scan the office, and then motion for him to move over to the
coffeemaker with me. I start to pour myself some.

“Is Jeannine in her office?” I take some sugar packets from the basket and open
them casually.

“Miss Randall? Yeah.”

“Is she meeting with someone?” I dump the sugar into my coffee, watching
Raymond.

“No. I don’t think so. She doesn’t have any appointments—that I know of.” He
leans in; his eyes shift to see if someone’s listening. “You know how it’s been for her
lately.” She’s sold even less than Alan the last few months.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” I say, desperate to keep him focused. I stir my coffee.

“Did you want to see her?” he asks, confused. Ray was hired after Jeannine and I
had our falling out, so he never knew us as friends, just cold business associates. I’m
sure Claire filled him in on the underhanded business deal that made me the office pariah
and ended the romance between Jeannine and me. But I’m sure Claire didn’t give him a timeline of how close all that was to when Jeannine started dating Alan.

“No, Ray.” I tap the stir straw on the rim of my cup and put it in my mouth, biting the end with my back teeth. “No I don’t, and that’s the point.” Raymond watches intently. “Raymond,” I start, unsure I should ask him what I’m about to ask him.

“You want me to create a distraction?”

“Ah, yeah,” I say, stepping back and looking away from him.

“I can do that.” I’ve never thought of him as devious, so I’m shocked by his eagerness.

“Really?”

“Yeah, no problem.” His voice is strong and confident, something I’ve never heard in him.

“All right, then,” I say, but he’s already started for the hallway. I scoop up my coffee and follow him, still stunned.

Jeannine’s is the first door on the right; a few feet beyond that, on the left, mine; Alan’s at the end of the hall.

Ray swaggers to her door, turning to give me a final wink.

It’s open, he doesn’t knock.

“Miss Randall.” His innocent tone gives me confidence. I imagine Jeannine looking up from her work, her hair pulled back, rolled in a bun with a pencil, a few strands falling out, drooping around her face, her small, black-rimmed reading glasses halfway down her nose as she looks over them to see Raymond.
“Yes, Raymond, come on in. What is it?” Ray closes the door, so that only a crack of Jeannine’s office is visible. It’s a dramatic move, but makes it easier for me to slip past. I pause once I’m on the other side.

“Raymond, you know I don’t work that way.” I can tell by her tone that he has suggested something unethical, but despite her hatred of such practices she still manages to be kind to Ray.

“Yes, but I just thought . . .” His voice is laced with panic. It’s not the same panicked voice he usually has, but it’s a masterful reproduction; anyone who didn’t know he was on the con, couldn’t tell the difference, but if he really knew her feelings about ethics, he wouldn’t have to fake it.

“I know, but no one should ever resort to that just to sell a house.” An object lesson she taught me a long time ago, which is why I need Raymond now.

“You’re right.” His panic has become contrition—another impressive reproduction. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it, Ray,” she consoles him. “You’re not the first person to have suggested such a thing to me.” There’s a hint of frustration, which still makes me feel guilty.

“I’m glad to see that you’re one of the good guys,” Ray adds. I grimace at the thinly-veiled compliment.

“Thank you, Ray,” she says with thinly-veiled gratitude.

“Well, if you need anything just let me know.” I start to sneak away from the door, impressed with Ray.
“Actually, Ray, I was wondering, has Mr. Morgan come in today?” I freeze. I don’t know why she’d be looking for me.

“Um, I don’t think so,” he says. I hold my cup to my lips, sipping. “Would you like for me to tell you if he does?” I stop drinking and just hold the hot coffee in my mouth.

“Yeah. I need to talk to him.” I swallow. We haven’t had a conversation that came from a “need” since I realized apologizing wouldn’t work. After three years we’re just getting to meaningless chit-chat and even that is filled with so much tension that neither of us can stand it for more than two minutes.

“Really?” Ray asks, using the same tone I would have used if I were in there.

“Yes,” she says as if he isn’t aware of the history between us. “Will you let me know if he comes in?”

“Sure.” He still sounds confused.

Jeannine’s door opens and Raymond takes a few steps towards his office before turning to me. He shrugs, pointing to the door as if asking me if I want to go in. I shake my head. He lets it drop and walks into the lobby. I look back to Jeannine’s open door. For a long time I waited for reconciliation, and now it seems that she wants to re-open the lines of communication, but seeing her and Alan together makes me unsure.

I slip my hand into my pocket and retrieve the information that forced me into the office in the first place: Walter’s new restoration. I take another sip of coffee and kick open my office door. I stop when I see Alan sitting in my chair, going through one of my drawers.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask.
He slides the drawer in as if he’s done nothing wrong. “I guess I could ask you the same question,” he says.

I look around the room. “This is my office.” I push the door closed with my heel and step towards my desk.

“Is it?” he asks, standing.

“Yeah, it is.” The territorial argument is childish, but it’s part of a bigger battle. I step closer to him; we’re almost face to face. “So I’ll ask again: what the hell are you doing?” I step aside to give him room to escape, which he does, fleeing to the edge of my desk.

“Well, Rick, since I haven’t seen you in so long, I wasn’t sure you needed an office anymore.”

“Oh, really?” I drop down into my chair, tossing Walter’s listing on my desktop.

“Yeah, really.” He takes a seat on the corner.

“Well you haven’t gotten rid of me yet.” I lean back in my chair and sip my coffee.

“No I haven’t. Maybe you should remember that.”

I start to laugh. “Are you going to fire me, Junior?” His father always calls him junior. He hates it, almost as much as he hates the thought of me outselling him month after month.

“Despite what you might believe, Rick, life here would go on without you.” I can see in his eyes that he doesn’t believe it.

“Is that right?” I grow more serious. “I accounted for, what, fifty percent of the company’s sales last month?” He looks away. “Yeah, I guess life here would go on
without me . . . not for long.” I put my hands behind my head. He just stares at my desk. “Now, why don’t you get out, and let me go back to work.” I lean forward to put my hand on Walter’s listing, but Alan snatches it.

“It would almost be worth the drop in business to see you out on your ass, Rick.” He tries to weaken me with a glare, but I just smile. He unfolds the paper and reads it. “Is this one of Walter’s?” he asks, all business. He looks at me over the top of the paper.

Walter is the bigger battle. His multi-million dollar restorations in the Hollywood hills have been the backbone of Jefferson Realty, since my mentor, Alan Sr., started the agency. That’s why Walter was so important after Big Al passed me over and gave the business to Junior. It was easy to convince Walter that Alan’s inexperience and ineptitude were a liability, but it was a little harder to keep Walter away from Jeannine—someone he knew and trusted almost as much as me. Alan went after Jeannine around the same time I became Walter’s exclusive listing agent.

“I already have clients to sell it to,” I say to Alan, “so don’t even get that weasel brain going.” I demand the paper with an open palm.

“Did you list it?” he asks holding the paper close to him.

“I don’t need to list it,” I say to reiterate the point that I already have buyers in mind.

“Now, now, Rick.” He sounds like a kindergarten teacher. “You know it’s company policy to share listings.” I roll my eyes. “It’s called teamwork.” “That’s a stupid policy that not even you follow.” “It’s not a stupid policy.” He pulls the listing closer to his chest. “It’s a great policy, and let me tell you why.” I shake my head. “Let’s say that someone, like you,
has a great place to sell.” He waves Walter’s information like a farewell hankie. “And someone like me has a great client to buy that place. You’re the seller, I’m the buyer, we both benefit. That’s cooperation.” He’s got the condescending tone of a bad *Sesame Street* skit.

“How about this?” I start, sitting on the edge of my seat. “I’ve got a great place to sell, and I’ve got clients to buy it, so I’m the seller and I’m the buyer, and only I benefit.”

He waves his finger in the air. “That’s not teamwork, Rick.” If he tells me there’s no I in team, I’ll kill him. “My way is much better.” He backs towards the door.

I start out of my chair, but he stops, his eyes demonic. “Although . . .” he starts, considering a plan. “You might be right, Rick. You did bring the property in.” His reconsideration sounds like a stranger offering a kid candy. “Why don’t we have our two clients bid it out? That way when your clients are finally outbid, and they will be outbid, my commission will be that much bigger.” He backs to the door. “So I’ll just get this to Abby, and she can put it on the MLS, and I’ll let the Pattersons know I have a house for them.” He puts his hand on my door knob. “See, we work together and everyone’s happy.” He pulls open the door. “Have a good day, Rick.”

I stand. “Listen you son-of-a . . .” my words trail off when I see Jeannine standing in the doorway.

Alan steps back away from the door, just as shocked to see her as I am. He jams the listing into his pocket. “Hey, sweetheart, what are you doing here?” he says, looking back at me. I fall back onto my chair, picking up the listing Raymond left on my desk and pretending to read it.
“I was just on my way to see you,” she takes a couple steps in, “and I thought I heard voices in Rick’s office.” She looks at me and then at Alan.

“Yes, Rick and I were just discussing teamwork.” He puts his hand on her waist to usher her out of the room. “Good luck out there, Rick.” He gives me a sinister grin and shoots me with a pistoled finger. I want to shoot him a finger of my own, but Jeannine is watching. His grin grows as his hand slides all the way down her back. She gives me a hollow, pseudo-friendly look which has become the hallmark of our interaction. I turn to Ray’s useless listing as she closes my door.

I drop the listing on the desk. I really hate everything about this office. It would be great to get out of here right now, but I have to get my listing back and make Alan sorry he was born. I take my note cards out of my pocket, thinking about my long-term plan.

I exhale and grab a pencil from my desk. I peel off the top card which I wrote after watching *Can’t Hardly Wait*. I lay it down, so I can read it.

*Abe discovers he loves his friend Becky, but doesn’t get a chance to tell her before she starts dating John, the captain of the football team.*

It’s a teen romance right now, but I’m just using it as a template until I can come up with something more adult. It’s like one of those freewriting exercises Jerry has us do in class.

I read the card again. Jerry says a screenplay should have two major plot points, both of which need to complicate the main character’s life. The first point propels the audience into the rising action, and the second propels them into the climax. Abe losing
Becky to John is my first plot point; Abe figuring out his feelings are my rising action, but I don’t have my final plot point or a climax.

I tap my pencil on the desk. Alan’s such a bastard.

I exhale again. The second major plot point has to have Abe doing something to get rid of John. He’s trying to get Becky back and that will rationalize any behavior. I quickly scribble on the card:

*ABE DECIDES TO KILL JOHN*

I laugh at the thought. That might be a little too extreme. Even though it would definitely move it out of the teen romance genre—not much murder there.

I remove the card and lay it alongside the other. I’ll make that my “maybe” pile. Murder’s not exactly what I’m looking for, but I like the dark mean-spiritedness of it. I need something equally destructive, but more subtle. I write the basic idea:

*ABE GETS REVENGE AGAINST JOHN*

I tap my pencil on the card while I try to come up with some form of revenge: itching powder in his jock, setting fire to his locker, some kind of doctored photographs, but nothing seems right—none of it is true justice.

I clamp the pencil in my mouth and lean back in my chair, trying to think of what would make good revenge. I stare at the three salesman of the year awards hanging on my wall, relics of Big Al’s reign. Alan stopped giving them out because it forced him to admit that I was his best agent. I should have made him look at them while he was threatening me.

I sit up at the desk again and remove the pencil from my mouth. I write:
ABE GETS REVENGE AGAINST JOHN BY UNDERMINING HIS ABILITY TO PLAY FOOTBALL

Taking away something that John values increases the revenge factor. There’s nothing better for revenge than taking away something that defines that person.

I look up at my awards again before picking up the phone. I slide the card closer to me and then dial Ray’s desk. I let it ring only once before I hang up with my finger. I dial another extension.

“This is Abby Kennedy.” Her voice is exactly the way I imaged it, warm and comforting. Like her smile, it gives everything away. I’m not sure how long she’ll last in the real estate business; she’s too nice—an innocent rabbit in a den of wolves.

“Hi, Abby. This is Richard Morgan.” I use the same voice I use to close deals.

“Yes, Mr. Morgan, how are you?” Her words are business, but her tone is too open.

“I’m good. I heard it was your birthday.”

“Yes, it is.” The pitch in her voice goes up; she makes it too easy.

“Well, happy birthday, then.”

“Thank you, sir,” she giggles, dropping any defenses she may have had.

“No problem. Say, is Raymond there by chance?”

“Yeah, he is. Do you need to talk to him?”

“That would be super, Abby. Thank you and happy birthday again.”

“Thank you.” I can hear her giggle trail off as the phone moves away, and then I hear Raymond.
“Yes, sir.” His voice shakes. He’s realized what she hadn’t: Alan doesn’t like interoffice fraternization.

“Hey, Ray.” I keep my gentle seller’s voice to put him at ease. “Could you come into my office for a second?”

“Sure, Mr. Morgan.” He sounds unsure. “I’ll be . . .” His voice trails off.

“What is it, Ray?”

“Miss Randall,” he whispers. “She’s standing in the hallway talking to Mr. Jefferson.”

I shake the image from my mind. “It’s ok, Ray. She already knows I’m here.”

His breathing gets heavy. “Does she know I lied to her? What am I going to say?”

“Don’t worry, Ray. I’ll cover for you.” I shake my head at the phone.

“Thank you, sir. I owe you big time.”

“Why don’t you start by coming into my office?”

“Yes, sir, I’ll be right there.” He hangs up. I drop my phone into its cradle, and gather the cards into a pile. There’s a soft knock at the door. I give the revenge card another look and then sweep the pile into my desk drawer.


“What is it, sir?”

“Have a seat, Ray.” He examines the chair before sitting in it. “Did you say anything to Jeannine?”
“No. She was too busy talking to Mr. Jefferson.”

I nod. “Any idea what they were talking about?” I make it sound like an innocent question.

“No. They were just whispering to each other. You know how lovers are.” I purse my lips and rub my chin. Panic floods his face. “I mean you know how they are. Or not, I really don’t know anything about it. They really didn’t look too . . .”

“Ray.” He clamps his mouth shut, but continues to breathe heavily. I exhale, letting the issue pass. “Is there something going on between you and Abby?”

His eyes widen, and he raises his hands defensively. “Look, Mr. Morgan, I know that Mr. Jefferson doesn’t allow it, which is kind of hypocritical, if you think about it.” I glare at him, and he switches excuses. “We haven’t even been out on a date yet. I mean I was going to ask her out.” He searches my face for leniency. “But if you don’t think it’s a good idea . . .”

“Ray, I don’t care if you date in the office.” He looks up at me. “Most of Mr. Jefferson’s policies are asinine, but you have to expect that from an ass.” Ray smiles. “Does she like you?”

“I think so.”

“Good, Ray.” He smiles like I’m congratulating him on the loss of his virginity. I lean across the desk. “I need you to do me a favor. Abby’s Alan’s new assistant, right?” He nods. “And part of her job is entering listings into the listing service, right?” He nods again. “Ok, here’s what I need. Alan’s about to give her a listing, I need you to get it from her before she enters it into the MLS. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yeah, sure,” he says without missing a beat.
“Good. Also—” I pause. He waits with the stoic attention of Luca Brasi. “I need the contact information for a client.”

He nods. “Which client?” he asks, maintaining his hired-gun conviction.

“Patterson.”

He looks at me. “Patterson?” He seems unsure, revealing a loyalty to Alan I never knew he had.

“Yeah, is that a problem?”

“You want to take a client from . . .”

“Yes, Ray. I know what I’m doing. Can you do it or not?”

“Yeah. I can do it.” My conviction has put him back in line with me. “Anything else?”

“No, I think that will pretty much do it.”

“You want this right away?”

“As soon as possible.”

“Done.” We both stand. I can almost hear the Godfather music playing in the background. I feel like we should kiss cheeks or shake hands, but I just show him to the door.

“Ray, I think you have a bright future in real estate.”

“Thank you, sir.” His grin makes me glad he’s on my side. I open the door and give Ray a pat on the back, which slows when I see Jeannine in the hall. She appears to have been pacing in front of my office. She looks at me and then at Ray.

“Hi, Miss Randall,” he says, slipping from Luca to Fredo.
“Raymond,” she says, acknowledging him but focusing on me. Ray looks back at me and then ducks under her fixed eyes to disappear down the hallway. Jeannine’s folded arms fall to her side.

“Hi, Rick,” she says with a sincerity that dissolves my mob boss sentimentality.

“Hey.” I retreat into my office. Jeannine follows me.

It’s not until I’m protected behind my desk that I take a good look at her. She’s wearing her black and white pinstriped skirt, that’s cut just above her knees, and a white button-down shirt, which hints at cleavage. She’s not wearing the jacket. Her hair is pulled back, and she has her glasses in one hand, tapping them against the other. As usual, she looks both professional and sexy—a combination that has always intensified the difficulty in being around her.

“I didn’t see you come in,” she says.

I adjust some random papers on my desk. “Well, you know me.” I can’t look at her eyes.

She lets out an ironic chuckle. “Yeah.” She sits down on the edge of the chair that Raymond was just in. Her skirt slides up her thigh as she crosses her long legs. She looks around the office. Then she locks eyes with me and gets light. “Hey, I saw you at the video store on Saturday.” She makes it sound like no big deal, like we didn’t act like strangers.

I focus on the papers in front of me to avoid her eyes and her legs.

“Yeah, I was there.” I wanted to forget that ever happened, but I have to match her enthusiasm about it.
“Yeah . . .” She weighs her next words. “I saw you talking to one of the girls there.”

“Yeah, Audrey.”

She seems taken aback that I know her name. “Oh, is she a friend of yours?”

“Not really. I just know her from the video store.” I’m confused by the line of questioning, but I’m glad we’re talking.

“She’s cute, and she seemed to like you.”

I think about telling her that was just cheap salesmanship, but we’ve both grown uncomfortable with the stale conversation, so I change directions. “So what are you up to?”

“Just kind of roaming around.” She seems just as happy as I am to be onto another subject, but she’s still not ready to talk about why she’s here. “What are you working on?” She leans over to look at the papers I’m fiddling with.

“Just trying a little teamwork,” I say, mocking Alan’s earlier comment.

She seems to go back on the defensive. “What was going on between the two of you?”

“Just your boyfriend being the great boss that he is.”

She looks away. “Why do you have to be like that? He didn’t take the company from you. He hasn’t done anything to you.” The first time she’s been in my office for years and she’s picking up where we left off, and she still doesn’t see that this isn’t about the company.
“Is that why you came in here? To defend him? To tell me he’s a good guy?” I want to keep going, but the prelude to my diatribe hasn’t inflamed her; it’s only made her contrite.

“No, Rick, that’s not what I wanted.” She smoothes her skirt. She exhales, and mutters “dammit.” “This isn’t . . .” she starts to say. She looks up at me. “Never mind.” She stands—I’ve chased her off again.

“Jeanie, wait.” She stops and looks down at me. “Stay.”

A smile starts to form on her face.

“It’s been a while since you called me that.” Her smile widens as she slides back into her chair, like she is trying to forget the past three years of contempt and betrayal, and I too want to forget. “Rick, I know we might not be in a place where I can ask you a favor, but I need some help.” She stops.

I lean towards her.

She looks around the office. “This might not be the best place.” She straightens her skirt again, stalling, and I fear that she’ll want me to forget she asked. “I was just about to go to lunch. Maybe . . .”

Alan, with all the timing of a good eavesdropper, appears in my doorway, trying to make his emergence look spontaneous. “Hey there, sweetheart,” he says with enough loud surprise to cut her off. He comes in and places a hand on her shoulder. “I was just looking for you.” He shoots me a cold glare.

“Well, I was right here,” she says without turning to him. I’m sure she’s looking for an excuse to explain why she’s in my office.
“So I see.” He breaks off his glare to look at her. “Honey, you shouldn’t bother Rick.” He begins running his hand through her hair. “He’s got a lot of work to do.” His sweet tone gets stern. “Isn’t that right, Rick?”

“You know me, always working on something.” I smile, thinking about what I am working on.

“See. You really should leave him alone.” He looks down at her, but she avoids both of us. “I’m ready for lunch, so we can go anytime, assuming you’re done with Rick.”

“Yeah,” she stands, “let’s go.” She takes him by the hand and leads him to the door.

Alan stops as Jeannine goes out into the hall. “You have a good day, Rick.” He leaves with a wink and a thumbs-up. I shoot him the finger, but he’s out in the hall and doesn’t see it. I keep the finger up for a few seconds, and then I use it to dial Ray’s desk. I let it ring until he answers.

“This is Raymond.”

“Ray, how are we with the . . . project.” I cringe at my use of code.

“It’s done,” he whispers into the phone.

“When Miss Randall and Mr. Jefferson are out of the office, I want you to bring it to me.”

“Yes, sir.” Almost military.
I hang up the phone, lean back in my chair, and inhale the stale air now perfumed by Jeannine’s garden scent. I’m plagued by a host of delights and terrors as I imagine what else Jeannine had to say. I curse Alan for interrupting.

Ray crosses the office and lays the information on my desk as if it were a top secret dossier.

“Here you go, sir. Good luck,” he says with a wink.

“Thank you, Ray.” My talk with Jeannine has taken some of the excitement out of sticking it to Alan.

“Anything else, Mr. Morgan?”

“No, Ray, that will be it for now.” He nods his head in a way that could be mistaken as a bow and walks out.

I breathe in more of Jeannine’s scent. Alan has been a constant interference in my relationship with her: he took her out of the room as she was about to tell me something important, just like he took her out of my life before I had a chance to mend things.

My fingers drum on the Pattersons’ number. He thinks he can outsmart me. I imagine Abe standing on an empty football field contemplating his next move—he’s about to take John down.

I exhale the smell of Jeannine and start to dial.

INT. RICK’S OFFICE—LATER

I really didn’t want to work today, but Big Al taught me when an opportunity presents itself, you have to act, and this is an opportunity. Mr. Patterson insisted on
meeting during his lunch hour. I’m glad I follow Big Al’s example of keeping a spare suit at the office.

After changing, I make sure to lock my door. Jeannine’s door is wide open. Alan’s, like mine, is shut. I swirl the cold coffee still in my cup, and then take out my keys, sorting through them until I find the master Big Al gave me when we first moved into the building.

The underlying aesthetic of Alan’s office is *Fortune* magazine—oak, leather, muted lighting, but it smells like a dusty old library, and all the items he has on display to make himself look impressive make it almost museum-like—his meaningless certificates in ornate frames, the long, gold putter on its shelf behind his desk, even the picture of him and his dad with Arnold Palmer, boast his shallow egotism; everything’s a trophy; everything’s laid out to give the illusion of importance, success, power. He knows almost nothing about real estate, but he manages to keep up an appearance. Being a fake is one thing he’s got going for him; he just needs to figure out how to apply it.

I put my cup on Alan’s solid wood desk, sliding it across the clean, polished top as I take a seat in his black leather chair. I lean back and put my feet up. It’s comfortable. On the corner of Alan’s desk is one of those amusement park pictures, a candid somebody takes and then charges you for: him and Jeannine snuggled together on a bench. There’s also a snapshot of Jeannine that Alan must have taken. I sit up and take it off the corner of the desk.

It’s an extreme close-up. She’s fighting off the camera, playful, smiling as she shies away. Her hair forms a spray behind her head and along the side of her face, and I can almost smell her shampoo—apricot and mango. She’s got a bashful beauty, the kind
of look photographers try to fake, but hers is real; it’s Jeannine. I wipe the glass with my sleeve and put the picture back.

I stand, picking up my coffee cup. She looks much better in the snapshot. The other picture is overboard—looking at each other with their heads together, a cheap prize bear between them, balloons tied to the bench—staged.

I give Alan’s chair a twirl and watch it spin. I stare into the cup. I put my knee out and stop the chair. I pause to look at the picture of them together before tipping the rest of my coffee into Alan’s cushioned seat, the mocha color blending with the dark leather. She looks better without him. I shake out the last few drops and walk to the door. I stare back at Big Al shaking hands with Arnold Palmer and then exit.

I haven’t been in Jeannine’s office much since she and Alan started dating, but I’m suddenly curious about the pictures on her desk. Her smell intensifies the closer I get to her open door.

“You on your way, boss?” Raymond asks.

“Yeah,” I say, turning from Jeannine’s open doorway.

“You look good.” He grimaces. “I mean you look professional,” he corrects himself, but it doesn’t help.

“Thanks,” I reply, buttoning up my suit coat. I thrust my coffee cup into his hands as I walk past him.

“Take no prisoners,” he says slapping me on the shoulder. I shake my head.

“Will do, Ray.” I wave without turning around.

Out of the corner of my eye I notice Abby’s balloons swaying in the ventilation breeze. I stop, and Raymond rushes over.
“Was there something else, boss?”

“Yeah.” I reach into my pocket, again looking at Abby’s balloons and then down at Abby, who is trying to watch us without being seen. “Why don’t you take Abby to lunch for her birthday?” I take a roll of cash from my pocket and peel off thirty dollars. “My treat.” I hold the money out to him, but he just looks at it.

“I couldn’t.” He looks to her cubicle.

“You like her don’t you?” I ask. He nods. “Then take the money.” He still hesitates. “We’ll call it a bonus.”

He looks at me and then takes the money, jamming it in his pocket. “Thank you, sir.”

I nod and continue to the door.

“Out to sell some houses, Rick?” Claire asks.

“Actually, I’m on my way to a funeral.” I don’t break my stride.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she mourns, and then asks “Who died?” with a hint of intrigue.

I stop with my back pushing the door ajar. “I don’t want to ruin the surprise,” I say before stepping out into the fresh air.

**EXT. WALTER’S RESTORED HOUSE—AFTERNOON**

Even from the outside I can tell that Walter has outdone himself with this one. It complements the other houses in the secluded neighborhood with its dark brick and wood exterior. There’s a picketed balcony on the second floor, supported by large ebony pillars which line the long front porch. The big yard is beautifully landscaped with flowers that contrast the house in brightness and color, and trees that stand as tall and impressive as
the house itself. A small stone pathway leads to the front door. Alan’s right; this place would draw some serious bids, but this isn’t about money. In fact, I was prepared to lower my commission to get the Pattersons, but he didn’t miss a beat when I told him I’d be taking over the account.

The Pattersons drive up as I’m on my way to unlock the front door. His gold Lexus barely comes to a stop before his wife steps out—a vibrant girl in her mid-twenties. She takes off her sunglasses and stares at the place as if she were looking at a priceless work of art. I put my hand in my pocket and stroll down the driveway.

Mr. Patterson gets out a little slower. His graying hair is the first thing I see rising above the car; he’s at least fifty. He gives me a stoic nod, steps around the car, and stands next to his wife. They look like father and daughter. He’s in a plain, dark suit, with well-polished Kenneth Coles; she’s wearing a pink and red floral dress the length of something you’d see on a tennis court, and a pair of white sandals that show off her pink French-tipped toenails.

“Oh, it’s beautiful, Eddie,” she says.

He shoots me a glance and puts his arm around her, whispering in her ear. She looks over his shoulder at me and then gives him a look of annoyance.

My phone rings. I smile at them and check my caller ID. It’s the office. I send it to my voice mail.

I walk over to them. “Hi, Mr. Patterson, how are you?” I extend my hand. He takes it like he’s at a strong man competition. “I’m Richard Morgan,” I say, turning my smile at his attempt to establish power into something friendly.
“Richard—Edward Patterson.” His face is serious and his tone all business.

“This is my wife, Kimberly.”

“Kim,” she corrects him. Her voice brings back memories of *Can’t Hardly Wait.* She puts out a dainty hand, and I give it a quick shake.

“This is a nice place, Richard,” he says, trying to downplay his interest while admiring the house again.

“I love it,” she says, rubbing his arm. He gives her a father’s scolding look, and she returns blank innocence with a hint of contempt.

“Well, Mrs. Patterson,” I start.

“Kim,” she insists.

“Kim,” I repeat, “if you like the outside, wait until you see the inside.” She smiles. I turn to him, business. “The man who did the restoration is a friend of mine. He is the best there is.”

“Ooh,” she says, stepping around her husband and putting her arm under mine. I look back at Mr. Patterson so he can see my innocent surprise, but he’s shaking his head at the ground, the way a broken gambler might.

We start up the driveway to the house, Mrs. Patterson on my arm and Mr. Patterson bringing up the rear. I don’t want to isolate him, but I can see she’ll be a good lever when it comes to sealing the deal.

As we reach the front porch my phone begins to ring again.

“Someone’s popular,” Mrs. Patterson comments, bumping me with her hip.

“Kim, please,” Mr. Patterson pleads from behind us. He rolls his eyes at her. I take the phone from my belt. It’s the office again.
“I’m sorry, Eddie, I’m just trying to be friendly. He doesn’t mind. Do you, Richie?” She puts both hands around my arm. I look at Mr. Patterson who appears wearied.

“I’m sorry, but I need to take this call,” I say. The Pattersons exchange a few more words as I answer the phone. “Richard Morgan,” I say, hoping not to hear Alan on the other end.

“Hey, Rick, it’s Jeannine.” I put my hand on one of the cool, black pillars to steady myself. “How are you?” I think about telling her it’s not a good time, but I want us to pick up where we left off.

“Fine.” I try to shield the phone from the Pattersons’ sweet talk.

“That’s good.” She pauses as Mrs. Patterson proclaims her love to her husband. I turn from them. “Are you with clients?” she asks. The Pattersons have grown silent; she has her head on his chest, her arms around him. I hold up my finger to indicate one minute. She nods, and he follows her lead.

“What?” I take the house key from my pocket.

“It sounds like you’re with clients.” She says a little clearer. I put the key into the door lock and turn it. “I didn’t know you had any appointments today.” I open the door.

“I didn’t.” I wave the Pattersons into the house as I cover the phone and whisper to them. “Go ahead and start looking around,” then I return to Jeannine. “I mean, I don’t.” Mrs. Patterson rushes in, but Mr. Patterson proceeds more leisurely. He keeps an eye on me.

“It just sounded like you were around other people.” She pauses again.
“No, not right now.” I need to change the subject. “What can I do for you?”

“Alan told me that he got a listing from you this morning,” she says. The mention of his name makes me want to shut her out again.

I hear Alan say in the background. “I know I gave it to Abby,” he says.

“It wasn’t on her desk,” she tells him and then comes back to me. “He says he gave it to Abby, but she’s at lunch, and we can’t find it.” It’s typical of him to involve her in this.

“So what do you want from me?” I look into the house to see how the Pattersons are doing. She’s already going upstairs, but he is still in the entryway. He stands sideways a few feet away from me, his arms folded, watching me and examining the lines in the Italian marble floor at the same time.

“I was hoping you could help me.” The tone in her voice reminds me of when she first started working with us and would ask me for help.

“Help you or help Alan?”

“Does it matter?” she asks, closed off. I need to be more diplomatic with her right now, but I’m distracted by Mr. Patterson and his pacing.

“Hold on a second, will you, Jeannine?” I cover the phone before she can answer.

“I’m sorry, sir, did you have a question?”

He nods, turning to face me. “I wanted to apologize for my wife’s behavior.” He’s less stoic than before, open. “She can seem a little forward, but don’t read anything into it. That’s just how she gets her way.” He smiles like he’s about to share a dirty secret, and I resist laughing at the notion that I needed to be told. “You know how women are.” He taps me with his elbow, bonding us. I nod, becoming more aware of the
phone in my hand. “Listen, kid,” he steps close to me, “let me tell you something, man to man: don’t ever trust a woman. If you give them an inch they’ll use it against you.” I smile at the irony of conviction coming from a man who is being told what to do by a girl half his age. “It’s good to see you know how to work them too.” He points to the phone. “Don’t let her make you feel guilty about it.” He gives me a reassuring pat on the back and returns to his all-business façade, rejoining his wife.

I watch him exit the room before bringing the phone to my ear again. There was a time when Jeannine and I would share odd things clients would tell us, but I know she wouldn’t appreciate the situation of this one. “Sorry, Jeannine, where were we?”

“I needed your help with Walter’s new listing.” Again she makes it a personal plea, reminding me how right Mr. Patterson is.

“Yeah, what about it?” I ask.

“Well, I’ve got clients that I think would be perfect for it.”

“You do?” I’m not amazed she has clients, but my response could be interpreted that way.

“Yeah, I just picked them up last week.” Her excitement about a potential sale seems to distract her from the possible misread of my statement.

I would be willing to back away from this place if Jeannine had someone to take it. I have no loyalty to the Pattersons.

“You know how slow things have been for me,” she continues. “I need this sale.”

Why would Alan tell her about the place if he already had clients for it? I know he doesn’t care that much about her. He’d never put love over a sale especially if it meant being able to beat me.
“It’s like fate that Walter would have a house open just after I picked them up.
Alan and I were just talking yesterday about how perfect they’d be for one of his places.”

My stomach turns. I look at the Pattersons, discussing something on the balcony that overlooks the open entry and the dining area—it is a sure thing.

“What’s the couple’s name?” A cold drop of sweat rolls down my back and I close my eyes.

“Patterson. Why?”

“No reason,” I mutter. Mr. Patterson’s comments now make sense—I’m stealing him from Jeannine.

“So can you remember any of the information? I’d really like to get moving on this.”

I grip the heavy mahogany door for support. “Not really.”

“Can you call Walter and get it?”

I twist my shoe into the floor. “Yeah.”

“Would you?” An excitement I haven’t heard from her since we stopped dating.

“Sure.”

“Thanks, Rick.” Her gratitude is soft and honest, like a bridge has been built, but more like a punch in the head. She pauses as if there is more to say, but she doesn’t get a chance.

“What the hell?” Alan screams.

“What?” Jeannine asks him.

“There’s something all over my chair. I just sat in it.” I don’t react; I can’t.

“Rick, I’ve got to go. If you . . .”
“Jeanie—” I think about telling her. “I’ll take care of it,” I finally say, sounding like the hero.

“Thanks again, Rick.” She pauses and then hangs up.

I clip the phone back on my belt and slide down the brushed brass doorjamb until I’m seated on the front step. A slight breeze makes the grass of the sloping front yard quiver. I’ve done it again. If she had a hard time forgiving me for taking Walter, she’ll never forgive me for this. My worries about her manipulating me to get something have vanished.

Mr. Patterson clears his throat behind me. “Bad news, Mr. Morgan?”

I stand and turn to them. “Sort of,” I say. Mrs. Patterson has a huge grin. I shake off the nausea and try to look professional. “But it doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, then. Well . . .” He talks slow and serious, trying to maintain his disinterested pretense.

“We love the house,” she says. He sighs heavily and looks at her with an open mouth. She looks at him, ignores his shock, and turns back to me. “And we’ll do anything to get it.” It’s like she just won a game show. He rubs his brow, and I want to do the same thing.

“Kimberly,” he says.

“Oh come on, Eddie,” she starts to whine. “I’m tired of living in that hotel; I don’t want to wait anymore. We both want this one.” She frowns and looks up at him.

He smiles at her. “You’re right,” he says. She kisses him on the cheek. I just got a huge commission, and I want to step in front of a train.
“Actually,” I start, “I just found out that another agent is handling this house, so I’ll have to pass you off to her.”

Mrs. Patterson’s excitement fades. He just looks annoyed.

“Her? Is this the same girl we were with before?”

I nod.

Mr. Patterson looks at his wife. “No.” I almost have to step back. “We want this house. We want you to sell it to us, and we want it done today.” Mrs. Patterson wraps herself around his arm, a blissful smile on her face. “I don’t care what you have to do, just do it.” She kisses him again. He smiles at her delight.

“Ok,” I agree with a sigh. I look at the ceiling. “Wait right here. I just need to go down to my car for a second.”

“Hold on,” Mr. Patterson says, stepping out onto the porch with me. “Do we have a deal?” He sticks out his hand like a punch in the gut. She presses her hands together in front of her, her bottom lip between her teeth. Mr. Patterson’s hand is steady and patient. He leans towards me and half whispers, “Remember what I told you. Don’t let this other woman beat you; don’t let her use you.” I grab his hand, which isn’t as firm as it was before; it doesn’t need to be. He looks at his wife with a smile while our hands are still locked together. She dances like she needs a restroom.

“Let me take care of a few things, and I’ll be right back,” I say, trying to be happy about the money I just made.

I dial Raymond’s cell phone on my way to the car.

After a few rings, he answers. “This is Raymond.” A mariachi band sparks and flares behind him.
“Hey, Ray. How’s lunch?” I ask, speaking so he can hear me. The Pattersons are walking around the outside of the house, admiring the blossoming flower beds. “Good, sir, thank you,” he yells over the enthusiastic band. “I’m glad. Listen, Ray, did you say that Jeannine doesn’t have any appointments today.” “That’s right. She hasn’t had any for a while.” “Does she have any clients at all?” I hate that I have to ask it that way, since I’ve taken the Pattersons from her. “One less than she used to, huh, boss?” He laughs, thinking my theft of Jeannine’s client to be a calculated act of spite. His enjoyment of the situation peters off when I don’t laugh with him. “Yeah, she has a few, but most of them are stalling on her. Why?” “What about Alan? Does he have any appointments today?” “Let me check.” I can hear him mumbling to Abby under the roar of a trumpet. “He’s going golfing at two o’clock.” “That’s good,” I say to myself. “What?” Ray yells. “Nothing. I need you to do something for me.” “Name it.” Eager for more dirty work. “I need to get Jeannine out of the office for a little while.” “Ok,” he says with a ponderous hum. “I guess I could send her out to meet with some clients that’ll never show. That seems to happen to her a lot these days.”
“Fine.” I don’t like having to make this crueler, but I have to drop the paper work off to start processing the sale, so it would be bad to run into either of them. “Make sure that she is out of the office at the same time Alan is.”

“Will do. Hey did you make the sale?” he whispers low enough for me to pretend not to hear him.

“Also you might want to keep Abby out of the office until Alan leaves.”

“Why?”

“Well, enjoy your lunch. See you around two.” I hang up.

The Pattersons are still looking at the house, but they have also taken an interest in what I’m doing. I flash them a little smile. “Everything’s all set,” I yell with a carefree thumbs-up that makes me feel dirty. I open my car and reach into the glove compartment for a contract. I pause, head in the car, contract in hand. I’m reminded of a line from *Can’t Hardly Wait*: “I can’t feel my legs.”

I wipe my hand across my brow and turn to the Pattersons, thinking how this will pretty much be the end of me and Jeannine. I exhale to rid myself of the cost/benefit analysis. I walk back towards the Pattersons, forcing myself to smile.

My phone rings, but I turn it off without looking at it. I wipe my brow again. Things can only get worse from here.

“Ok, here are the contracts. Let’s go inside and get you to sign in all the right places.” Mr. Patterson nods. Mrs. Patterson leaps towards me and kisses me on the cheek. He just smiles. I prefer the violent, jealous type.

*INT. JEFFERSON AND ASSOCIATES REAL ESTATE—AFTERNOON*
Usually walking into the office with a signed contract is almost as good as kicking Alan Jr. right between the legs, but this feels like the Coyote just before gravity gets hold of him.

“How was the funeral?” Claire asks.

“Not as good as I would have liked.” I walk past her, the contract rolled in my fist, swinging at my side. Once I give it to Abby everything will be out.

I walk right past the beehive and into the senior associate hallway without even looking at Abby’s desk. I don’t breathe as I pass Jeannine’s office. I take out my keys and rush through my door and close it. I look up at the ceiling, breathing like a drunk over a toilet.

There’s a knock. I labor to swallow. “Who is it?” I ask as gathered as I can.

“Sir, it’s Raymond.” His insecurity is calming. I open the door and step towards my desk.

“Come in, Ray.” I throw the contract on top of some other papers and crash down into my seat, loosening my tie and undoing my top button. I need a drink.

“Long day, sir?”

“Not as long as it’s going to be,” I say. He looks at me confused, but I wave off the comment.

“Is this the contract?” He points with excitement. I nod and put my feet up on the desk, letting my head fall back. “Way to go, sir.” It’s like one of those meaningless congratulations from the team’s equipment manager. I want to look up at him to see if he fully appreciates what has happened, but my head is too heavy. “Do you want me to take this out to Abby?”
I force my head up. “Yeah, Ray, why don’t you do that.” I shoo him away with the back of my hand.

He snatches up the paper with a nod.

“Close the door on your way out, will you?” I rub my forehead.

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you,” I say and then let my head drop back again when I hear the door close.

I start to wonder if Abe’s revenge is going to go as bad. Certainly if I go for the tragic ending it will. He’ll end up alone and humiliated. I write the note card.

*ABE’S REVENGE BACKFIRES HORRIBLY, AND HE ENDS UP PUSHING THE GIRL HE LOVES EVEN FARTHER INTO THE ARMS OF ANOTHER*

At that point killing John would be the only option for him.

*ABE COMMITS A VIOLENT MURDER/SUICIDE*

What the hell, why not kill himself too?

I laugh a little and realize what I need to do is flee this place before anything else happens. I stand, shove the card in the drawer with rest, and wonder if I should bother changing back into my street clothes or just get the hell out.

The intercom buzzes. I freeze. Here it is: the one thing that’s going to put me over the edge.

“Mr. Morgan,” Ray’s timid voice chimes. I look back and forth between the intercom and the door. “Mr. Morgan, are you there?” I sigh, and push the answer button.

“Yes, Ray.” I think my voice is just as timid as his.
“Uh,” he stutters and then proceeds, making my gut wrench with each syllable.

“Miss Randall is on line one, and she wants to talk to you.”

I wonder if she’s called the Pattersons already. I feel like my throat is closing.

“Tell her I’m not here.”

“She,” he pauses. “She already knows you are here.” His breathing is rapid. I sigh into the speaker. “I’m sorry, sir. She called to reconfirm the appointment that I had given her, she said they never showed and she sounded upset, so then I felt bad about sending her out on a wild goose chase, so I almost told her what I’d done, but then she asked about you, and I thought it was a good out, so I panicked and told her you were here, and then she wanted to talk to you, and I said ok without really thinking about . . .”

“Ray,” I say.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Morgan. I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“It’s ok, Ray.” I pull my tie down more. “I’ll talk to her.”

“Please don’t tell her what I’ve done.”

“Don’t worry, Ray.” I lift my finger off the intercom button.

“Thank you, sir.”

I pick up the phone and answer line one. I can hear traffic in the background.

“Hello.” I’m suddenly aware that I have no defense if she confronts me about the Pattersons.

“Rick.” She’s on the verge of tears. I sink into my chair, knowing it’s not about the Pattersons, yet.

“What is it?” I ask.
She gives a quick pitiful laugh. “I wish I knew.” A chill runs through me. “Can you tell me? I just got stood up by another client, so please tell me what’s wrong.” Her plea is painful. “I’m lost, Rick. I thought it was just a slump, but it’s starting to sound more like a conspiracy.” She manages a laugh that turns to deep sobs.

“Nothing’s wrong with you. It is just a slump. Everyone has them.” Now I feel like the equipment manager.

“Everyone but you.” Envy or resentment, I’m not sure.

“That’s not true.” I pause, looking at my awards. “I have my moments.” What moments I don’t say. “You’re going to pull out of it.” Telling her good things while I’m pulling the rug out from under her.

“How?” she asks through her tears.

“I’ll help you.” Even without the current betrayal, I’m not sure our relationship has healed that much, but her confiding in me somehow makes the offer seem appropriate.

She starts to chuckle. “I’m sure that’s just what you need, a broken-down, emotionally-volatile woman scaring off your clients.” She starts laughing a little more, but with despair, not amusement. “I’m sorry, Rick, you probably didn’t need this today.” She sniffs.

“I don’t mind.”

“I know you don’t.” She pauses, and I’m filled with an almost electric desire to come clean and hope she’ll understand. “I just need to get a hold of myself. I mean, I could sell the Pattersons soon.” Her sobs are dissipating, but she’s still in no position to hear that I’ve stolen from her again. “Maybe all I need is one solid deal.”
“Yeah.”

“And then I can get back to challenging you for top seller.” She laughs.

“Sure, why not,” I say.

“Thanks, Rick.” She pauses. Guilt rises and burns in my throat. “You really are the best.” And that’s what it feels like to be hit by a train. I wonder why she picked Alan over me if I’m “the best,” and why she’s called me in the midst of this crisis instead of the man she picked. “Rick,” she breaks the silence with the same tone she used earlier in my office, “there’s something we need to talk about.” Ants scuttle through my veins.

“But I don’t want to do it over the phone,” she continues. I feel like one of the Usual Suspects finding out I’m in debt to Keyser Söze. “Are you going to be in the office for a little while?”

I would love to say yes.

“No, I’m not.”

“Are you sure? I really need to talk to you.” A soft desperation that almost makes me reconsider. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Sorry. I’m actually on my way out right now.” I stand up, just to make the lie more pressing.

“All right,” she relents, and again I feel my resistance waver. “Maybe we can get together tomorrow.”

“Maybe. Call me tomorrow.” By then she’ll know everything.

“Ok.” She still sounds unsure. “Well, Rick, thanks for being such a good friend.” She pauses, allowing us both time to decide if we are friends again—maybe we are, but we soon won’t be. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”
“Yeah, tomorrow,” I repeat. I give her a hollow goodbye and hang up. I make my way to the door, only half focused on escaping. Claire’s voice on the intercom makes me fully focus on it.

“Rick, Alan’s on the phone. He wants to talk to you.”

I sigh and drop my head, pinching my temples.

“He seemed interested when I told him about your sale. I think he wants to congratulate you.”

I drop my hands and take a few aggressive steps towards the phone, cursing Claire. I lean on the intercom button. “Thank you, Claire,” I spit. I pick up the phone.

“What?”

“Hear you had a sale today, Morgan.” He only uses my last name when he’s not being passive-aggressive. “Congratulations.” He’s not angry like I thought he would be.

“Gee, thanks, Alan.” I make it sound as meaningless as his congratulations.

“We need to talk about this. When I get back to the office, I want you there.” Trying to sound authoritative, but his heart isn’t really in it.

“That sounds like a real party, Junior, but I’ve got other plans.” I clap the phone back in the cradle. I lock my door behind me.

By the time I get out into the open office Claire’s on the phone again. She sees me and perks up. I’m just going to charge right past her.

“Are you leaving, boss?” Raymond asks.

“Yeah. I’ve put in enough work for today.” I walk away from him keeping my eye on Claire, who is watching me and talking into the phone. She smiles as she points the phone up at me.
I turn to Raymond. “When Jeannine gets back, tell her that her clients called; they had something unexpected come up, and they’ll get back to her.” It’ll be a small relief for her, but it’s something.

“Check,” he says.

“Rick,” Claire says to me, still holding up the phone. “It’s Alan, again.” I continue to gain speed as I pass her.

“I’m sorry, Claire, I’ve left the building.” I hold up my hands as if helpless, and then I push open the door. I’m back in the fresh air, but it’s hard to breathe.
Chapter 4

INT. BLOCKBUSTER VIDEO—AFTERNOON

I was already going to return the videos I had, but now I could use a good movie to help me to forget how stupid I’ve been, even if just for a couple hours. I need to think about my screenplay and ignore that my actions have consequences.

Behind the counter is a high school girl trying to define the term disaffected youth while still adhering to the Blockbuster corporate image—a contradiction not easily achieved, and at which she, like Audrey, fails. She’s made an attempt to mute her rebellious look by making her eyelashes only hint at being too dark, but she’s done nothing about the dyed black hair, the silver Celtic cross necklace she can’t keep tucked into her shirt, and the line of earrings that make me suspect that she has other rings not currently visible. The sleeve on her blue polo shirt is slightly rolled, so when she has her elbow on the desk, propping up her head, I can see the bottom of her gothic tattoo.

“Hey,” she says like we’re passing each other at a party, her head never lifting from her hand. Her gaze wanders out into the empty store, and even though it’s dismissive, it’s nice to get a genuine greeting in a Blockbuster.

I step to the counter, laying my videos down. The girl swings her head over to me again.

“Is Audrey around?” I ask.

She lifts her head. “She just went to get something to eat.” Her eyes drift again. I look over to the dramas and then down at the videos. “Was there something else?” she asks, her dark eyes wide. I start to pick up the cases. “Put ‘em in the return box.” She
motions to the opening at the front of the desk and puts her elbow back on the counter, resting her head again to stare into the empty store. I deposit the cases.

I walk to the drama section; I’m looking for a movie that successfully bridges teen romance and drama. I scan only a few cases before picking up *American Beauty*, a drama that has some teenagers in it—his daughter is a teenager and she has a boyfriend and a friend who is a cheerleader, and Kevin Spacey wants to sleep with her.

Maybe Mike’s right; maybe sex is the cure for lost souls.

The gothic clerk starts making drumming noises as she stares at nothing. I guess everyone has their own cure. Maybe *American Beauty* will help me with mine.

I walk with the case to the front of the store and lay it on the counter. The girl eyes me and then walks over. I put my card on top of the video. She snatches it, scans it, and then pauses, looking at me.

“You’re Richard Morgan?” she asks, her boredom sparking into disbelief and interest.

“Yeah.”

She looks me up and down, and sneers another laugh. “Interesting.” She disappears under the counter for a second and then reappears, her look one of mocking cruelty, and I half expect her to thank me for making her day. “This is for you.” She puts a video case on the counter. It’s wrapped in a rubber band with a piece of paper that has my name on it. The girl grins.

I take the case from the counter to see what it is. “Drive Me Crazy,” I read aloud.

“Alright, Melissa Joan Hart.” She sneers like Billy Idol. “Rock on,” she says, pumping her fist, rattling her silver chain bracelets.
I put the case back on the counter. “I don’t want this.”

She looks at the case and then at me. She starts to shake her head. “Sorry, pal, but the computer says you’re not allowed to have anything else.” She taps the screen with a black fingernail.

“No it doesn’t.” I try to lean past the counter to see what the screen says, but she turns it away from me.

“Hold on there, John Wayne. You’re not allowed back here, so take your gay video and leave before I have to call security.” She pushes the case back towards me.

I step away from the counter and the case. “Where’s Audrey?”

“I told you, she went to eat.”

“What?”

“What am I, her mother?” She rolls her eyes and looks away from me. I stare at her until she turns back. “Try the KFC.” She jerks her ringed thumb towards the building which shares a parking lot with the video store, and then she looks away again. I start to walk out the door. “Hey, buddy, you forgot your card.” She holds it up and waves it back and forth. I take a step back into the store. She slides my card under the rubber band wrapped around the video and throws it at me over the top of the security barrier. “Take that too.” She grins as I catch the case. “Enjoy your movie,” she says, mimicking the cheery attitude customers are used to, and then she places her elbow back on the counter, resting her head again. I look at the case and walk out.
INT. KENTUCKY FRIED CHICKEN—AFTERNOON

I smell hot grease and eleven herbs and spices the second I walk in. KFC in the late afternoon is almost as dead as Blockbuster—two people in line, a bunch of kids at one of the tables, an older couple at another.

Audrey is seated at a table in the middle of the dining area. A large man in a light-blue shirt is standing by her table, his back to me. Audrey is smiling as she talks to him, and I wonder what he’s being suckered into.

I approach the wide man’s back, the video case swinging at my side. I didn’t want to step around him and surprise her, but his size doesn’t leave other options.

It takes a second before she says, “Hey, Rick.” The man in blue looks me over like a boxer at a weigh-in. “Rick, this is Harvey.”

“How’s it going?” he says with a slight jerk of his head. Close up he smells like oily fried chicken. His gut slightly sticks out over his belt, too many years in fast food, a good reason for his loose shirt.

“Harvey’s the manager here.”

“Good for you,” I say, trying not to sound sarcastic.

“What are you, a high school basketball coach?” He takes a hand out of his pocket to give my loosened tie a flip.

I look down at my tie, cinching it to my neck. I give my arms a roll to straighten my suit coat, and button it up. “No.”

“Well you sure look like it,” he mutters, turning back to Audrey.

She scolds him with her electric blue eyes. “Thanks for the food, Harvey.” His smile makes him look like a fairy tale hero being congratulated by the rescued damsel.
“Stop by the store later, and I’ll make it up to you.” She uses the same lilt she uses with me.

“Oh, I’ll do that,” he says like somebody who thinks he’ll get lucky. Then he turns from her, stares me down, and meanders away with his hands in his pockets, probably muttering personal affirmations to himself.

“Oh, he’s sweet,” I say.

“Yes he is.” She takes a swipe at me, and laughs. “Have a seat.” She points to a chair and pulls her tray closer.

I throw the video on the table as I sit. She watches the case slide.

She smiles. “So you got the present I left you?”

“Oh, I got it, but that’s all I got.” She looks confused. “Why did you freeze my account?”

“What?”

“I am only allowed to rent this crap?” I throw a backhand at the case.

“What are you talking about?”

“That frighteningly sardonic girl behind the counter said this was all I could rent.” I pick up the case and show it to her.

She starts to laugh. “Poe told you that?”

“Poe?” I say.

She nods and picks up her drink.

“I didn’t freeze your account.” She pauses, looking over my head. “I don’t even know if I can do that.” But she seems intrigued at the idea.

“So basically that spooky little girl snowed me.”
She nods and laughs. “That’s why I keep her around.” She sips again.

“I was wondering.” I slide down in my chair.

“Do you want some?” She holds a drumstick out to me, but I refuse it. “Not in a finger-licking mood?” She takes a bite.

“Not really.”

She finishes chewing. “That’s too bad.” She parts her lips slightly and then sucks the tip of each finger, making a smacking noise after each one, watching me. I tap the video case against the table and twist in my seat. Mrs. Patterson could learn a lot from Audrey. Behind the counter Harvey is keeping an eye on me.

“What’s the deal with this Harvey guy?” I wonder if he has any idea what he’s dealing with.

“Jealous?”

“No.”

She looks at me, stirring her mashed potatoes and gravy. “He’s just a friend.” She lifts a mound of potatoes. “Something like your Saturday night brunette.” She takes a bite, smiling. I suspect the comparison is based on something deeper than the lie I told her. Her smile drops. “So you don’t like my choice?” I think she’s talking about Harvey until she motions to the video.

“I didn’t want any more teen romances.”

“Was the last one that bad?” She checks the tan potato mixture.

“No, but I can only take so much.”

“You’ll like this one.” She stirs her potatoes loose-wristed.

“Why?”
“It’s a surprise.” She puts a sporkful of potatoes in her mouth, presses her lips round the handle, and withdraws the spoon with the same liquidity she used to clean her fingers. “I love these potatoes,” she says, cleaning the remnants with a stiff tongue. She keeps her eyes on me. “Sure you don’t want some?” She offers the now clean, but slightly moist, plastic utensil.

“No, thanks. It’s a surprise?”

“Watch it. Then you tell me.” She moves on to some more chicken. Harvey’s eyes narrow on me, like I’m Victor Laszlo.

“Fine,” I sigh. “But I’m not going to let you push another one of these on me.” I stand.

She smiles. “If you say so.” She starts to lick her fingers again.

“You might be careful when you do that. I think you’re turning Harvey on.” He turns to the teenager behind the counter when Audrey looks.

“Maybe I’m trying to.” She raises her eyebrows. She finishes wiping her hands with a napkin. “Pay attention to this one.” She points to the video case. “I think it’ll help you.”

She takes another bite of chicken, pulling white meat off the bone. I wonder if she sees more than I want. I shake the case at her as I turn away.

“See you soon, Rick.”

I wave without turning around.

Harvey watches me as I get closer to the door. “Here’s looking at you, kid.” I give him the same condescending finger shoot Alan gives me. He cocks his brow and grunts as I exit.
The question now is do I go home and watch this video, or do I take my chances and go back to the office and get my clothes? I look at the video. The office is probably empty by now, and this suit smells too much like chicken.

**INT. JEFFERSON AND ASSOCIATES REAL ESTATE—EVENING**

The office is silent, a nice change from annoyance and paranoia.

The empty hallway still smells like apricot and mango. There’s something magical about standing in the dark surrounded by that smell. I stop outside Jeannine’s door, where it’s the strongest, allowing it to torture me for only a few seconds.

When I open my door a light cuts into the dark hallway.

“I was just about to give up on you,” Alan says. He’s reclined in my chair, feet on my desk, hands behind his head. I want to smile at his new suit, but I’m too busy kicking myself for not going home to watch *Drive Me Crazy*. He pulls a cigar from his inside coat pocket.

“How did you get in here?” I look back at the door.

He lights the cigar, drops the lighter on my desk, and plucks up a set of keys. He jingles them. “You’re not the only person with a master key, Rick.” He breathes smoke and studies his cigar. The keys make a thick, guillotine-like noise when he drops them back on my desk. “By the way, that coffee thing was nice.” He fakes a chuckle and then stops. His eyes are red. “You’re such a child.” He takes a long drag, with the hollow confidence of a mafia boss or studio exec.

I step to the front of my desk. “I like to keep things simple for you.” I take a seat.
He concentrates on a puff of his cigar. “Is that right?” I sit back. “Well, I appreciate the concern.” He looks past the cigar to me. “But I’m fine. You’re the one that should be worried.” He pokes his cigar at me, and then puts it back in his mouth.

“How do you figure?” I put my feet up on the edge of the desk.

“Jeannine.” He blows smoke in my direction. My feet drop off the desk, and I shift in my chair, concentrating on the spot where my feet were. “What, no wise-ass comment, Rick?” Smoke billows out as he laughs. “Tell me, what’s it like to have killed your chances with her again?” He flicks ash on my desk and takes another drag from his cigar. I’ve got nothing and he knows it. He smiles, the cigar still in his teeth. “That’s what I thought.” He takes another pull on the cigar, long and slow. “You’re so predictable, Rick. At times you disappoint me with how easy you make it.” I want to stop him, but I still have nothing. “She’s through with you, pal.” Hearing it aloud makes my chest tighten and my stomach heave, but I manage to look up into his eyes; they’re sharp enough to cut. “She’ll never forgive the same transgression twice.” His eyes dart away from mine for a second. “But that’s exactly what I was counting on.” The sentence echoes in my head as his smile grows. He leans back and puts the cigar back in his mouth. He wants me to ask, to admit that I believe he is smart enough to have planned and executed my defeat all along.

I stand. “Well, Alan, I’d love to stay, but I have other things I need to get done.” His proud expression dissolves as if I had just poured water on his face. I turn my back to him, pleased to have shut him up.

“Well, Rick, you might need these.” I turn to him. He has his feet lifted off the desk. Under his legs I can see my cards. His conquering grin has reappeared. “If you’re
looking for revenge, I could give you some pointers.” He lets his feet drop to the floor, sitting up in the chair. “Because I suspect your main character, like you, will be outmatched.” He pulls the cigar out of his mouth after one last drag and grinds it out on my note cards, letting the extinguished stub fall and roll on the desk top. “Especially when it comes to getting a girl back.” He stands. “But don’t worry, pal.” He comes towards me. “The story wasn’t that good anyway.” He stops in front of me. “Always hit ‘em where it hurts.” He pats me on the shoulder as he walks past. “Have a good evening, Rick.” I look at the cards, blackened by ash—the metaphor not escaping me. “By the way,” Alan says from the door, but I don’t lift my head, “if you’re wondering where your clothes are, they’re in the dumpster behind the building. I like to keep things simple, too.” Then he’s gone.

I listen for the front door to close. My stride is slow, like Charlie Sheen approaching a bomb crater in the final scene of *Platoon*. I pick up my cards, letting the ashes fall on the desktop with the smoldering cigar butt. The card *ABE GETS REVENGE AGAINST JOHN BY UNDERMINING HIS ABILITY TO PLAY FOOTBALL* has sustained the most damage. I take it off the stack, letting the rest fall and scatter on the floor. I consider it for a second and then tear it in half, severing the black scar left by Alan’s cigar, and let the halves flutter into the garbage can.

I sit in my chair, hovering over the stack of cards. Maybe Alan’s right—maybe there isn’t anything good in the pile. I bend down and start brushing the cards back and forth like someone sifting through the wreckage of their burned home. I pick up the card *VICTIMIZED BY CHOICES*. I should get it framed and hang it on my wall. I lay it on the desk, and go back to the mess on the floor. Abe and Becky and John, I leave on the
floor. I know the card I’m looking for: *A MAN LOSES THE GIRL OF HIS DREAMS TO A MAN HE HATES BECAUSE OF HIS BETRAYAL.* I pick it up thinking “again” should be in there somewhere. This card is still my story. I don’t know that Jeannine was ready to take me back, but I’ve blown any chance.

I keep the card in my hand as I walk out the door. I really do need a drink.

*INT. SUNSET BAR AND GRILL—EVENING*

Sunset is close to the office. It’s decorated like a classic Mexican cantina, dark, but not seedy. It’s surprisingly large, lots of turns and half-walls, so I can hear a few groups laughing, but I can’t see any of them; it’s a good place for privacy.

The young bartender watches me weave my way to the bar. He dries his hands with a towel and then throws it over his shoulder. I take a seat. He leans towards me, so I can see his rugged stubble.

“Bloody Mary,” I say.

“Alright.” He turns and takes down a tall glass, and puts it on the counter. “You want something to eat?” he asks as he reaches under the counter.

“You got fried chicken?”

“Yeap.” He pours the clear vodka and red mix into the glass. “Fries or mashed potatoes?”

“Mashed.”

“You got it.” He drops the ice into the drink, plunks in the celery stick, and slides it to me. “I’ll put the order right in,” he says wiping his hands on the towel.
I take a drink, studying the rippled mirror behind the shelves of glasses and liquor. Laughter explodes from around the corner.

“Hard day at work?” The bartender stands over me, wiping out a long beer glass. I shrug, pumping the celery up and down. “What line of work are you in?”

I tap the celery against the edge of the glass. “Real estate.” I suck the red liquid from the crisp, green fibers. “At least for now.” I watch the rippled form that loosely resembles me drink.

“I know what you mean. This is temporary for me too. I’m really a screenwriter.” I put my glass on the counter, still watching the distorted mirror. He’s a better candidate for brainless action star. “I’m going to write about this.” He waves his arms over the room as if unveiling it, rag in one hand, glass in the other.

I twist in my stool to scan the place and then look at his proud eyes. “Somebody already wrote Cocktail.” I drink.

He lowers his brow. “I’m not going to write about bartending. I’m going to write about the people. Do you know how many stories walk in here every day?” He motions to me with the polished pilsner. “You’ve got one.” He starts rubbing the rag against the long glass again.

I’m aware of the note card in my back pocket as I shift on it. “Not really.” I take a drink.

“Come on. The unkempt suit, concerned look, eating alone in a bar after work.” He’s accurate. “Even your drink tells a story.” I swirl my Bloody Mary. He brushes the hair from his forehead, a grin on his face.
I watch myself drink—Mike’s mystery man. I put the glass down, the bartender still watching me. “You’re right.” I turn to look at him. He puts the glistening glass on the counter. “I do have a story.” I stir my drink. “I just killed my wife . . . Mary.” I hold up the glass. “Because she was having an affair with another woman, and now I’m on my way to Mexico, but first I have to meet my accomplice, my wife’s former lover. She’s bringing the fake IDs.”

He smiles, not as annoyed as I was hoping he’d be. “See what I mean?” He whips the towel off his shoulder, lifts the cleaned glass, and wipes the counter under it. “Your chicken’ll be out in a second.” He sets the glass on the shelf behind him and walks down the counter to start a conversation with another lonely man. I take a drink, watching the ocean of red rush towards me.

“Hey, it’s Rick.”

I lower the glass. In the mirror I can see a round body and orange hair moving like an unbalanced washer. I set my drink on the bar and turn.

“Claire.” I nod. Her eyes are bloodshot and half-closed. I turn back to the mirror, hoping she’ll stagger on.

“Look at you, drinking alone.” There’s a hint of pity, but it’s probably just the alcohol.

“I like to, Claire.” I pick up my drink.

“Sure you do.” She staggers over and takes a seat on the stool next to me, and she puts what I think is meant to be a comforting hand on my arm. “I’m so sorry, Rick.” Like she’s apologizing for something deeper than any comment she’s made to me.
“You’re going to be ok.” She pats my arm. “Between me and you,” she says with a wino’s whisper, “I’ve always liked you, no matter what everyone else says.”

“I appreciate that, Claire,” I say, leaning away from her foggy breath.

“Maybe you should come join the party.” She waves, wobbling on her stool.

“What party?”

“Abby’s birthday.” She tries to point around the corner, but just ends up wobbling more. “Everyone’s here.”

“Everyone?” I ask. Her head bobs up and down with what looks like great effort. I look to the corner, and then back to Claire. Something more than vodka and Tabasco starts burning in my stomach. “Even Jeannine?” She again nods. I start out of my seat. If I can get to her before Alan does, maybe I can control the damage; maybe even get her to understand.

“And Alan’s there too.” Claire looks sober for a second. I sit back in my seat. She puts her arm around my shoulder. “I know you’re sad because of Jeannine and—” she lets out a moist hiccup—“Alan, but you should really . . .”

“No thanks.” I take another drink, looking at us in the mirror; it’s like watching Laurel and Hardy through a fish bowl. The bartender comes at me with my chicken.

“Can I get it to go?”

He looks at Claire with her arm around me. “Your accomplice?” he asks. I just smirk. He smiles and walks back to the kitchen.

“I know it seems like the end of the world, Rick.” I hold my breath in the breeze of cheap beer. Her hand slips from my shoulder, and she smacks me on the back. “But
it’s not a done deal yet. She might say no.” Her face swings away. She steadies herself with a hand on my back, swinging forward again.

“No to what?”

“Marriage.” Her head drops down.

“He asked her . . .”

“Yeah—where you been?” She smacks my shoulder, swinging away again.

“Here you go, bro.” The bartender slides me the Styrofoam box. “It’s . . .” I take out my wallet and throw my credit card at him.

“Claire, when did he ask her?”

“Tell you what.” She pats me on the knee. “I’ll go get her.” Claire staggers away before I have a chance to grab her. I start to stand, but she stops, and swivels around. “But first I need to go to the bathroom.” She wanders back towards me.

The bartender points to the bathroom, smiling. He looks at me. “Sorry, pal, but I don’t think she can keep a secret.” He lays my receipt and a pen on the counter. I scribble my signature, pick up my dinner, shoot down the rest of my drink, and start for the door, keeping an eye on the bathroom.

The bartender starts to clean up my area. “Good luck in Mexico,” he says with a wave.

INT. RICK’S CAR—LATER

There’s something poetic about speeding through the dark streets of LA, a slight buzz, like a bare bulb, burning in the back of my brain, tomato and Tabasco thick in my throat. Fleeing the bar has given me the same thrill Vincent Vega must have had rushing
an overdosed Mia Wallace to his dealer’s house—a man with a goal trapped in a car with his panic, the world around him a dark vacuum. Nothing like it.

I push the button to roll down the window, bringing in fresh air and the racket of gushing wind. So many things are clashing in my brain I think I might vomit. I breathe in the night and concentrate on the hypnotizing blur of street lights and want to scream into the dark.

I run my hand through my hair and look at myself in the rearview mirror; beads of sweat, like tiny blisters, pepper my brow, like I’ve got a fever. I wipe the sweat away with the palm of my hand and dry it on my suit pants.

I feel like I’ve been wearing this suit for weeks. It’s creased from too much worry for one day. I slow to tear off my jacket, tossing it in the back seat. Maybe I’m the overdosed Mia Wallace.

I pull my car to the curb—I’m overtired and need to stop running for a second. I put my arm on the steering wheel and rest my head on it. A ridiculous laugh builds in me, and I cough it out like John Coffey spewing demons on the green mile. I fall back in my seat, letting my head hit the headrest.

“This is pathetic,” I say to my reflection, the laugh catching in my throat.

For the first time since leaving the bar I let Claire’s news take center stage. It might actually be better for me if Jeannine marries him. At least then I can stop thinking about her, hoping there might be some chance. One less thing in my life. I’ve been trying to get her off my mind for three years, and maybe this is the answer—finally a chance to bury them both and drown myself in my screenplay.
I take the card from my pocket, the story that is my life. I can’t escape them. I toss the card onto the passenger floor. I drum my fingers on the white box in my passenger seat—the smell like the last time I saw Audrey, the time she talked me into a movie that will do me no good. With all my cards on the floor or in the trash, I’m back to square one.

INT. RICK’S APARTMENT—LATER

The chicken is gone by the time I reach my place. Just what I needed, comfort food to ease the burn of my Bloody Mary and let it settle into a numbing cloud in my brain—calming me and drawing my attention away from analyzing where I stand with Jeannine.

My answering machine is beeping, and under the influence of grease, vodka, and the air of an LA night, I push the button without thinking. An electronic voice informs me that I have one new message, and then a voice stunned, angry, and hurt undoes everything the chicken did.

“Rick, it’s Jeannine.” Like a spike driven through the back of my skull. “I can’t believe . . .” She stumbles over her words, teetering somewhere between sobs and swear words. “Alan is right, I should have known better.” I look at the machine as if I could see Alan in the room with her, prompting. “How could you . . .” I want to turn it off, but can’t. After a short pause she finally gets a handle on what she wants to say. “I guess it’s clear how far we’ve come over the last few years.” Her voice is devoid of anger; she means it. “I guess we’re finished.” I can almost hear Alan laughing. There’s a brief
silence, then “Goodbye,” a sharp click, and nothing. I wish I had another Bloody Mary and a box of chicken.
Chapter 5

*Thursday*

*INT. JERRY’S CLASS—NIGHT*

The class is in a semi-circle; Jerry straddles a backwards chair in the middle, doing his preliminary check on everyone’s progress: “what have you done since last week?” The washed-out fluorescent lighting, the geometric configuration, and the silent judgment of others make it feel like an AA meeting.

“See, I don’t think that’s the direction you should go,” Jerry tells Barbara, a timid brunette scarecrow with all the aesthetics of a kindergarten teacher and a freakish partiality to eroticism. “Can anyone give Barbara some other options?” Jerry asks.

“What’s wrong with getting the two girls in bed together,” Sam says, not even looking up from his fingernails. “I’d watch that.” He smirks.

A Tarantino wannabe who knows it all, but he can’t figure out that profanity and gratuitous violence can’t cover a weak plot. He reminds me of Mike, but without the heart.

“Thanks for sharing,” Jerry says turning his back on Sam.

“Just trying to help.” Sam smiles, peering deeper into his fingernails.

“Anyone else?” Jerry scans the other stunned faces. Barbara’s story has given them the shock of a driver’s ed. class that has just seen *Blood on the Asphalt*. Jerry goes back to Barbara. “Yeah, like I said, that might not be the direction you want to go, Barbara. Explore some other options for next week. Give your characters power instead of telling them what to do.” Jerry gives a reassuring smile, she nods, and he turns his chair to the next person, putting me on deck.
I shift in my seat. He’s expecting a new story, but I’ve got nothing. Even my
desperate attempt at teen romance has fallen apart.

Sam continues to examine his fingernails, which makes me wonder what he has
in there. His juvenile attitude makes me think he’d be carving JERRY’S A BUTTHEAD
in the desktop with a switchblade.

He looks up at me and scowls in a way that would have weaker kids standing in
line to cough up lunch money. I nod. He goes back to his fingernails. Maybe he’s
writing about a Vietnamese manicurist.

“So, Rick,” Jerry says, “have you started something new?”

“Or are you sticking with that same train wreck?” Sam says under his breath. He
only looks at me briefly before going back to his fingernails. A few people snicker, but
most just sigh.

Jerry shoots a glare at Sam and then comes back to me. “So Rick, what do you
have?”

“I’m still collecting ideas.”

“Ok. What are you considering?”

I look around the class again. Everyone but Sam is watching me. “I can’t think
of anything right now.”

“What about your note cards?”

I slide back in my desk, shifting my gaze around him. “I left them at my office.”

I’ve just given him the adult version of my dog ate my homework. He shakes his
head and rises off his chair. He spins to the rest of the class. “Never be caught without
your note cards, people.” He pulls a card from his pocket, and squats down, positioning
it on my desk. “I want you do an exercise for me.” He points at me and stands. “In fact I want everyone to do it. Everyone take out a note card.” Sam rolls his head back as he takes out his cards and puts them on his desk. He eyes me like I just told the teacher he forgot to give us homework.

“Now,” Jerry says, “close your eyes. Let everything flow out of your thoughts. I want you to let an image float into your mind. Don’t force anything, just let it happen.”

I know what images are coming before I even close my eyes. I was hoping to escape them.

“Come on, Rick, close your eyes.” The rest of the class is already sitting in silent darkness, even Sam, who is probably just dozing off. Jerry nods at me. I close my eyes.

“Now, just let your brain do its job.”

Like a movie at high speed, it all hits me: Jeannine looking sexy and professional, Alan in a halo of smoke, Mr. Patterson, his trophy wife and outstretched hand, Audrey with Harvey, the blank computer screen, burning note cards . . .

“Oh,” Jerry breaks in, but not soon enough to stop Jeannine’s voice on my machine playing over the sight of Alan telling her about the Pattersons and then sleeping with her. “Now write what you saw.” Jerry hovers over me as I scribble something down.

“Let’s see what you’ve got, Rick.” He snatches my card off my desk and starts to read it. “INT. BAR—EVENING. A man in an unkempt business suit sits alone at the counter. The place is empty, except for our lone drinker. He stares into a Bloody Mary; he’s broken.” Jerry looks at me. “That’s a start.” He looks over the card at me. “But let’s take it deeper. Where does it go, Rick?” I shrug. “Anyone?” He turns to the class.
“How about this?” Chuck holds his hands out in front of him, tension straining the muscles in his arms, like he’s about to crush the world’s largest fly. “The guy sits there for a second—” Chuck’s voice is soft, like a campfire storyteller. “And then out of nowhere he leaps out of his chair.” Chuck stands, his voice booming. “And pulls two pistols from the inside of his coat.” He imitates the action. “And then . . .”

“Chill out, Rambo,” Carla, says. “Broken doesn’t mean homicidal.” I’m looking forward to her final screenplay—an ethnic *American Graffiti—Mexican Graffiti.*

“Maybe you need a flashback,” Ellis says to me, repositioning his thick, dark-rimmed glasses. “You know like how he ended up there ‘alone and broken.’”

Jerry nods. “That’s good, Ellis. It’s always important to know where you’re character’s coming from.” Jerry looks at me. “How did he end up there, Rick?”

“Maybe he can’t write,” Sam says, brushing off the top of his desk.

“Shut up, before I break you in half,” Carla says. Sam gives her a dismissive backhand, which is void of conviction, and then crosses his arms, twisting in his chair.

“What do you think, Rick?” Jerry asks.

“Maybe he lost his rent money at an underground cock fight,” I say, getting a few laughs.

Carla throws her hands up. “Always the cheap way out,” she says.

Jerry avoids looking at me. “Yeah,” he sighs, looking to see if I have anything else; I don’t. “Well, Rick, you keep working on that, and we’ll check up on you later.” He holds the card out me, turning when I grab it. “Does anyone else have something they’d like to share? Tara?” Sam gives me a mocking smile and a double thumbs-up. His smile becomes a silent laugh as he turns his thumbs upside down.
I turn the card over.

INT. JERRY’S CLASS—LATER

I wait for the rest of the class to file out. Jerry’s shoving books and notepaper into his bag on the table.

“Did you want to talk about your story?” he asks without turning around.

“Sort of.” I look around to make sure we’re alone.

He turns, a yellow legal pad still in his hand. “Go ahead.”

“Well, the story I told the class isn’t exactly what I’m doing; it’s not even mine.”

He nods. “I know.” He turns and drops the pad next to his bag. His dramatic actions makes me feel he knows everything. “I had lunch with a friend who works at Miramax.” He leans back on the desk for support. “Mike pitched him a story with a man in a diner losing his money at a cock fight . . . and something else about a prostitution ring being run out of the same diner.” He twists his hands in the air as if trying to solve a Rubik’s cube. “Something like that.”

“So is it going to go anywhere?”

“I think he got some money to write it.” He sounds disappointed by that. “So now that we know what Mike is up to, let’s move on to you.” He lifts himself off the floor and onto the desk. “Do you have anything?” He folds his hands between his legs, leaning towards me.

I scratch the back of my neck. “I was working on something.”

“So what happened to it?”

“It didn’t go where I wanted it to go, and it was garbage.”
“Garbage?”

“Teen romance.”

He grimaces and then folds his arms. “Well, you know how I feel about genre films. Lucrative, but not fulfilling for true artists. Perfectly satisfying for some people, like Mike, but I never thought that was you.” He presses his hands against the desktop. He thinks I can do more. “On the other hand, it might be good for you to have some conventions to lean on through the hard parts.”

“Yeah,” I say.

“So give me the logline.”

“I never really got that far.”

“Pretend you did.”

“Well, the story’s about a boy who secretly loves this girl who happens to be his long time friend, but she starts dating the football captain, so he has to figure out a way to get her back.”

“So a high school boy must admit his feelings for his friend when she starts dating the football captain.” He shrugs. “Sounds like a start; it’s a little clichéd, but you can beat that with good characters and new twists, so give me those particulars.”

“Like I said, I didn’t get . . .”

“Humor me.”

“Well, Abe is the protagonist.”

“The boy who loses the girl.”

“Right. Becky’s the girl he’s after, and John is the football captain.”

“So what’s Becky like?”
“She’s beautiful, but more beautiful once you get to know her inside and out.”

“Katie Holmes rather than Britney Spears,” he says, bobbing his head around.

“Well, that’s usually how it’s done. So this Abe, did he always love her or just after she started dating the football guy. One of those ‘you-don’t-know-what-you’ve-got-until-it’s-gone’ things?”

I look at the floor. “No. He always loved her, but he didn’t think he had to do anything about it until she was gone.”

“Yeah, ok. John? What’s his deal?”

“He’s a bastard.”

“Just because he took Becky . . .?”

“No.”

“Please don’t tell me popular people are inherently evil. That’s the point of every teen movie.”

“Popularity’s got nothing to do with it.” I grab one of the pale student desks behind me and slide it between us. “He’s just a bastard.”

“There’s nothing redeeming about him whatsoever?”

“Nothing.” I wave my hands in front of me. “He’s basically the devil.”

Jerry’s eyes open in a humorous twist of shock. “Wow. Ok, then.” He slides back on the desk. “Obviously some issues there,” he says to himself and lets out a light laugh. “Rick, you can’t have characters who have nothing of value. Everyone has at least one thing that people can empathize with.”

“Not everyone.”

He looks at me, shaking his head. “Well, does he love Becky?”
“She thinks he does, and that’s one of the things that makes him so devious.”

“So why is he dating her? Is it something sexual?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“Revenge.”

He leans over his legs. “Ok. I’m intrigued. Against who?”

“Abe.”

“Ooh, our hero has a dark secret.”

“No he doesn’t,” I say. Jerry’s arms collapse, as if robbed of all energy. “John is just jealous.” I put my foot back on the seat of the desk.

“Jealous of what?”

“Abe’s smarter than he is.”

He shakes his head. “That’s not enough. You can’t have jocks intimidated by intellect. It breaks convention. Give me something specific that could actually spin this thing in an interesting direction.”

I stand up and pull the pale desk back around me and sit on it. I’m actually considering this plot again. “Ok. How about this? Abe could have been the quarterback, but he quit the team, and that’s how John got it, but he is always being compared to Abe, and people say he didn’t really earn the position, he just got it because Abe didn’t want it.”

He nods, his hand on his chin. “So if John can’t beat Abe on the field, he’s going to beat him in love?”

“Exactly.”
“So basically it’s a battle between these two boys and the girl is just a pawn in the whole thing.” He pauses, but moves on before I have a chance to react. “That’s not a romance, Rick; it could be a tragedy.”

“No . . .”

“Give me the major plot points.”

“Point one: Abe loses Becky to John.”

He nods. “Second?”

I think about the burned card sitting in my trash can. “Abe does something to get back at John. I’m still working on the specifics, but that’s the general idea.”

“So what’s your character’s main goal with this?”

“To get Becky back,” I say as if he’s missed the whole point.

He nods, looking at his shoes swinging back and forth. They stop, and he looks up at me. “See, you say he’s trying to get her back, but his actions indicate an overwhelming preoccupation with revenge against John.” He pauses like a D.A. presenting obvious proof. “Again you have this tragic overtone, where the girl is just a pawn in a power struggle between two men. She’s not the story; they are.”

He’s right.

“Which has the potential to be more interesting than just getting her back.” He watches me, but I’m too busy thinking. “But this is your story, so if you want to write a teen romance, you can.” He doesn’t seem to want me to do that. “But you’ll need to change your second plot point if you do. He needs to do something to win her back which in turn humiliates the boyfriend, not the other way around. Make his focus on her central.”
“Forget about the girl and just punish the guy?” I stare into his eyes, a look that stuns him for a second.

“Yeah. That’s one way to go.” He looks at me as if I have an ulterior motive for asking, so I don’t press it anymore.

“I’ll have to think about that,” I say.

He hops down off the desk, turns his back on me, fumbles in his bag before slinging it over his shoulder. “Well, whichever you do I want you to write me a scene for next week. I don’t care where it takes place in the story, just get me something that lets me hear the voices and see some interaction. Can you do that?” I nod. “Good,” he says. He holds out a blank note card. “Use this to write your scene idea.” I take the card from him, and he smacks me on the shoulder as he walks past me. He stops at the door and turns. “Oh, something else you might want to think about.” I wait. “If he does want to get her back you need to tell me why he deserves her.”

“What?” I’m too distracted thinking about revenge.

“You need a character that an audience is going to root for. He has to be likeable. That might be easier if you can justify a reason why he deserves her.” He waits to see if I get it. I do. “Good luck.” He tosses a wave as he turns. “See you next week.”

Jerry’s right—forget about the girl and focus on punishing the guy. This is a revenge story.

\textit{INT. RICK’S CAR—NIGHT}

Once again I’m in a Tarantino movie, but this time I’m the bride from \textit{Kill Bill}, and I’m going after Alan.
I’ve forgotten about hurting Jeannine and trying to get her back, and I’ve forgotten about teen romance. I have to pay Alan back for bringing her into this in the first place. I’m sure he’s expecting me to just wallow around feeling bad for her.

I keep Jerry’s blank card on the seat next to me, just in case something mean sparks to mind.

I pull up to the drive-thru window and order my two-piece meal with mashed potatoes and gravy. I’ve been craving chicken like a crack addict—like it’s the adrenaline shot that saved Vincent Vega.

I peer around the kid taking my money. I wonder if Harvey is back there somewhere. This isn’t his KFC, but the smell wafting out the window is Eau d’Harvey. I take my chicken and lay it in the seat next to me. The red and white box, Colonel Sanders staring back at me, like he knows exactly what he’s doing.

My stomach is rumbling, and my mouth watering just from having the Colonel in shotgun, but I’m not going to eat until I get where I’m going. My plan was to go straight home after class, but my direction has changed. Jerry’s going to get his revenge.

EXT. ALAN’S HOUSE—LATER

I park at the curb across from Alan’s house. I pull the candy-striped box onto my lap and open it. I’m reminded of the other night, sitting in my car at some anonymous curb—guilt, anger, the desire to see her, and a Bloody Mary pulling at my stomach. I was surrounded by similar smells then—the same smells around Audrey and me with Drive Me Crazy between us, but I’m in a different state of mind now.
Alan’s windows are dark. I don’t want to think about where he might be, but I can’t ignore the image of a coital celebration of their engagement at Jeannine’s—the culmination of two done deals.

I bite into a piece of chicken, tearing it in my mouth like a gluttonous barbarian. I don’t have any plan, but I thought any good act of revenge starts with a stakeout, and if something impulsive hits me I’ll act on it. I’m just a good real estate agent who’s trying to write a screenplay—and a chicken-craving stalker, out for blood. I take another bite of chicken, with more civility than the first—it’s not a werewolf movie.

Maybe it’s the thought of Tarantino, but I have two situations running in my head. In one scenario, Abe, a la Tanya Harding, is waiting outside the locker room with a lead pipe. In the other I’m peeling across Alan’s grass, hitting him, sending him flying over the hood of my car, before he gets to his front door.

I smile, drop the piece of chicken back in the box, and wipe my hands. I pick up a fresh napkin and rest it on the steering wheel. I start to write the scene, hoping something will come out of it:

**EXT. LOCKER ROOM—NIGHT**

_Abe lurks in the shadows, wringing a heavy lead pipe in his hands. His face glistens with the kind of malicious glee Jack Nicholson had in The Shining._

_The door starts to open and Abe sets his stance, drawing the pipe up over his head. His eyes are fixed with conviction._

I stop writing to shield my eyes from oncoming headlights. I slide down into my seat. It’s Alan’s dark blue Land Rover, turning into the detached garage. I look
down at the scene sketched on the napkin. It’s just catharsis. Good revenge has to be subtle.

A few seconds later Alan pops out of the garage talking on his phone, laughing. I look back at the napkin. He wanders down to the end of the driveway, a perfect target for a drive-by.

He talks until more lights appear at the end of the street. He steps aside to let Jeannine’s maroon Blazer pull onto the driveway.

I slide down a little more. She steps out and they kiss. I grit my teeth to stop my stomach from quivering at the sight of her. This is revenge.

Alan puts his arm around her and guides her to the house and inside.

I write more:

Becky’s car shows up to pick up John. Abe lowers his pipe and stays hidden in the shadows.

I wad up the napkin and throw it to the floor of my car, same place the card landed before. Sorry, Abe, I guess everything is complicated when you can’t ignore your love for someone you can’t have.

“Damn, that’s corny, Rick,” I tell myself. The bedroom light isn’t on yet, and I don’t want to stick around to see it.

I start my car, but before I drive away a thought comes to me, an obvious answer to my problem. I take out Jerry’s blank card and my pen.

ABE GETS REVENGE AGAINST JOHN BY TAKING BECKY BACK

I pull away from the curb as the bedroom light goes on.
INT. RICK’S APARTMENT—LATER

My answering machine is beeping again, a painful reminder. I put the box on the table. I don’t really want to hear who called—the last message was an exercise in aversion therapy—but I can’t stand the beeps, so I push the button, and go to get a plate.

“Hey, Rick, it’s Audrey from Blockbuster.” A prickling feeling like her nails on my spine. “I was wondering what you thought of Drive Me Crazy, but I guess you’ll come in when you’re done with it. See you later.”

I haven’t watched it yet—haven’t had the stomach, and my current state of depression has given me too much masochism to take it tonight. I move the video case from the coffee table to the top of my DVD player. I’ll watch it later.
Chapter 6

Monday
INT. DAILIES DINER—MORNING

Abe’s plan to get revenge against John has to start with Abe getting Becky back—that was my biggest worry. But Audrey was right, *Drive Me Crazy* did help: it gave me an idea. Of course, watching it alone on Saturday night might have influenced my objectivity, which is why I want to run it past Mike, just to see what he thinks about it.

There are more people in the diner than there were the last time I was in here, but the remaining customers scattered about seem to be at the end of their meals, so I expect the diner to be desolate in a few minutes, which will give Mike a chance to work on his screenplay more.

It’s a bit of a change to see Mike hovered over his laptop, staring into the screen, instead of watching customers and trying to figure out their stories. I’ve never seen him concentrate like this, but he’s not typing; he’s just watching the screen. I know the posture.

“You’ll give yourself cancer that way.” I say finding a hint of joy in breaking his concentration.

He looks up at me, and when the glaze over his eyes fully dissipates, he lets out a sigh.

“I’m not that lucky.” He looks back into the screen, one last desperate check for inspiration; then he shuts the computer.

I give a silent, empathetic laugh.

“I’d forgotten how hard it is to create the minutiae of a story,” he says pushing the computer away from him. “And the fact that the studio is breathing down my neck
doesn’t make things any easier.” His subtle way of telling me he’s sold the idea.

“Maybe it’s because I’m missing my inspiration.” He waves a hand towards the counter—the stools are empty. “I need that desperate man.” He looks me over. “Did you know that I sold the story about the man who loses his money at the cock fight?” I was hoping to escape with just the subtle reminder.

“Yeah, I heard.”

The look of pride on his face makes me wonder if he thinks I saw it on Entertainment Tonight. “How did you know?” he asks just to make sure.

“Jerry told me.”

He smiles. “Oh yeah—is he mad that I’m doing things without his help?”

“No, he seemed fine with it.”

He looks back to the empty stools. “I need my depressed loser. But I haven’t seen that guy for days.” He looks me up and down, hopeful, then fallen. “And you don’t look at all depressed.”

“Thanks.”

He looks at the ceiling. “Why does God hate me?” He presses his hands in the direction of his question.

I consider it. “God hates all writers,” I say, taking a seat.

His hands drop and he looks through me. “Is that why we’re fascinated by losers who can’t hold onto their women?” He eyes me.

“And desperate men in diners.”

He’s stunned for a second, but then looks impressed. “You’re onto something there, Morgan.” It doesn’t sound like sarcasm, but I don’t take it as a compliment. He
reaches around the computer for his coffee. “We are the great untold stories.” He toasts us and drinks.

He seems to be taking it so personally, but asking him to explain the reasons would derail my purpose in being here.

“Speaking of guys who can’t hold on to women . . .” I say, knowing I might be cutting my throat.

He smiles behind his mug. “Is this a personal problem?”

“It’s not a problem; it’s just a question.” He continues to look at me. “About writing.”

“The guy who lost his girl because of betrayal and can’t get her back?” He sips, still watching me.

“He’s going to get her back,” I say.

He smiles. “So you’re writing a good old fashioned melodramatic romance.” The smile’s got nothing to do with me. “That’ll piss Jerry off.” His smile grows. “Good for you.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I say.

“So do you need help with winning a woman over?”

“I’ve got an idea, but I don’t . . .” I trail off.

“Well, lay it on me.” He leans back in his chair, ready to listen but oozing doubt.

“I was thinking about jealousy?”

He nods as if impressed. “Who are you trying to make jealous?”

“The girl.”
He almost starts to laugh. “Oh yeah, that’ll definitely work.” He looks around and leans towards me. “Dave just hired a new waitress, and you should see Jamie whenever I talk to the new girl.”

“And you wonder why God hates you?”

“Hey, I’m a writer.” He smiles.

“So you think jealousy works?”

“Lots of people think it works, and that’s why it’ll work for you. It’s all about perception.” He gazes into the center of the diner, lost for a second; then he looks back at me. “But you should probably test it out.” His eyes narrow on me in a mischievous glare, like I should already know what his suggestion is going to be. “Ask Jamie out.” I should have seen that one coming. “I bet if she thinks it’ll make me jealous, she’ll go out with you.”

“And what do I get out of it?” I ask.

“Research . . .” he pauses to smile. “A lot more, if you’re lucky.” He sees I don’t share the humor. “You get to see first hand how your scene will work.”

“No. Besides, what do you think, she’s going to go out with me once and fall in love?”

He eyes me. “Yeah, you’re probably right, that wouldn’t work.” Only Mike could concede my point and insult me at the same time. “But still it’s a good idea.” He takes a sip of coffee. “How did you come up with it?” he asks.

“It just came to me.”

He nods, openly impressed. “Do you already have a character picked out?”

“I hadn’t gotten that far.”
“Well, you need a specific type of girl.”

I nod. I’m interested in his philosophy on women.

His eyes shift around the emptying diner. “A sex-pot.” I start to lean away, but he grabs me. “Listen, a totally hot chick, great body, great looks, and super sexual—the kind of girl that the other girl wants to be. That works on two levels. It’s not only jealousy of the girl, but it plays on insecurities, which is especially good if you want a little revenge on her too.” He gives me a sinister wink. My limbs go numb thinking about how Jeannine’s actions stung me. “That’s the way you should go.”

“Someone like Jamie?” I ask.

He smiles. “Now that you mention it, yeah, just like Jamie.” He sips his coffee with a smile. “Got anyone you want to make jealous?”

“So you think jealousy will work?” I ask.

“Yeah, another woman will work great, and if you need one, I can help you out.” He winks.

“Thanks anyway.”

He nods, picks up his coffee, and looks to the counter. Still no desperate man.

“Do you need some help?” I point to the laptop.

“No.” He thinks it beneath him to take advice from me. “I’ve already got an idea for an angle.” He drinks and sets his mug on the table, and pulls the laptop close, as if he needs to write it down before it escapes him. “It’s been staring me in the face for so long.” He opens the computer and punches the keys as if they were hot.

I pause behind him before I leave, just long enough to see what he’s got. He has already started the scene:
Fade In

* A lonely 50s style diner. A man in a wrinkled tan suit sits at the counter, nothing but a cup of coffee in front of him. A few people buzz around, but he pays them no mind, all he sees is the mug and its brown liquid quivering under the air conditioning.

He types “V.O.,” indicating a voice over. Then: Smith. Finally: “God hates all writers, and I think that’s how I ended up in this 50s retro hell.”

I smile and leave Mike to it.

EXT. BLOCKBUSTER VIDEO—MID-MORNING

It’s still a little early for Blockbuster to be open, so I just take a spot where Audrey can’t see my car if she’s inside.

Taking Becky back is more poetic than a lead pipe, and Mike’s right, using a sexpot will play on her insecurities, allowing Abe to hurt her just a little for dating John in the first place. Mike is a devious bastard, which is why I trust him when he talks about deception.

I’ve got Drive Me Crazy in the seat next to me—I’ve gotten everything I need from it.

The faint smell of fried chicken is settling over the parking lot like the morning haze over the valley—the siren song of Harvey’s vocation. I shift to face the source of the smell, my stomach rumbling, reaffirming my fears that I’ve become addicted to fried chicken.
The plain, steel kitchen door of the restaurant swings open. Harvey exits—I recognize the blue and white stripes of his manager’s uniform stretched tight over his belly; behind him is Audrey, her blue Blockbuster polo shirt pulled tight over perky breasts, her usual, easy gait, all strut and sexuality; Harvey’s stride is a little more labored, but it’s got a spring that only comes when a fat man is happy.

I sink down in my seat, watching, like a pathetic voyeur who, in a mist of desperation and fried chicken, stalks girls and their boyfriends.

Something about the morning light and the empty parking lot gives their pace an aggressive confidence similar to Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs*, except the two of them are filled with an unidentifiable joy that makes this whole experience more annoying, and more humiliating.

Audrey takes out her keys and unlocks the door, opening it for him. He says something that makes her laugh. Then he pats her on the butt. She jumps, but doesn’t stop laughing, just takes a weak swing at him, which prompts a comical, silent-movie sort of jog into the store. Audrey then steps behind the glass door, the fingers of her right hand curled around the doorjamb as her left hand removes the keys from the lock. Her head rises as if in slow motion, and my throat constricts as if she were raising a gun in my direction and before I know it her eyes are on me. I search for a glimmer of recognition. I wonder if I’m parked far enough away. Then a grin creeps across her face. A cold, gloating smile like the human-monster from a horror movie who knows it’s being watched and is glad. Audrey’s fingers uncurl from the doorjamb and she steps into the obscurity of the store just as the door closes.
I’m frozen for a few seconds, trying to decipher the look, the smile, the vision of me sitting in my car like a third-rate detective. Being caught in the act of concealment makes me look like I’m hiding something from her. Why would I be in an almost empty parking lot watching a sexy young girl and a self-deluded fat man walk into a video store? Her smile said everything—she thinks she has the upper hand. I can’t ask her out and give her more reason to believe that.

I look down at the video next to me. Maybe it’s the fact that I’ve just run out of options for making Jeannine jealous or the confusion the smell of chicken is giving me, but I’m rethinking my whole strategy. I may have gotten some bad advice.

I cast a scathing glare at the video case, which goes unappreciated.

Maybe getting Jeannine back won’t be such a task. If she said no to his proposal, everything might be over or at least starting to crumble.

I take out my phone and call Ray’s desk.

“This is Raymond.”

“Ray, It’s Rick.”

“Hey, Mr. Morgan. How are you?”

“Fine. Why do you ask?” I don’t know how far Claire’s gossip has spread.

“No reason.” I can tell there really isn’t.

“How was the party at the bar the other night?” I’m fishing.

“Good. Claire got so drunk. I’ve never seen her that way.” He chuckles.

“And how’s Abby?” My gut reaction was to hate her after she told Alan about the Patterson sale, but it’s not her—it’s him.
“Really good.” His emphasis on the word really makes me not want to pursue that line of questioning, but I get the feeling he would like me to. I wonder if he even knows that she turned me in, and I wonder what he thinks about it, again an issue I’m not going to pursue.

“Say, Ray—” It’s going to sound ridiculous, asking him if he knows anything about Alan and Jeannine’s engagement; I don’t want to bring him into all that. “Is Claire around?” She already knows everything.

He pauses, perhaps scanning the office for her. “It doesn’t look like she’s back.”

“Back from what?” I’m not sure if it’s just curiosity or desperation that prompts the question.

“Mr. Jefferson sent her to buy some champagne.”

“Champagne?” My stomach hollows considering the reasons for champagne.

“For the company’s anniversary party on Saturday. He and Abby have been in meetings all day about it.”

“The company is having an anniversary party?”

“Didn’t you know that?”

“No. How would I have?”

“Abby said that all your regular clients were all invited, so I just assumed that you sent them their invitations.”

“That sneaky bastard,” I say to myself.

“What was that?”

“I don’t know who’s coming. Mr. Jefferson has that list.”

“Does Abby have it?”

He hesitates. “Probably,” he admits.

“Could you find out for me, please?”

“She’s in a meeting with Mr. Jefferson right now, and she probably has the list with her.” He sounds relieved.

“All right. Thanks, Ray.” I hang up and toss the phone back into the passenger seat. I look to the video store, start my engine, and pull up to the door.

INT. BLOCKBuster—Moments Later

Audrey’s behind the counter, her elbows resting on it, face to face with Harvey. They both look up.

“Hey, Rick, how are you?” Audrey asks in her usual over-friendly tone, rising off the counter to face me.

Harvey glares at me.

“Hey, Audrey, would you like to go out?” I ask between agitated and heavy breaths.

A smile creeps across her face, she glances at Harvey who looks like an elephant shot by a tranquilizer and just starting to realize what’s about to happen.

“Sure,” she says, looking back at me.

“Great. Call me later tonight, and we’ll get things figured out.”

“Ok,” she says.

I toss her the video, and she catches it.
“Thanks for the movie,” I say. “It helped.” I turn to leave, catching a quick look at Harvey, his eyes drooping like a man watching his house burn down. “Hey, Harvey. Nice to see you again,” I say, dumping a little gasoline. Then I’m gone.

INT. JEFFERSON REALTY—AFTERNOON

I rush through the open office, my eye fixed on the senior associates’ hallway. I feel like Jerry Maguire walking into his office just after he was fired, thinking only of getting his clients. In my peripheral vision I see Raymond getting off his chair and starting towards me, but I’m already turning into the corridor.

Jeannine is standing in the hallway talking to one of the girls who works around Raymond. She looks at me, but I avoid her eyes, trying to plot a path around her.

“Excuse me,” I mutter as I step between them. I lock eyes with Jeannine. She’s too surprised to give the kind of searing look that would accompany the message she left me, and I don’t wait for it.

“He’s in a meeting with Abby,” Jeannine says after seeing that I’m not going to my own office.

“I know,” I say, so she can’t hear me. I grab the knob, trying to turn it but failing. I jiggle it—locked.

“What is it?” Alan yells through the door. “I’m busy.”

I reach into my pocket and pull out my keys, glancing back at Jeannine, who’s no longer listening to the girl. Behind them, Raymond has appeared, curious.

“The door’s locked?” Jeannine asks. She stops short of me. I think I have an idea. I watch her as I open the door; she ignores me.
“Rick, get out,” Alan yells when I enter.

I jump back pulling the door closed again. I catch Jeannine’s surprised eyes.

“Sorry, Alan, I didn’t know you were indisposed.” Jeannine leans away, eyes wide. “They’re naked.”

She pushes me out of the way and opens the door. Ray rushes up the hallway, nearly knocking his innocent coworker to the floor.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Alan says, but Jeannine has already come into the office to see him behind his desk, fully dressed, and Abby sitting across from him, steno pad on her lap.

I put my hand out and stop Raymond. “Just a joke, Ray.” He searches my eyes for truth, and finally seeing it, he attempts a smile and steps back.

Jeannine hovers between Alan’s desk and where I stand at the door. She looks at me and for a second I see the hate I was expecting. “Jackass,” she mutters walking past me. The tropical paradise I smell helps me see how stupid the whole thing was. “April, let’s continue this in my office,” she says to the girl standing in the hall, who I’m glad to see is amused by the whole thing.

I reset my sights on Alan. “Abby, would you mind giving us a little privacy?” I ask.

She starts to collect her things.

“Hold on, Abby,” Alan says holding his hand out to her. “She’s not going anywhere, Rick. I think you . . .”

“Oh, you know what, Alan, you’re right,” I say. “Abby, could you check and see if Walter Leaderman has been invited to the little shindig this week?”
“Of course he has . . .”

“Thank you, Abby,” Alan says. “That will be enough. Go ahead and get started with the other stuff.”

“Yes, Alan.” She stands and rushes out of the office where Ray is waiting for her.

When she passes me I think about whispering “I know what you did,” but I don’t want to start anything with her while Ray’s around.

I close the door.

“That was a funny little stunt, Rick.”

“Yeah, it gave me a chance to see the doubt she has.”

His confidence falls for a second. Then he resuscitates it. “You’re pathetic.”

“Yeah. Well, we’ll see.” I breeze past the implication. “So tell me about your little party, and why my clients were invited, but I wasn’t.”

“Are you going to lecture me on the morality of poaching clients?” He snorts a little laugh. “I guess you are the expert.” He stands and strolls to his mini bar. He pours himself something and then turns to me again. “I’m going to be honest with you, Rick. After all, you deserve that.” He lifts his glass part way. “I’m tired of this little game.”

He sips. “I figure all I need to do is take a few of your key clients, and then I’ll be done with you for good.” He pauses. “Actually, all I really want is Walter. I don’t even care about the rest.” He watches me over the brim of the glass as he takes another drink, like a James Bond villain.

“I appreciate your honesty. Now let me tell you what I want.” I step to the front of his desk, and he lowers his drink, looking into the glass.
“I already know what you want, Rick.” He spins his glass making the liquid inside twist, and then he looks up at me. “You want Jeannine.” He steps near his desk, and sets the glass on the corner. He’s shut me up for a few seconds, and he’s savoring it.

“We don’t always get what we want,” I say.

“Ain’t that the truth.” He picks up the glass, bottoms it out, and slaps it back on the desk like he’s just won a drinking contest. “But sometimes we do.”

I look into his weasel eyes. “Yes we do,” I say with enough conviction to get him to consider it. “See you on Saturday, Alan.”

He nods and turns back to his mini bar.
Thursday
INT. JERRY’S CLASS—NIGHT

Jerry hasn’t shown up yet, so a group has gathered around Tara’s desk to discuss the impact that independent film has had on the Hollywood system—a debate that has been raging with them since Jerry mentioned it in passing on the first day of class. All the excitement makes it easy for me to slip unnoticed into a seat deep in the belly of the semi-circle.

I’m cautious about placing my copy of the Los Angeles Times on the desk. Concealed under the paper is the scene Jerry wanted me to have for this week.

The clique huddled around Tara reminds me of how easy our writers’ group fits into a John Hughes film—where the social stratum is well delineated. Tara is the youngest and best-looking girl in class, the center of attention and the best candidate for prom queen. Andrew flanks her, our “sporto”—almost as popular as the queen, but with a hint of desperation in his bravado. Bonnie and Barbara share the role of the weird, silent character—Bonnie, the angry activist grad student, gets the weird and Barbara gets the silent. Chuck and Ellis split the geek role—Chuck is more the loud-mouth-idiot geek, Ellis is the intellectual, chess club geek.

On the other side of the class is Sam—the rebel outcast, except there is nothing cool about him. No one likes him, so he’s an ass to cover the fact that it bothers him. Today he’s trying to look uninterested. He sizes up the group, undermining their abilities.

I’m sitting closer to Sam than I’d like, when I have the kind of script that I do, but I ignore him and hope he’ll show me the same courtesy.
I pretend to read the headlines until I’m sure no one is watching me; then I fold
the paper up so I can see the slugline at the top of my script: INT. HOMECOMING
DANCE—NIGHT. Jerry will probably stop there and wonder if I’ve really given him the
vengeance he wanted.

Sam has started watching me as if he smells bad writing. I drop the paper back
over the script and scan news stories. Someone in the conversation mentions Reservoir
Dogs, catching Sam’s attention before he moves on to dusting off his desk.

“Horror doesn’t count,” Ellis booms at Tara. She is the least weary of genre film,
a malady the class has tried to treat. “It’s pop crap, not art.”

I fidget with the paper, waiting for the class’s usual devolution into what makes
good film, an opinion that was clear to me just a little while ago. I’m relieved when Jerry
enters.

“Ok, let’s get started,” he says throwing his bag on the front desk and rubbing his
hands together. The group scatters to their desks. “I’ve decided to forgo the usual
progress report.” He swivels at the hips, addressing the semi-circle, his hands pressed
together in front of him, moving up and down with the tempo of his speech. “Instead, I’d
like to go straight into workshopping.” His swivelung stops and his joined hands point to
me. I freeze. “Rick and I started talking about his new screenplay, last week, and I’ve
been thinking a lot about it.” Everyone looks at me. “Would you mind sharing it with
us?” Ellis still seems a little charged up about the “pop crap” issue since he didn’t get a
chance to finish his diatribe on the subject, and Sam is just joyous to take me apart.

I shift in my seat trying to think of an intelligent way to present my “pop crap.” I
think about my life. “It’s a vengeful love triangle,” I start. “A triangle filled with
betrayal, deception, mistrust, and a hell-of-a-lot of backstabbing.” It sounds like a good story, but not much of a life.

“Any sex?” Barbara asks. The class turns to her. She looks down, as if she never said anything.

I hesitate.

“Keep going,” Jerry urges. “Sounds like you’re running with some of the things we talked about last week.”

“Two guys, Abe and John, trying to destroy each other, and using a girl, Becky, to do it.” Jerry nods, hearing almost the exact words he used last week.

“Interesting,” Andrew says, getting nods from most of the class.

“Give him a chance; he’ll screw it up,” Sam says, picking at a spot on his desk.

Jerry shakes his head at Sam. “Did you bring a scene, Rick?” he asks, his hands pressed together under his lips.

“Yeah.” I glance around the circle as I slide the script from under the paper.

“This is the final scene.”

“Set it up for us.” Jerry leans back against his desk, demonstrating the same reclined interest Mike had when I first asked him about the jealousy angle.

I read the location tag to myself, wondering how far I’ll get before someone stops me.

“Come on,” Jerry urges.

I clear my throat. “This last scene takes place at the prom.”

A boisterous guffaw stops me. “What is it, some damn teen romance?” Sam asks.

“Would you shut up?” Carla says. “He hasn’t even started yet.”
“Alright, let him get through it before we attack,” Jerry says, turning to stare Sam down. “Keep going, Rick.”

“Well as I said there’s a battle raging between John and Abe. John has taken the girl Abe loves, and so he’s trying to avenge that.”

“So is this the climax?” Tara asks.

“Yeah.”

She nods like a kid listening to a campfire tale.

“Abe has spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to do that. Finally he figures that the best thing to do is to steal Becky back. That way he gets her and punishes him.”

“Ok, Rick. How does he do that?” Jerry asks.

“He’s going to make her jealous.”

“Oh, I like that,” Tara says.

“You would,” Sam says.

“Shut up, Sam,” Andrew comes to Tara’s defense.

“What’s wrong with it?” she says.

“Using jealousy,” Sam starts. “That sounds like the cheap trick of a damn teen romance, and not a good one either,” he adds looking at me.

“What about some action?” Chuck asks. “Why not just kick the guy’s ass in the parking lot?”

“Yeah, that would be much better,” Bonnie says, rolling her eyes at Chuck. “He’s going for something cerebral.”

“Is jealousy the best path for that?” Jerry asks her.
“It’s a start. Better than a barroom brawl.” She reaches out to punch Chuck in the arm.

“Yeah, it is cerebral and emotional. He’s hurt emotionally, and so he is going to do the same. It’s . . .” Tara says.

“Poetic justice,” Ellis says, getting a smile from her, which seems to upset Andrew.

“Ok, but is it enough to get her back?” Jerry asks.

“If it’s the right woman,” Barbara says, avoiding anyone in the room.

“She’s a sexpot,” I say to Barbara. She nods in approval.

“A what?” Jerry asks.

“Sexpot—a girl that is hot and sexual and makes the other girls jealous,” Barbara says like she’s reading from Webster’s.

“Is that going to work?” Jerry asks, looking at the women.

There’s silence.

“Oh, yeah.” Barbara is the first girl to speak.

“It would work for guys too,” Andrew says. “If John’s getting nothing from Becky and he sees Abe scoring with . . .” He looks at me for the name.

“Britney.”

“Oow. It even sounds like a trampy cheerleader,” Bonnie says, giving Tara a quick glance.

“Yeah.” Andrew nods at the name like he’s looking at a dirty picture of her. “If he’s scoring with Britney, maybe John will rethink it all.”

“You mean dump the nice girl and go after the sexy tramp?” Jerry clarifies.
“Oh, yeah,” Barbara says again.

“I don’t know if I like that,” Tara says, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Yeah, you’re going to manipulate this girl into liking him?” Bonnie asks.

“Plus, what about Britney’s feelings?” Tara asks.

“Cheerleaders don’t have feelings,” Bonnie says as if she’s just traveled back in life ten years. Tara’s mouth drops, but Bonnie just smirks.

“It might not work.” She turns from Tara to me. “Maybe she’ll just see him happy and not want to disturb that.”

Jerry looks at me. He seems to think that’s a good point. “Why is this going to work, Rick?”

I slide back in my chair. “Because she wants to be with Abe, she just doesn’t know it yet.”

“So why will she realize it now?”

“Whatever tricked her into liking John is wearing off. She’s finding out that he’s just a stupid, brainless jock. She’s always taken Abe for granted, used him as the shoulder to cry on, but when she sees the possibility of losing him, she’ll know it’s now or never.” It’s not until I stop talking that I realize I’m out of breath. “At least that’s how I picture it.”

“Ok,” Jerry says. “Let’s hear the end of it.” He points to the script. “Just the last few pages.”

I glance around the room before lifting the script and flipping to the last part.

“John and Britney were voted king and queen of the prom, so they are dancing together,” I explain and then start to read.
The principal steps out of the way, allowing John and Britney to descend to the dance floor. When they step into the middle of the hollow of people, music starts. Abe watches them slowly dance around the open floor. Becky appears, unnoticed, out of the crowd behind him.

BECKY
Britney looks beautiful.

Abe turns around, stunned to see her, but he quickly regains his composure.

ABE
(Glancing back at the now dancing royalty couple)
She does, doesn’t she?

He turns back to Becky.

BECKY
(stepping along side of him, but watching the dancing couple)
Kind of weird watching your date dance with someone else, isn’t it?

She looks at him and they stare into each other’s eyes, a glimmer of something passes between them.

ABE
(shrugging)
Does it bother you?

She looks out at their dancing dates, considering the question. Abe watches her, waiting for her response. She turns back to him but doesn’t look at his eyes at first.

BECKY
I thought it would,

She looks up at him again.

BECKY
But now that it’s happening I find that it doesn’t bother me as much as . . .

She stops, looking away again.
Abe bends down trying to meet her eyes, but she avoids the attempt.
Roberts 118

ABE
(softly)
As what?

Her eyes lift to meet his.

BECKY
As much as watching her dance with you.

Abe smiles. She looks away.

BECKY
I know it’s stupid.

Abe puts his hand on her chin and turns her to him.

ABE
No, it’s not, because it bothered me to see you dance with him, too.

They stare at each other for a few seconds.

BECKY
(quietly)
So what do we do now?

ABE
(holding out his hand for her)
Would you like to dance?

She smiles.

BECKY
I’d love to.

She looks around.

BECKY
But not here.

She gently takes his outstretched hand and pulls him out of the crowd. They vanish out the door.
I close the script.

There’s silence, but only for a second.

“I told you. It’s a damn teen romance,” Sam says.

“Is that it?” Ellis asks. “That’s the end?”

“That can’t be the end,” Bonnie states with a kind of lost faith. “Where’s the deception? The mistrust? The backstabbing?”

I drop the script back on the desk.

“I want to see him rub the guy’s nose in it,” Chuck says. “Is that in there?”

Tara says nothing, which makes me think she’s hiding something.

“Sounds like a disappointed audience with some valid points, Rick,” Jerry says. I pull the *LA Times* back over my script. “Is this all we are going to get out of the revenge story? What about John’s reaction?” He points to Chuck.

“Or Britney’s?” Tara asks.

“Yeah,” Jerry says, both acknowledging and dismissing Tara’s comment. “If this is the end, you need to think it through a little bit more. You’ve built something that could be pretty good, but you leave it unresolved with that ending.” Telling me what to do makes me think he’s ready to move on.

“What’s most important for him?” Carla says. She has been silent the whole time, so her outspokenness now gets everyone’s attention. Jerry shifts his eyes to her as if annoyed that she’s reopened the discussion.

“What?” I ask, trying to switch gears with Jerry.

“Is he trying to destroy the guy, or is he trying to get the girl?”
I look down at the paper covering the script and then back at her. “He wants to do both.”

“How is more important?”

I don’t break eye contact with her. “The girl.”

“Does she know that?”

“No.”

“Why doesn’t he tell her?”

“She’d never listen.”

“Does he deserve her?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?” She stares at me waiting for an answer as if Becky was her best friend and I was a suitor. Jerry does the same. He asked me to think about the question, but I was too concerned with the actual scene.

I look up at Carla. “Because he loves her, and he’d do anything for her. That’s why he’s doing this. That’s why he’ll try anything to get her back.”

She smiles as if satisfied. “Then that’s what he should say to her, and if it’s true, she’ll listen.” Carla sits back in her seat.

“So you say Abe should just talk to her, be honest, get the girl and forget about the rest?” Jerry asks.

“Yeah.”

“Then it’s just a damn teen romance,” Sam says.

“That’s not always a bad thing,” Tara says.

“Yes it is,” Sam says.
“No, she’s right,” Barbara says, her tiny voice barely audible. “If love is what you want, honesty is the key.” The class looks at Barbara, shocked that she has an interest in genuine romance. “Anything else is just psychosexual manipulation.”

“Yeah, but it’s interesting. What’s interesting about love?” Chuck says.

“Yeah, I thought we were trying to make this about more than love,” Ellis says.

“At least a little psychosexual manipulation,” Sam says, winking at Barbara so she starts looking at her shoes again.

“Maybe it is just a romance,” Tara says. “If what he really wants is the girl then he should get her.” Sisterhood seems to have helped her overcome her fear of pop crap.

“But Carla is right, not through deception. If he loves her, she’ll see it.”

“Oh yeah because girls never make the wrong decision when it comes to a big, strong football player,” Andrew says, surprising no one.

“So what then?” Bonnie asks. “He has to trick her?”

“Maybe,” Andrew says.

“All right,” Jerry steps in. “I don’t want to start a gender war here, and it sounds like we’ve given Rick plenty to think about.” He is ready to move on. He looks at me.

“Figure out your goal, what you want.” He waits for me to understand and moves on.

“Ok, now that we’re warmed up let’s talk about someone else. Tara, what are you working on?”

I pull the script out from under the paper and read the slugline again. I flip to the last page and write in the white space under the ending:

ABE TELLS BECKY EXACTLY HOW HE FEELS

I close the script and bury it under the newspaper.
**INT. JERRY’S CLASS—LATER**

The class dissipates after Jerry releases them. I linger, keeping my script under the paper.

“You sparked quite the discussion today, Rick,” Jerry says.

I stop and turn to him. “Who knew teen romance was so controversial?”

He nods with a smile as he comes around his desk. “So are you going to stick with the ‘damn teen romance’?” He imitates Sam’s voice and laughs. He leans against his desk.

I shrug. “Would that disappoint you?” I close the gap between us.

“I would think it would disappoint you.” He turns to the materials on his desk, packing them into his bag. “I thought you were looking for more than . . .” He trails off to let me fill in the blanks: pop crap. He looks over his shoulder.

I look away.

“If you want to go after the happy ending, you can. It’s your story, but don’t forget the vengeance—this guy stole from your character; that should never go unpunished.”

“Is jealousy a good way to do that?”

“Maybe not the smartest, but it’s good if you have to get back at the girl for some reason too.”

I half-laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“Mike said just about that same thing.”
Jerry yanks his bag off the desk. “Well, Mike’s not always wrong.” He walks past me. “See you next week.”
I’m still undecided about what I’m going to do this evening. The comments in class have been zipping through my brain for two days, and I’ve questioned too many times whether this plan will work or not.

Audrey is waiting for me on the front stoop of her apartment. She looks the way I imagined Britney looking—the hot sexpot who will make the other girl jealous. Her strapless black dress forms to her body like a wet t-shirt. It’s the first time I’ve seen her in something other than khaki pants and her Blockbuster polo shirt—she looks great.

“Just thought I’d get some fresh air while I waited,” she says, coming towards me. The dress makes her walk even more sensual than usual, and I look away to avoid being hypnotized.

“It is a nice night,” I say, looking into the clear night sky.

“Yes it is.”

I look back expecting her to be inches from my face, but she is at a respectable distance. By now she should be pressed against me, saying something confusing or arousing, but she’s acting like a real date.

She cracks a smile and leans in to kiss me on the cheek. Tender and petite, not at all how I imagined. “And I’m sure it will only get better.” Her tone is innocent, not sexual. She takes my hand, the grasp soft, gentle. All I can do is stare at her. This changes the game.

“Shall we, then?” she says, swinging our hands towards the parking lot, and imploring me with a smile.
I try to grin, but it fails. “Audrey,” I start. She looks into my eyes, as if she knows what I’m going to say, but she doesn’t let me say it.

“I’m sorry, Rick.” Her hand falls from mine, and she seems a bit embarrassed.

“Am I being too nice?” I’m confused and I don’t hide it. “I wasn’t sure what you wanted. I assumed you wanted a Nicole.”

“Nicole?” The name is familiar, but I’m trying to place it.

“But I guess you wanted Dulcie.” She steps into me and wraps her leg around mine. “Someone who is going to push you into a janitor’s closet and stick her tongue down your throat.” *Drive Me Crazy.* She puts her lips next to my ear. “I actually like this better.” She bites my lobe, and growls. She lets go and steps back. “I assume we’re going after the lady I saw you staring at in the store. Do you think that will work on her?” Yeah, that’ll do. I nod. “Good.” She grins. “This swings both ways, right? You have to do the same to Harvey. You have to make him jealous.” I should tell her she doesn’t need that. “I’ll figure out a time and a place later, but I just want to make sure we are both clear.”

I nod. I still can’t figure out what she sees in him, or why she thinks she needs to manipulate him. But that’s not important.

“Now should we go?” she asks, taking my hand again.

I look at her, and smile. “Yeah, let’s go.”
INT. PARTY—NIGHT

When I wrote the scene of Abe and Britney at the dance, I had Abe looking for Becky to show off his new girl, but he could just as easily be hoping to avoid Becky—thinking of what could go wrong.

Audrey looks around, soaking it up. “Great place.”

Alan picked one of his properties for the party, and it was the right choice.

“I know. Its open floor plan is very conducive to mingling, and the vaulted ceilings help you forget that there’s even a roof.” Like I’m selling the place.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Well if you’re interested you can pick up a leaflet by the door.” I point to a display.

She looks at me, and we both start laughing. “Your boss is kind of lame,” she says.

I nod. “This is his most expensive property, and he’s having a hard time selling it. I’m sure that’s why he chose it. The fact that it works for a party is a lucky coincidence.”

“Well, I don’t know why he can’t sell it. I like it.”

I just smile. I have a few clients who’d buy it in a second, but I don’t want Alan to get even half a commission.

“So where’s the girl?” She leans sideways to try and see through the mass of people.

“I don’t know.” I don’t want to know.
“I guess we should just be ready then.” She pivots around me like I’ve just twirled her in a tango move, putting us face to face, then the arm that was under mine slips down to the small of my back where it meets up with her other hand, sealing our bodies together. My arms fall around her back. I stare into her eyes, but they’re not filled with adoration or love, but a sadistic delight. “How’s this?” she whispers into my ear.

“Maybe just a little much,” I whisper back.

She laughs as if I had told her a joke and then peels herself away. “Oh, Rick, you are so funny,” she says loud enough to draw the attention of people around us, not an easy feat in a room as loud as this one.

“Thanks,” I say more like a question than anything else.

She winks, then pivots away from me, sliding her hand down my arm and wrapping it around my hand. She gives it a confident squeeze, and I notice the firm silk of her touch.

“Hey, Mr. Morgan,” I hear in the distance. Ray cuts through the crowd and stops short of a comfortable conversational distance, eyeing Audrey and our clasped hands. His mouth drops open as if he had something to say but it had left him; it’s the exact reaction I wanted Jeannine to have.

“Ray, this is Audrey,” I say.

Ray’s hand shoots out like he’s meeting a client.

“Hey, Ray.” She breaks her hand free and lets Ray shake it.

“Ray’s my assistant,” I say close to her ear.
“Wow, that’s great,” she says, wrapping her arm around my back. “I bet this guy keeps you busy.” She nods my way and pokes me in the stomach with her free hand.

“Yeah,” Ray manages to say without closing his mouth.

“So where’s Abby?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” he says, still staring at Audrey.

“What about Claire? Have you seen Claire, Ray?”

He looks at me; his eyes clear as if he finally realizes that Audrey is not the only person in front of him. He starts to speak, but Audrey cuts him off.

“Have you seen Jeannine?” She pulls me close to her, while cutting through Ray with her eyes. She must love the weakness she sees in him. “I’ve heard so much about her. I’m dying to meet her.” She smiles, graceful for Raymond and sinister for me.

Ray looks at me. He may not know everything about Jeannine and me, but he knows enough. I nod, pretending I don’t see the danger.

He looks back at Audrey, who waits like a lioness in the tall grass. “I don’t know,” he says. “I saw her earlier, but now I don’t know.” He looks to me.

“That’s ok, Ray,” she says. “But when you see her you tell her I want to meet her, ok?” She talks to him like he’s a kid, and he just nods to her.

“I have seen Mr. Jefferson, though,” he says with enthusiasm, just happy to be able to give some information related to a person and a place. He looks at me. “He’s on the balcony talking to Walter.” His smile drops. “I’m glad I found you.”

“Son-of-a-bitch.” I break Audrey’s grasp and start to walk away.

“Wait,” Audrey says, grabbing my arm. “What do you want me to do?”

I look down at Ray. “Have Ray tell you about his forbidden love.”
Ray’s eyes widen, and Audrey smiles. She turns her head to Ray. “Really, Ray, a forbidden love?” She puts her arm around him and guides him to a place where they can tell secrets. Ray looks back at me, his eyes pleading like he was being dragged down to the depths of hell. I shrug as if helpless and start to push through the crowd.

There are fewer people in the kitchen, so I can see the sliding glass doors that lead out onto the balcony. Walter is leaning against the railing, fiddling with an empty glass and smiling. I start towards him, but Claire steps out in front of me, a champagne flute and a plate of hors d’oeuvres in one hand and a cracker with something spread on it in the other. I keep my eye on Walter around Claire’s large orange dress.

Before Claire addresses me, she nibbles on her cracker—which makes her look more like Dame Edna. “Hey, Rick, I didn’t expect to see you.” She’s not as drunk as the other night, but she’s had a few, which makes me wonder about her life outside the office.

“Yeah, well I came.” I try to move around her, but she blocks me again.

“Did you come for Jeannine?”

I stop. “What if I did?” I ask. I’m sure by tomorrow morning she’ll have forgotten anything I say.

“I saw that beautiful girl you came with.” She sips her champagne managing not to spill her crackers and crudités. I wait for her to swallow and hold back a belch. “She won’t be happy about that.” She stuffs the rest of cracker in her mouth. “These are so good.”

“Why won’t she?”
“What do you think?” I know she’s a little drunk, but her coy avoidance is just childish.

“I don’t know, dammit. Tell me.” I’m just short of grabbing her and shaking the truth out of her.

“She still hasn’t said yes to Alan.”

“What does that have to do with me?” I suspected she was waiting because of me, but I’m no longer sure.

“Maybe nothing.” Her responses are too frustrating to figure out, and Walter looks like he’s enjoying himself a little too much.

“Ok, thanks, Claire. I have to go talk to Alan.” I start for the glass door.

“Where are you going?” she asks me. “Alan’s down the hall talking to possible buyers.” She motions with her plate and glass to a nearby hallway where Alan is pointing out the molding to a couple who are looking at each other more than the house’s extras.

I turn to see who Walter’s with. I sidestep to put Claire between me and the door again.

“What is Jeannine doing with Walter?” I ask myself, but Claire answers.

“I don’t know. She’s been waiting for you all night. Alan was talking to him earlier.” Claire takes another drink.

I watch Jeannine and Walter. Her body language isn’t business, more like a date. Her clothing is a little more sensual than what she wears to the office. She doesn’t show as much skin as Audrey, but she doesn’t need to. Her hair is up and the spaghetti straps
on the full-length dress allow her to show off her long slender neck, her most attractive feature. The simple strand of pearls is icing.

She says something they both laugh at, and then she takes Walter’s empty glass and comes into the kitchen. I stay behind Claire, who has taken more interest in her plate of goodies than me.

Jeannine takes a place in the drink line, smiling to those around her, being a good hostess. Walter looks out at the view from the balcony. The perfect chance to undo whatever propaganda Alan laid on him, but he’s not why I came.

“Thanks for your help, Claire.” I say, walking past her to the drink table.

She nods with her mouth full of little pieces of toast.

“Hey, Jeannine,” I say. Her head comes up, but not enough for our eyes to meet.

“Hey, Rick.” She keeps her attention on the drink table.

“How are you?” I feel stupid using such a line with her, but I’ve got nothing else.

“Fine.” She still doesn’t look up. “How are you?” It’s an automatic reaction.

“I’m good.” I try to it sound like I am. “I saw you talking to Walter.” She stops making her drink, her eyes on my chest. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s good. He just sold a house.” She looks up at me. “But you knew that already.”

“I heard Alan’s trying to take him from me.”

She laughs a little. “He won’t have anything to do with Alan. You made sure of that.” I take it as a compliment. “Now if you’ll excuse me I have a client.”

“You have clients here?” I mean it to sound like a congratulatory question, but the friction between us makes it sound like I’m mocking her.
She looks hurt, then angry. “To be honest, you insensitive bastard, no, I don’t have any clients here.” She whispers, then turns cold. “But you do,” she hisses with a cruelty I’ve never seen in her. “But not for long.”

The dress, the hair, the conversation with Walter now all make sense.

I let my shock and realization register on my face.

She just smiles, both mocking and malicious.

“Why?”

“Well, I thought I’d try the Richard Morgan real estate philosophy: always screw the ones who hurt you. You’re familiar with it, right?” She tries to move past me, but I stop her by grabbing her arm. “Let go, Rick,” she demands with force, but without making a scene.

“If it’s a sale you want, have Alan give you this place. I’ve got the perfect client. You could have it sold in a day.” I realize the offer is worthless the moment I speak it.

Her eyes are cold like Alan’s. “This isn’t about money, Rick.”

“I know. You’re pissed, and you want to hurt me, but you’re better than this.”

She gives a cold laugh. “I used to say that about you too.” She looks down at my hand around her arm, and I let it slip from her. “Can I go now?”

“Jeannie,” I start, forgetting revenge and backstabbing. “I’m sorry.” For the first time tonight she doesn’t look like she hates me. “I never meant to hurt you.” It sounds like a bit of a cliché, but I mean it and she knows that.

Her lips part and I wait for the words she’s about to speak. Her eyes shift to something behind me, and her mouth closes just as I feel hands slither past my hips and
lock just below my belt buckle, and I barely have time to realize how screwed I am before the words come.

“Hey, Ricky, where have you been?” I feel Audrey’s moist teeth begin to flirt around my right ear. Then she stops. “Oh, hi.” She says over my shoulder. “You must be Jeannine.” Audrey frees a hand to extend it towards Jeannine. Jeannine’s politeness kicks in and she grab’s Audrey’s hand.

“Yes, I am, but I didn’t catch your name,” she says, looking at me.

“Oh, I’m Audrey.” She lets go of Jeannine’s hand to stroke my chest. “I’m with this stud, huh?” she asks me. “I have the hardest time keeping my hands off him, but he doesn’t seem to mind, if you know what I mean.” Jeannine nods. “Do you, honey?” Her teeth go back to my ear.

“No he doesn’t,” Jeannine says to me. “Well it’s good to meet you, Audrey. If you’ll excuse me, I have a client waiting for this drink.” She looks at me. “Good-bye, Rick.” She takes a few steps and then turns around. “Hey, I’ll send you an invitation to my wedding.” Her face is blank—the cold, impenetrable face of someone who doesn’t care about anything.

I want to stop her, but I can’t form the words to do it, and Audrey’s moist kisses on the back of my neck and her probing hands make it worse.

When Jeannine is far enough away, Audrey’s hands pull me close to her. She lets out a slight laugh. “How was that? Do you think she believed it? I do. She looked pretty upset.”

“Yeah.” I want to be mad at Audrey, but this was my stupid plan.

“So, what’s next?” She comes around the front of me and takes my hands in hers.
“Nothing.” I watch Jeannine give the glass to Walter. He smiles at her, and the look that Jeannine gives me is similar to what I imagine Abe giving Becky as he dances with Britney.

Audrey forces me to look at her. “That’s it?” she asks a little fallen.

“Yeah, that’s it.” I break away from her.

“No, Rick, you’ve got her just where you want her . . .” She has more, but I cut her off.

“No. This is not where I want her.” Jeannine gets a little closer to Walter when she sees that I’m still watching her. Audrey moves her head. “It was a stupid plan,” I say still looking at Jeannine.

Audrey seems offended. Jeannine laughs, putting her hand on Walter’s arm.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say.

EXT. AUDREY’S APARTMENT—NIGHT

There is no reason for us to linger on the doorstep. Our business is done, and I’m pretty sure Jeannine is gone.

“Maybe we could try something else,” Audrey says.

I don’t want another game, but I let her make suggestions anyway.

“Maybe I could work on the guy—you know, undermine the trust, get her to think that he’s after me.” She thinks about it. “He’s kind of cute.” At that point I stop her.

“No. I don’t think movie clichés are going to help.”
She looks down. “I’m sorry it didn’t work for you.” I can tell she really is, but I’m not sure if it’s regret for me or because it shatters her faith in teen romance. “But you’re still going to help me right?”

I don’t get a chance to answer.

“Did you two have a good time?” a voice booms through the courtyard.

Audrey’s already leaning over the second floor railing. “Yes, Harvey. We had a great time.” She pulls me close to her.

I fell like I could vomit, getting dragged into this again.

Harvey staggers around as if wounded.

“So go away.”

“No, Audrey, please.” He looks at the ground and back up to her. “I need you.” Her hold on me slackens.


She puts her hand on her chest. “You love me?”

It’s not exactly Romeo and Juliet, but it works for them.

“And I never want to lose you.” He gives me a glance.

“I hoped you would say that.”

“Will you . . .” If he asks her to marry him, I’ll do a swan dive off this landing.

“Come back to me,” he says with open arms, and I understand her attraction to him—he’s cheesy and easy to manipulate, a teen romance cliché.

She turns and winks at me, to let me know it’s not over yet. “Well, I don’t know. Rick and I were . . .”

“Screw him,” Harvey bellows. “I’m the one who loves you. I always will.”
She smiles at me with a sadistic playfulness he can’t see. My pity for him makes this night even more depressing.

“Please, Audrey,” Harvey moans.

She looks at me again. “It worked,” I whisper, hoping to end this gruesome scene, but she’s working out her next move. I have to do something. “You win, Harvey,” I yell. “I’ll never love her the way you do.” My admission shocks Audrey. “Come up and get her.”

His heavy steps bound up the stairs. She still seems unsure, but there’s nothing she can do now. “You got him,” I tell her, still hoping to shake the insanity from her. When she turns to Harvey, sweaty and gasping for breath at the top of the stairs, I slink past her and around him, trying not to smell or touch him, and down the staircase.

**INT. RICK’S APARTMENT—NIGHT**

I throw my keys on the table, more pissed about teen romance than ever before, and the only thing that is going to make me feel better about embarrassing myself is erasing that damn script. I don’t know what I was thinking writing a teen romance with a happy ending full of love and joy. I hate that crap.

I scoop the script off my computer desk. The first order of business is to destroy this thing. I tear it in half and then in half again, crumpling the pieces, chucking them in the general direction of the garbage can, throwing myself down on the chair. I feel a little better looking at the scraps on the floor.

I scoot the chair closer to the desk and open my screenplay. I want to erase it all, destroy the notion that I could change anything, forget getting something back that is lost.
I highlight the script and with one push of a button Abe and his foolish attempts at getting Becky back are gone.

Jerry’s right. Get back at John and forget the rest—forget Becky—forget Jeannine. Stick to my natural tendencies: screw everyone who hurts you; it’s worked in the past.
Chapter 9

_Sunday_

*INT. JEFFERSON REALTY—EARLY MORNING*

Back to my old ways of revenge. Just as Jeannine has been Alan’s tool to destroy me, the business has been mine to destroy him.

I’m sure the party, if it was any good, ended only a few hours ago, so while Jeannine and Alan are home toasting their cunning capture of Walter’s account, I’m going to raid Alan’s contact list, his clients, their numbers, every person he’s talked to, and I’m going to take every one of them, starting with the house where he held tonight’s party.

There’s a light behind Alan’s door, a glow like something from _Close Encounters of the Third Kind_, and I, like Richard Dreyfuss, approach it with a wary but hypnotized groping.

Just about the time I reach my office, the crack of light widens. I paste myself to the wall to avoid the hurried silhouette that rushes out of the room into the hallway. The outline of long hair makes my stomach knot, thinking it could be Jeannine. She comes closer—clothes half undone, shoes in her arms, upset—it’s Abby. She ducks her head, red strands of her mussed hair shielding her eyes. She’s not out of the hall long before I hear the front door open and close.

My steps towards Alan’s office are even more measured. I’m thinking about the possibilities for Abby being half naked in the office at two a.m., ignoring the most obvious, maybe for Ray’s sake more than my own.

The woody smell of Alan’s cigars oozes out the open doorway, and his leather chair squeaks. I recognize Alan’s suit coat as I step over it to enter the room.
The cigar I smelled is burning in the ashtray on his desk, next to it a half-empty glass of scotch. Alan’s bare feet are propped up on the desk as he leans back in the chair, his head flopped down and away from where I stand. He has a hand wrapped around a framed picture that lies face down on his chest.

He speaks before I can come up with something clever. “I thought I told you to leave,” he says with the deep throaty growl of a man who has had too much to drink.

“Actually, I think I’ll stay.” Not the right words, but the best I can come up with.

He swings his head to face me. We are both wearing the same suit we wore to the party. His tie is undone and hanging on either side of his neck, and his white shirt is half unbuttoned, exposing more of Alan than I ever wanted to see.

“What the hell are you doing here?” The slurred speech makes me wonder if he recognizes me at all, but the venom makes it clear.

“Just wanted to make sure you got home safely.” Even with him in such a condition, I don’t let up.

He sneers. “Abby drove me.” He fumbles until he finds the glass of scotch. He manages to connect the edge of the glass with his lips and then empties it and lets the glass drop from his mouth and thud on the carpet. With anyone else I might feel compassion, but he just makes me laugh. “Oh, yeah, laugh it up.” His feet fall from the desk and he tries to stand. The picture falls to the floor. It’s the close-up of Jeannine.

He groans, bending to pick it up, and then, with all the gentleness he can muster, he lays it flat on his desk. We both stare at Jeannine looking as beautiful as she has ever looked. Then our eyes meet each other. Behind his inebriation, anger wells. “Is that
why you’re here, you bastard?” He pushes the picture with the heel of his hand. It skitters off the desk and lands at my feet.

“What?”

For a second he speaks with a sober voice. “Are you going to make me say it, you sadistic son-of-a-bitch?” Then he gets the remorse of an alcoholic who has achieved his moment of clarity. “You win.” He folds his arms on his desk and drops his head on them, muttering again. “You win.”

The words aren’t as satisfying as I always thought they would be, but maybe that’s because I don’t know what he’s talking about. I haven’t done anything to beat him yet.

Alan’s head comes up off his arms, his mood has swung again. “Get me another drink, will you?”

It’s the least I can do.

I pick up Jeannine’s picture and place it back on the desk, then cross the floor to the mini bar, kicking his shoes out of my way and sidestepping the empty, lipstick-tinted glass on the floor. I use the open bottle of scotch to fill a fresh glass.

“Ice?” I ask with a tone that indicates a more cordial relationship—just two old pals having a drink.

“Neat,” he says, like I knew. He lets out a drunk snort of amusement. “Hell, make yourself one too. We can toast it all.”

I bring both glasses back to the desk.

“Thank you, sir,” he says with a poor English accent, taking his glass from me.

“So what are we toasting?” I ask.
He’s already started drinking. He stops mid-drink, looks at me with one eye, and laughs again. “You,” he says as if he just thought of it. He lifts his glass and drinks.

I drink too—it’s good scotch.

“To her,” he says, still swallowing his last drink and waving the glass at the picture of Jeannine. He drinks again. I drink too.

“So this is about her,” I say, sucking wind.

“About you being right about her.” A declaration he sees as worthy of a toast. When he has finished swallowing, as if he’s intoxicated enough for it to no longer hurt, he gets honest. “She never wanted me. She always wanted you.” He starts to laugh, but drowns it with the rest of his scotch. “Always you, Rick.” He slams the glass on the table. “And now you have it all . . . the girl . . . the client . . . the girl and the client. You were always better than me.” It doesn’t sound like self-pity, it sounds like the truth he has always feared, finally allowed to come out. His face turns down, realizing that he is not intoxicated enough for it to no longer hurt.

“Here’s to us, Alan.” I raise my drink and dump the remaining scotch into his empty glass. “And the women that destroy us.” I tap the rim of my glass to his and dump the last drop of scotch into my mouth, while he grips his with both hands and gulps what I’ve left him.

I stand and start for the door, giving one last look at him. He sucks on the glass, his gaze fixed on the picture of Jeannine. I turn back to the mini bar, take the bottle of scotch, deposit it on his desk, and turn Jeannine’s picture face down. “Have a good night, Alan,” I say with all the magnanimity of a Capra hero.
INT. RICK’S APARTMENT—LATER

I pace the floor, torn by my desire to go knocking on Jeannine’s door at 2:30 in the morning, and the promise I made to myself that I would never let her hurt me again. I wish I had finished my glass of scotch.

I thought I could get away with turning off my feelings for her, letting her go, but I now realize that has never worked, especially when there is the kind of possibility that now exists. Alan said it: she wants me, always wanted me, and I’ve always wanted her. Maybe now it can finally happen.

What changed her mind? I laugh at the thought that the ploy with Audrey may have actually worked, but I think maybe it was me finally apologizing for what I did.

I walk into the computer room and start to sift through the torn pieces of my script until I find the note I wrote on the last page:

_ABE TELLS BECKY EXACTLY HOW HE FEELS_

I started to tell her at the party. It didn’t end the way I had hoped, but I feel like I can try again. First I need to shower the smell of Audrey off of me.

EXT. JEANNINE’S APARTMENT—MORNING

I waited as long as I could before coming over. It’s still early, but not so early that I’ll feel guilty if I wake her.

I step out of the car and rush across the street like a S.W.A.T. team member in an action movie. I take a deep breath and knock on the door. The peep-hole darkens, and then there is another pause, a decision being made. The locks snap open and there is Jeannine. She’s put together, but doesn’t look like she’s slept for a while—her eyes are
red and puffy, and her face is creased. She avoids looking at me, still undecided about
opening the door.

“Hey, Rick,” she says, her voice flat and weary. “What can I do for you?”

“Can I come in?” She looks at me, still doubtful. “Please.”

She sighs and opens the door for me.

Her place is filled with her smell and a host of memories from the time when we
were friends with possibilities. I breathe it all in; I’m where I should be.

“Want a seat?” She waves me into the living room.

I flash her a smile and hurry to the couch, wondering how to start. I can’t imagine
just blurring it all out—it’s is too much.

Jeannine lands on an over-stuffed chair opposite me. The way she looks and the
nostalgia of being in her apartment give me a place to start.

“What’s wrong, Jeannine?” Her name sounds awkward, too formal, but anything
else might sound manipulative.

She snorts and looks away, biting her lip. I’ve seen her like this before, same
place, same mood; I hesitate.

“Come on,” I say, “you used to tell me things.” I slide to the edge of the couch,
leaning over my knees to get closer. I consider grabbing her hand, but we’re not ready
for that.

She looks at me with a moist gloss over her eyes. “That was a long time ago,
Rick.” She tries to smile, but her lips quiver, and she looks away again. “A lot has
changed.”

“That’s why I’m here.” I sit up and fold my arms, backing off a little.
She gives me a sideways glance. “You want to be friends?” She makes it sound like a ridiculous proposition. She shakes her head. “I don’t know if that’s possible.”

“I know, but I don’t want to be just friends.” I stop. She’s smart enough to figure out the rest, and I hope I didn’t get to it too soon.

She turns to me. “You know—don’t you?”

I’m not sure what she’s referring to, and I show it.

“How did you find out so fast?” She makes it sound like a violation of her privacy.

“What?”

“That I dumped Alan.” She leaves off ‘you idiot,’ but it would fit.

I nod.

She smiles, but she’s not happy. “You think I did it for you.” I should have stayed home. “And now you’ve come to reclaim me.” She starts to laugh. “Of course. How could I have not seen this coming?” She gets more somber. “I can’t believe how stupid I am.” She stares me down. “Do you want to know why I dumped him?” She doesn’t wait for an answer. “Because I finally saw it. I realized what you two were doing.”

“What . . .”

She doesn’t stop. “I was blind, and you two must have been having a great time, laughing it up.” She throws her hands in the air, mimicking celebration, but more irate than I have ever seen her.

“No . . .”

“It makes me sick to think about.” She presses her fingers to her chest.
“Jeannie . . .”

“Don’t, damn you, don’t. Look what you’ve done to me.” She stands out of the chair, and I fall back against the couch. “You two selfish bastards. You took advantage of my feelings for you, and I never saw it.” She turns away.

I stand and step towards her. “Jeannine, listen . . .”

“To you?” She turns around. “No. Not anymore. You came here the instant you heard I left Alan, trying to get me back, turning the final dagger in whatever screwed-up little game you two are playing, but I’m not going to be your pawn again.” The conviction in her voice and the look of disgust send waves of moist heat through my body. “Alan wanted me to help him steal Walter, and I did it.” She swaggers back towards me with a kind of pride in cruelty that only a deeply scorned person can have. Then her eyes soften. “I thought it would feel good to hurt you the way you hurt me, but it didn’t.” She crumples, as if her bitter pride was the only thing keeping her up, into the chair in front of me. “I actually felt sorry—one of the perils of humanity, I guess.” She looks at me. “But Alan loved it.” She watches her feet bounce up and down. “The worst part is I saw that taking Walter from you gave him the same kind of joy that my acceptance of his proposal gave him, and that’s when I figured it out.” Tears well up in her eyes. She strains to hold them back, using her bitter bravado, and it gives her strength in her legs again as she stands and hovers over me. “So I gave him a taste of his own medicine. I told him I was leaving him, that you were the one I wanted all along, and I even took away his great trophy of the night. I told him I was giving Walter back to you.” She looks at me. “But you’re not getting Walter.”

“Jeannine . . .” I stand, wanting to tell her he’s not what I want.
“And you’re not getting me.” She turns her back on me.

I pause before saying, “That was all Alan . . .”

Her back quivers as she laughs. She turns back to me and all emotion has left her.

“You’re the exact same way, Rick.” She steps closer to me. “So how can I turn away from him and go right to you?”

“Because, I do care for you. I do love you.” This declaration doesn’t have the strength or impact I was hoping for.

“Even if that’s true, it doesn’t change anything, Rick. I see what you are because I became the same kind of monster—someone whose first reaction is vengeance every time somebody does something wrong to them. I’m not going to be your tool, Rick.”

“That’s not . . .”

“Your hate for each other runs too deep for you to want anything else.”

“I’ll walk away from him completely. I’ll leave the agency. Then it’ll just be the two of us. We’ll forget about Alan.” I wave my hand away from us, pushing all else aside.

She cocks her head to look into my eyes. “No, Rick, I’m leaving the agency.”

She backs off. “Maybe that way you can just kill each other and be done.”

“You’re leaving?”

“I can’t stay, knowing what you almost did to me.”

“Where are you going?”

“Back to Michigan.”

“I can’t let you go. I love you, Jeannie. I have for years.” The only lines I can think of come from some old black and white movie.
She looks down at her shoes. “It’s too late.” She opens the door, a hint too overt to ignore.

She’s resolute. This is the end.

“Jeannie . . .”

Her eyes come up to mine, cold and firm. “No.”

She waves me through the door and shuts it once I’m on the doorstep.
Chapter 10

A few weeks later

INT. JERRY’S CLASS—NIGHT

“Is that it?” Tara says. “It just ends with him walking out.”

“I think we all found that to be a little unfulfilling,” Bonnie says. “I’m all for dark and depressing, but that was just sad.”

“It’s not sad.” Ellis says. “I think it’s got potential, but it does need something else—a real third act.”

“So what could he do here?” Jerry asks.

“He’s got to get the girl,” Tara almost cries.

“I’d like to see more action.” Andrew looks at me, ignoring Tara. “Is the last we see of John when he’s drunk?”

“Maybe he can go back to the stadium,” Chuck says. “And find John still wasted and then put him in a car and make it look like a drunk driving accident.” A gleeful grin, clarifying what he means by “it.”

“Or get Abby to file rape charges against him,” Barbara says, drawing a lot of attention and a little approval.

“That’s all too-heavy handed,” Carla says. “I like that last scene with John. He’s beaten.” She turns to Tara. “And I think it’s kind of ironic that neither of them ends up with Becky. Neither of them deserves her,” she says to me.

“But you can’t just leave it off like that,” Tara claims.

“You mean with nothing more said between them?” Carla asks. “Sure you can—why not?”
“Because no studio would ever buy it,” Andrew blurts out. “Audiences want closure.”

“Closure—exactly the term we need here,” Jerry says. “How are you going to resolve that?” He looks at me as does the rest of the class. I ended when the story lost interest.

“Well,” I say. “How about one of those things where they show the person’s name and tell what happens to them after the movie ends?” I’m thinking specifically about *Can’t Hardly Wait*.

“Example,” Sam demands. He grins; it’s not interest but a chance to use a line from *Pulp Fiction*.

“How about the final picture of John, still-frame, sucking on the scotch glass, then the words appear: *shortly after, John was involved in a sexual harassment suit. Full details were never revealed to avoid a scandal.* Then Abby with Ray: *Ray and Abby got married; he still doesn’t know where she got the money, but they now own John’s dad’s business.*”

“*Jamie fell in love with the man in the unkempt suit. Mike was so busy trying to get her back, he lost his scholarship,*” Jerry says with a smile.

“What about Abe?” Tara asks, falling for the cheap ending.

“*He sells his book,*” I say. “*And now writes teen romance movies.*”

“And Becky?” Barbara asks, no hint of sexuality. Everyone looks at her, nodding and then looking at me.
I pause. “She lived happily ever after in Michigan.” I flip the script over to indicate that is all I’m going to say about it. The class looks at me and then at each other, trying to decide if that ending satisfies them. Tara seems the most torn.

“Ok.” Jerry’s ready to move on to something else. “Any other comments?” he asks.

“It’s still a damn romance,” Sam says.

“Yeah, it is.” I lean back and listen for the faint drums, soft electric guitars, and wistful lyrics that play during the credits.
Critical Afterward

I’m one of those who perpetuates the melodramatic stereotype of the young writer as a feckless dreamer: I’m more comfortable with my own reality than actual reality; I can’t go more than a few minutes without my mind drifting to some alternate universe, and I’ve spent my life exploring those universes. As a child creative writing was the only subject that interested me, so early on I wanted to write professionally; because, what could be better than pretending for a living?

I got a lot of hollow nods when I told people I wanted to write for a living. The older I got the more I understood those nods—success is rare in the writing business, so all those good luck wishes were the unspoken understanding that I’d end up managing a Wendy’s some day (if I was lucky). That faithlessness ate at me, and I found myself giving into it. So I wrote privately and locked away the desire so I could pursue other avenues of interest in the field of English.

I enrolled in the master’s program at Brigham Young University with every intention of graduating with an emphasis in rhetoric and composition; I was intrigued by the philosophy of the subject, and it was still writing, so I set my sights on that—but that denial of my true passion didn’t last. Shortly after my enrollment (again in a clichéd twist of fate), I decided that I couldn’t leave creative writing alone; I had to pursue it; if there were some chance of becoming a writer I had to follow it, so I applied for the emphasis, and was rejected. It was discouraging, but I understood the reason why I was rejected (it seems all those years of self-tutorial were more of an obstacle than anything else), so I took some creative writing classes to hone my skills and reapplied. This time I
was successful (see, if I was a singer, someone would be calling the people from *Behind the Music*).

I viewed the opportunity to write a creative thesis as a chance to grow as a writer, so I decided to write a novel. To that pointed I had written short stories almost exclusively, but I took the wealth of first chapters languishing unfinished on my computer as a sign that I was ready to move on. R.V. Cassill says that a writer should have some experience in writing short story before attempting a novel (271). It makes sense that one should be able to handle the conventions of structuring a plot and fleshing out character on a small scale to ease the way into doing the same thing in a novel. I felt I had a good enough handle on the short story to easily adapt to the novel. What I didn’t understand was that “A novel’s length makes it a project in which one must make a major investment of time and effort” (Cassill 271). The issue of time was problematic in two ways: first, constant delays became frustrating. I thought the process would move faster; I knew it wouldn’t happen overnight, I just didn’t know it would take seven-hundred nights, so at times patience with myself and the project wore thin.

The second problem was the difficulty of maintaining the original vision of character and story as days, weeks, months, and years passed. My character did get better as time passed, but every time I changed who he was, I had to also remember to change the story to match his new persona. Rick started out very bitter about life, and the way he interacted with his environment reflected that, but as he became a little more mellow, I had to change the way he thought about things and how he talked to people. I think understanding how those small changes alter the course of your novel and knowing
that you’re going to have to be aware of all those things is exactly what Cassill is warning writers of when he talked about a major investment of effort.

Thankfully, the grinding woes of trying to write a novel served me well; my frustrated attempts to create became fodder for Rick, my main character, as he went through the same issues I did. Which was how I made my first choice about my thesis—the “I” character. Henry James claims that the first person in a long work is barbaric (quoted in Gardner 75), but I was focused on the advantages set forth by Steve Scoen, namely the ability to “put on the ‘I’ mask and ‘become’ the protagonist” (86). I thought it might be easier to lean on my own experience and use the first-person as a disguise. (I have no shortage of experience when it comes to frustrated attempts to create.)

It was John Bennion who encouraged me to include critical comments that he and other people had made. The comments on my thesis easily translated since Rick was also getting critiques from people on his creative work. One of the first crossovers was Mike’s comment on Rick’s painter story when they first meet in the diner. Mike calls the story too cerebral and says the character is unlikable. I got similar responses to the original narrative structure and Rick’s personality. In addition to direct comments, my experience with criticism in writing workshops helped me create Jerry’s class. Writing groups I’ve participated in gave me a place to start creating voices and comments indicative of such an environment.

Conflicts in defining writing as an art also come from my own life. I have always been a genre writer. I came into the program with an interest in horror fiction. I, like Flannery O’Connor’s aunt, didn’t think a story was over until someone was married or dead (quoted in Baxter 67), except in my stories no one ever married. This notion was
further fueled by my love of movies, which, as Charles Baxter claims, rely on action rather than “sensitive characters and their insights” (65). Such contrivances led to my initial rejection from the creative writing program and thus began my lesson in the conventions of literary fiction. Rick also faces conflicts between art and genre but from the other side of things. It was never my intention, however, to take a stand on genre as art. Rick’s concerns with it just evolved on their own, making me wonder if my issues run deeper than I originally thought, or maybe characters, like Frankenstein’s monster, can take control of their own lives, once they’ve been created.

Screenwriting is another place where Rick and I have commonalities. As mentioned, I have always loved film and TV, and as a component of my desire to write, I have dabbled in screenwriting, which gave me a certain amount of technical knowledge and an insight into what Rick might go through while trying to create a script. Details like writing note cards, understanding the plotting of screenplays, and technical format all come from books that I have read while trying to become a better screenwriter, again allowing me to take advantage of the first-person mask when fleshing out Rick’s character.

There were other ticks and traits borrowed from my own experience, but most of those fell away once I realized that I didn’t make a very good character (I think it was the misanthropy that doomed me.) Outside of that I followed John Gardner in letting my choice of point of view determine many of the other choices I made (76), and Rick’s desire to screenwrite gave me the biggest hint on how the story should be told.

Since screenplays are written in present tense, I wrote my thesis in present tense, a well-intended comment on character that gave me problems in narration. For one thing I
didn’t have the chance for retrospective insight, so to compensate I wanted to go the opposite direction—if there could be no hindsight for the story, I didn’t want any hindsight at all. I wanted to just drop in the middle of Rick’s life and have him explain it as if we had been watching him from the day he was born. I wanted to keep it all in the moment, no past, no future, just present—more concerned with where he’s going rather than where he’s been (something that would make Stephen King proud). To do this I left gaps in explaining who characters were, what their connections were to him, and how they connected to each other, making the story a kind of inside joke that the reader gradually started to understand as he or she moved deeper into it. In the end, this idea didn’t work out as well as I had hoped. King claims that all lives are *in medias res* and therefore need some back story (225), which I realized as I got feedback from readers who were more confused by the lack of history than they were intrigued. I did leave a few gaps that are eventually explained, but for the most part I gave in and let the reader see a little more of what was going on in Rick’s life, before they got too deep into it.

Rick’s screenwriting also gave me the chance to use allusions from movies to more accurately describe his feelings in certain situations. I think of Rick’s connection to the movies in terms of Wayne Booth’s *The Company We Keep*. He is occupied by all the movies he has seen—he has been “taken over, colonized: occupied by a foreign imaginary world” (Booth 139). They are what he has befriended and they have become his world—to the extent that he not only uses them to describe his reality but he takes advice from them. This submission runs so deep that those who he admires because of their connection to movies also tell him what to do, and he listens—Mike, Jerry, and even Audrey at times. The use of this convention allowed me to not only pin down specific
feelings, but it also allowed me to pin down his voice and develop his character through what he sees in movies—everything seems to remind him of something he’s seen. I thought the conventions worked out well; plus I got to justify all the time I’ve dedicated to gaining an encyclopedic knowledge of modern film (the six degrees of Kevin Bacon just wasn’t cutting it any more).

Other choices on Rick’s character were out of selfish desires. Because of my history with horror fiction, the antihero fascinates me. In a postmodern world of moral ambiguities “no white hat characters” has become the standard. The idea of the antihero just takes that philosophy to its extreme—if no one can be perfect let’s idolize the most imperfect. Meursault from Albert Camus’ *The Stranger* (my favorite book) is a quintessential antihero: a character who people didn’t really like, or didn’t want to like, or didn’t know if they should like. I was intrigued by that dilemma and so I wanted to create, in my limited capacity, a similar character, an antihero. I tried to follow the two part formula that J. Arthur Honeywell describes

>a character who, judged by the publicly recognized conventions and standards of morality and importance and the traditional appearances of heroism, is evaluated as a person of no social importance, as often engaging in morally reprehensible actions, and as lacking all the qualities associated with the heroic. (155)

My original vision of Rick was a man so poisoned by life that he had closed himself off as much as possible and just wallowed in his contempt for the world, craving detachment. The first-person narration gave readers a chance to be in his head at all times, so they could hear his mean-spirited commentary and his desires for violent revenge on everyday
people for doing everyday things (their existence was an annoyance). That view of Rick would fulfill the first part of Honeywell’s antihero—“lacking the qualities of the heroic.”

But main characters need something to draw readers in which brings Honeywell to the second part of such a character: the antihero also has a private side. When, as a result of the reader’s insight into the realities of the world of the novel, he is judged in the perspective of more realistically grounded standards of morality and importance and the realities rather than the appearances of heroism, a reversed evaluation is made in which he becomes, in his own way, moral, important, and heroic. (155)

It was in Rick’s vulnerability to Jeannine and his failure to achieve his goal of writing a screenplay that he would get sympathy from the reader. I was also looking for a connection on a primal level—when someone hurts you, you are justified in hurting them. However, this attempt failed because it took readers too long to get to the qualities of insecurity that made Rick human. Because his short comings don’t bloom until mid-novel, Rick was hated by readers for too long for them to care if he has a heart later on. So I tried to down play his courser traits and brought in his weakness for Jeannine earlier in hopes that readers would give him the benefit of a doubt. He’s still not the nicest guy around, but the fine line between jerk and victim is a little more realistic.

In addition to being an antihero I wanted Rick to be complex in a contradictory way, representing two extremes in divergent ideologies—art and consumerism. Rick sees writing as a purifying activity, a way for him to atone for the evils he commits by selling houses (and the devious manner in which he sells those houses), but he is still faced with the paradox of Hollywood—with so much money involved, art often has to
take a back seat to marketing. The problem presented to him is that to succeed in the world he wants he has to use the tools of the world he hates, giving him an interesting conflict of self and making him more human.

Outside of screenwriting I had no real experience with real estate, so some character traits and narrative conventions required a little research. At first I attempted to write without researching the business; I tried to be as realistically as possible using logic and bending it to fit the needs of the story, but readers who knew about such things had a hard time believing anything about the story because the real estate side wasn’t true to life. Dr. Bennion helped point me in the right direction and with a little assistance from my sister I was able to understand how a real estate office works. This understanding not only helped make the story more realistic but gave me the chance to build Rick’s more antiheroic character traits by showing him operating deviously in such an environment.

Although knowing Rick’s character helped with a lot of decisions, it did not give me a plot. All I had was a real estate agent who wanted to write a screenplay. I needed a little more complication than that; I needed more conflict. When talking about plotting Steven Schoen gives the three basic conflicts: war with another, war with one’s world, and war with oneself, all with two possible outcomes: win or lose (42). Schoen also advises bringing all three into play when writing a novel (43). Rick’s struggle to write a screenplay put him in conflict with himself; his general contempt for people and problems juggling art and commercialism put him in conflict with the world, and I knew there would be a girl (because there’s always a girl), and the most rational obstacle to get to her would be another guy (someone to war against). I had all three parts, but putting them together was more difficult than I had originally thought.
I wanted to identify the simple story: “a character struggling to reach a goal” (Schoen 4) before I started writing, in hopes that I could get a clear picture of where I was going, but the plot wasn’t that simple. He wanted to write a screenplay, but once I started to mix in all the other elements, that goal got a little cloudy. Suddenly I had to decide if he really wanted the girl, which I think he did, but he also wanted to get back at his boss and escape the world of real estate, while trying to return to innocence through his writing—just wanting to write a screenplay wasn’t enough (and it was never enough to carry a story). In an effort to return to simplicity I tried to decide which goal was most important for him, but I couldn’t even do that, because they all seemed equally important. So instead of trying to make a straight plot line I turned the story into a pit of snakes—each goal getting a chance at becoming the most important for that moment and then being supplanted by another goal later. I started the story with him accepting the loss of Jeannine, but not liking it; in chapter one there is no goal to get her back, all he wants is an idea for a screenplay, and from there goals popped up as circumstances arose to make them plausible.

Most of my early drafts were attempts to handle this squirming bundle, which kept me from making some important decisions about plot and character. In some ways I was trying the Stephen King approach of writing: not thinking about the future because, as he says, “plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren’t compatible” (163). I found (and other readers found the same) that when I had a place to go, the writing got bland and convenient. I think it’s my nature to take the path of least resistance, so if you give me some place to go I’ll just head right for it, no description, no character development, just get there, so I wanted to avoid knowing where to go to some extent.
But always pulling at me was R.V. Cassill and the insistence that the plot has to be worked out eventually (274), but it never was. I didn’t know what was going to happen until it happened, but I think that was good. Sure I could have saved myself several frustrating days filled with self-doubt, but I never would have gotten the story I ended up with. I’m glad I “put [Rick] in some sort of predicament and then watch[ed] [him] work [himself] free” (King 164). When creativity was really cooking and I saw things developing it made writing that much more thrilling.

Of course, the lack of premeditation does take its toll elsewhere. For me it meant several long days of revision, but I found, just like Donald M. Murray promises in *The Craft of Revision*, I became addicted to the revision process (256). After the first five chapters I stopped writing anything new and just started revising what I had written. Partially to see if I could get a handle on what would happen next; partially to improve what I had written to that point; and mostly to put off having to write anymore. The plot had bogged down. I wasn’t enjoying it, and I hated the story. Turns out, revision was just what I needed. While revising the previous chapters I started to formulate new directions. I got an overview of who the characters were, what they wanted and how they felt about each other. The process recharged me. After I finished revising those chapters I moved on, but I always went back to revision if I ran into a problem. I figured out that I needed to step back and use my left brain for a few days, so I could come at it with new eyes and renewed energy.

Revision also gave me a chance to address several structural problems. One of those problems was chapter format. Initially my chapters each represented one scene of the story. Every time Rick would change locations, I’d start a new chapter, which gave
the story some pacing problems and made it bland and confusing. Some readers commented that they didn’t know what the time gap was between chapters (since chapter breaks usually indicate time breaks as well). I decided to try and overcome those issues by making chapters multi-scene and adding day indicators at the top of each chapter. Now, for the most part, each chapter represents one day, but I also tried to follow Cassill’s advice and make each chapter complete in itself as well as function in the whole of the novel (279). The change gave the story more flow. We are able to watch Rick start the chapter with a goal and then pursue that goal with success or failure and then be given something at the end of each chapter, a gap or a new goal, to catapult us into the action of the next chapter.

Another structural problem was my use of adverbs. In On Writing, Stephen King addresses the use of adverbs. In short his claim is that “The adverb is not [the writer’s] friend” (124). When I first read his warning on adverbs I couldn’t believe they were that bad. I had seen them used so much, I thought he must be over-dramatizing the issue. When I started to write my story I learned just how debilitating they can be. It wasn’t until the third chapter that I noticed it for myself (other readers noticed it a lot earlier), but I was using adverbs everywhere, especially with dialogue tags (since that is where I had seen them the most). Everyone was saying something passionately or desperately or erotically. It was even starting to bother me as I reread what I had written. King says, “With adverbs, the writer usually tells us he or she is afraid he/she isn’t expressing himself/herself clearly, that he or she is not getting the point or the picture across” (124); that’s why I was using so many of them—I wanted readers to know exactly how characters were saying things, but I was too lazy to build the situation around the
dialogue so readers could hear the meaning behind the words, so I just used an adverb and that ended up happening a lot. Lance Larsen suggested taking out all the adverbs and I tried to do that. Of course that left a gap in understanding how the characters were speaking to each other, so I had to use more body movement and solid character development so readers could know how the characters dealt with each other and then they would know just how things were said and what was meant by them.

Another issue related to tagging dialogue was the use of “said.” Again I was raised to write using other vocabulary words that mean said, but got closer to the actual manner of speaking (he quipped, she moaned, etc.), but my readers told me to stick to said. I found that to be boring, so I needed to exercise other options to avoid having to say “said” over and over again. To do that I used physical details to make it clear which character was speaking. This helped not only to avoid repetition but it helped readers better see what was happening instead of just listening to it. And at times I didn’t tag the dialogue at all. It’s simple for readers to go without tags and still know who’s talking if there are only two people having the conversation.

Such realizations are indicative of what I wanted my thesis to be, a learning process. I had never written a story longer than twenty pages, and I wanted to write something longer to see if I could do it. Writing a collection of short stories would have been a much easier thesis (and there were several days when I kicked myself for not doing a collection of short stories), but I wanted to progress to the next level, and I feel like I have. Practice and the guidance of skilled writers and readers did more for me than reading any book about writing ever did. It’s hard for me to read something in a book and then incorporate it. I need specific instruction; I need abstract ideas applied to my
writing, and creating my thesis allowed me to do that. It took me two years to get through it, but the experience of struggle was just what I needed to help me become a better writer. I’ve learned a few things that I will apply to my next project, and because I learned those things first hand, they have more meaning for me. The thesis is of course the hardest part of the master’s program, but for me, it was the most beneficial, as I had a chance to put theory into practice, and ride the rollercoaster of success and failure, but that’s what I wanted all along.
Works Cited


