

The first five chapters of
Lighting the Dark Side.

BENT, NOT BROKEN

A Novella

Chapter I

Dwayne Johnson recognized early in life that he was different. Over his thirty-five years, individuals had gone to great lengths to make sure he knew he was weird, creepy, queer, and not right in the head. As a child, the kids called him retard, and at work he was Duh-Wayne. High school was no different as his senior class voted him most likely to lapse into madness and murder his parents.

He stood in the kitchen of his apartment, sipping tea, staring at the calendar that hung on the same nail as the clock on the wall. He knew that the clock was in the absolute center of the wall panel. It was three feet from the front door and also three feet from the bathroom door; furthermore, it was four feet from the floor and four feet from the ceiling. He was certain of these dimensions; however, he wouldn't hesitate to measure again and again.

On the calendar was a glossy black star on the eighteenth of November. It wasn't to remind him of his father's birthday; his dad had long ago estranged himself from his only son. The day was the second anniversary of the day that Leah Flanagan broke up with him. Throughout the calendar were thirty-seven such stickers; most were black and a few were gold and each indicated some event either pleasant or not.

He set his mug on the kitchen counter; and he knew that the mug was nineteen inches from the refrigerator, nineteen from the sink, eleven from the backsplash, and eleven more from falling to the floor. He washed his hands for exactly one hundred and nineteen seconds and ran a hand through his hair for the third time.

His wallet was in his right front pocket; garage door clicker in the front left, car keys in one hand, and lunch box in the other. He made a quick turn to survey his apartment and opened the door to the hall. The clock told him it was 8:01 AM. He was running on schedule. He made sure that the stove elements were off, the kettle was unplugged, and checked all these items three times before he felt confident enough to leave his home.

From his apartment to the elevator were thirty-three steps. Over the same distance seven light fixtures and only five electrical outlets were on the walls. He saw a dark trail of liquid coffee leading from suite 309 that had most likely leaked from a garbage bag when somebody dragged it to the lift. The line was new and Dwayne took a moment to assess it and decided that it was longer than a meter and not quite five feet. "Fifty-five and a half inches," he whispered and nodded.

Dwayne couldn't ride any elevator without imagining it breaking loose and achieving terminal velocity before crashing to the basement. This horrendous plunge would not occur as long as he was on the lift for no more than one minute and fifty-nine seconds. Any longer was insanely dangerous.

He sat at the wheel of his Toyota Corolla and made sure the seat was properly adjusted and both side mirrors were also set. After overcoming the urge to check the fluid levels for the fifth time that week, he started the engine. He reached into his blazer and pulled out a flask, uncapped, and took a long swallow. The clear odorless liquid warmed his mouth and all the way down his throat. Two more long gulps would calm his nerves enough to have him on his way.

Dwayne talked his way through the morning commute. "Drive and drive—thirty-one MPH. Turn right at the lights, signal, break, and turn and turn. Now accelerate to the speed limit. Drive and drive."

This went on for the entire twenty-nine minutes of the journey. "At the next stop light," he whispered, "look left for the girl in the dark raincoat."

Sitting at the bus stop was a woman reading a tattered paperback. She was in her late twenties, and Dwayne had first noticed her several weeks earlier. He glanced at her, looked away, and then looked again. He began to feel nervous, and he felt his face flush.

Ten seconds to green.

Then the woman looked up and grinned. She gave him the I-see-you-looking-at-me smile, proving to Dwayne that she recognized him from previous days. He believed that she thought of him as White-Car Boy. She, of course, was Black-Coat Girl.

The light turned green, and the moment ended.

At the next light, he reached and opened a small notebook. Black-Coat Girl was at the stop four times a week now, up from the previous three. Of those four sightings, she had looked up from her book only twice that week, down from the four of the previous week.

Despite the gold hoop ring in her lip and the twin spikes through her left eyebrow, he had feelings for Black-Coat Girl. She was one of the few things on which Dwayne could depend. Even though he did not know her, not even her real name, he felt like he could love her. He daydreamed about a life with her. She would accept his stuff and teach him all kinds of things about piercings and tattoos. The harshness of her appearance hid the kind gentleness inside. She was a good person who wouldn't harm him emotionally or otherwise. He decided that most people she knew misunderstood her.

Dwayne made sure that he did not enter the main entrance of his work office until exactly eight thirty-three each morning. He didn't begin work until nine and couldn't punch in until then. He arrived early to check that his coworkers hadn't completely destroyed his cubicle. Rodger Babcock, Mike Shannon, and Danny Wallace, "the Gang of Three" as Dwayne called them, took great pride in screwing with his head.

Dwayne knew that his personal belongings had suffered yet another ambush. It could be a subtle rearrangement of something on his desk or the entire room could be messed with. At first glance, nothing seemed out of place, so he began to count the pens in the glass jar that sat nine inches to the left of the computer monitor.

Six! He counted six pens. To the right of the monitor was an identical jar with pencils—also six. There should be five or even seven pens, and as many pencils. There should never be six! He counted each jar for the second time and then a third, and the count remained six. He took a long breath and glanced back and forth between the jars.

He remembered the bottom drawer of his desk had boxes of writing instruments, and he quickly yanked the drawer open.

None! The boxes were gone. Dwayne's heart began to pound. He looked at the jars, still twelve writing implements in total. He heard giggling from across the office floor.

"Don't panic," he whispered.

Dwayne took one of the pens and dropped it in the wastebasket next to his desk. Then he removed a pencil. He hesitated to add the pencil to the trash, as two together would not do. He stood and walked to the cubicle on the far wall, looked over, and noticed that Gabrielle Martinez was not yet at her desk. Dwayne tossed the pencil and smiled when it landed on the floor near Gabrielle's chair. Crisis averted, he sighed and sat at his desk.

Just to make sure, he counted the jars' contents and was pleased to count five of each. He turned on the monitor and tried to move the mouse to jolt the PC from sleep mode. The mouse would not move without considerable force. He pulled and then turned the mouse over and noticed that the bottom of the mouse was coated with peanut butter.

"Damn it!" He was deathly allergic to the beige goop.

Dwayne then pulled out the tray from just below his desktop and stared at the keyboard. All the odd number keys were missing. He struggled each time he used a computer, bothered to no end by those even-numbered keys. The equal balance of even to odd keys was the only thing that allowed him to function and do his job. He was extremely perturbed by the empty square slots where 1, 3, 5, etc., should sit.

"Oh, Dwayne! Not again?" Leah Flanagan said when she arrived at his cubicle with the day's floppy disk. It was Leah Masterson now as she had married the office owner only six months after breaking up with Dwayne.

"I—uh, um . . ."

"I'll be back in a minute," she said, as she turned and walked away. He heard her shoes clomp-clomp on the floor. Those long legs and wonderful feet were once his and his alone—well, for three months at least.

Minutes later, Leah's heels could be heard signalling her return to his desk. Dwayne heard laughter first as Leah passed Rodger's desk and even louder from the direction of Mike and Daniel's. Dwayne was the joke of the office, just as he was in college, and everywhere else for that matter.

He took a long swallow from the flask in his pocket and smiled as the liquid warmed his body. After another sip, he hid his medicine, as he called it.

Leah appeared with a new keyboard and mouse and a roll of paper towels. Dwayne took the computer hardware and began to unplug the damaged equipment, as Leah wiped the peanut butter mess from the desk. After Leah finished, Dwayne hosed everything down with cleaner and then wiped and rubbed until he was satisfied that his work area was unsoiled. In the bathroom, he turned his efforts to making sure that his hands had no signs of filth, and he wouldn't return to his desk until he was thoroughly sanitized.

At his desk, Dwayne slipped the 3.5-inch floppy disk into the drive and punched up the day's files. It contained the phone numbers of ninety-one potential customers. His job was to call each person on the list, the mark, and ask five questions. Today, the topic was about coffee and what chain the person preferred, if Tim Horton's or Starbucks. At the end of the survey, the mark is offered a package of coupons. All the marks had to do was give their home address or e-mail. The name and addresses were sold to companies that then sent dozens of coupon packages for different products.

The other phone marketing staff received disks with eighty numbers. Leah always made sure that he had a disk with ninety-one because if he was given a batch of eighty he would only do seventy-nine.

Eighty calls was considered a good day's work; however, Dwayne was the only caller who had beaten the ninety-call plateau, and he did that routinely. His one-day best was also the office record and still stood at one hundred and eleven calls. Even the afternoon shift callers couldn't match his scores.

He still remembered the day he set the record. Bill Masterson, the boss, stopped everyone and announced the accomplishment. Bill took Dwayne's photo and made an employee-of-the-month diploma that still hung on a wall of the call floor. Dwayne received a certificate for a free meal at a nice steak house. He of course took Leah, back at a time when she was open to such things.

He realized that he was getting a late start on his list and quickly dialled the first number and began the survey. He successfully got the required information and entered the digits on the phone pad to begin his next call.

Staff members stopped for a ten o'clock break. Dwayne made calls. Smokers stepped out to light up. He queried old men and housewives about whether they preferred lattes to cappuccinos. He was mediocre at best at most of life's pursuits; however, at work on the phones he was unmatched.

Soon it was lunch break, and he only stopped for a minute to open his lunch box and take three bites of his jam sandwich. When he decided no one was looking, he took a swig from his flask.

"Hey, no slacking off in there, OC," Danny Wallace said, as he passed Dwayne's cubicle.

Dwayne was startled at Wallace's voice and spilled a few drops of vodka on his slacks. He used a liberal amount of jelled hand sanitizer on his hands and then made another call.

Danny wouldn't finish his list and around four o'clock would be bugging Dwayne to take some of his work. Dwayne told himself that he would not help complete Wallace's list although he knew that he couldn't resist a chance to break a hundred.

It was one thirty-one; he stood and stepped back from his desk, crossed his cube, entered the hall, and counted the one hundred thirty-seven steps to the lunchroom.

At the door, he paused to appraise the room for coworkers. He saw only one and he smiled. Leah was bent over washing the bottom shelf of the refrigerator. Dwayne wondered why women didn't just kneel instead of leaning over with their butts sticking out. He enjoyed the view for a few seconds and tried to figure out how to announce his presence without startling her.

She continued to clean, and then she knelt as she turned to face him. "Hello, Dwayne." She stood and closed her sweater as if she was worried that he might take a peek at her cleavage. He remembered a time when she allowed him to see and touch anything he wanted. While glancing at the wedding ring on her finger he wondered what Bill thought of his new wife remaining friends with her ex at work.

"Hi."

"That time again?"

"Uh-huh." He nodded. "Is everyone doing okay?"

"Yes, I don't think you'll have any extra today."

“Oh?”

“Almost eighty percent of the calls are getting results today,” she said, as she filled with water and then plugged in the kettle.

“Wow, Bill must be happy.”

“I doubt that,” she said at a barely audible level.

“Pardon?”

“Oh, nothing.” She set three mugs on the counter, added teabags to two, and then hot water when the kettle whistled. The third cup was for him because she knew him so well.

He wondered if Black-Coat Girl would ever know him in that way.

Dwayne remembered all those conversations where Leah had told him over and over to get help with his—problem. He never did, and her concern for him caused her to leave him. He washed his hands—this time with extra soap.

Now their only time together was the one-thirty tea. And that was becoming a rare occurrence of late. He carried his cup to a table and wiped the chair and counter with a wet paper towel.

Leah sat across from him with a worried look on her face. He knew that look. Something was very wrong. Dwayne thought that he should ask her if something was troubling her. Instead he studied the number of chairs and remained silent.

He sipped his tea and then he removed the bag from his mug, stood, and tossed the bag in the nearest trashcan. Leah joined him in standing, forced a smile, and then said something about some unfinished work that needed her attention. She left him there with the two tables and eight chairs.

Dwayne glanced at the wall clock and smiled when he saw that it was one thirty-nine. He reached one hundred and thirty-eight steps at his cubicle and took one more to feel comfortable.

At his desk, he took a deep breath to cope with the thought of what he might find. Rodger and the others hardly ever did anything to his office during the day, especially if they were falling behind with their lists. Everything appeared to be in order when he made a quick check.

The third drawer of his desk contained a notebook, and he opened it on his desk. He flipped to a fresh page and jotted down a few lines describing the mess he found that morning. On the previous page was a note about the saliva that was deposited with mucus on his keyboard the day before. Spitting on his things was a favorite prank of the three of them. They kept themselves amused at his expense, and Leah had the chore of cleaning up and keeping the boss from learning of the pranks. Not that her husband would do anything about the problem. Terminating three of his staff would cripple the operation.

Dwayne shivered when he remembered some of the disgusting things that the Gang of Three had inflicted. He shook his head and squeezed out a palm full of hand cleaner and rubbed his hands together until all the liquid was used. By three fifteen, his list was completed and he checked over his results on the screen and saw that he had achieved the 75-percent-success quota. It had been a good day after all, just as he had suspected. He smiled.

He burned all the info to CD, removed the disk, and with the floppy, made his way to Bill Masterson’s office. He paused outside the door when he heard Bill and a female voice laughing. As he raised his hand to knock on the door, it opened and he retreated to allow Rachael Creed to exit Masterson’s office.

Rachael was twenty-one and extremely attractive. Leah was not happy when Bill hired Rachael as his new secretary. Dwayne watched Creed walk away, and as she did so, she stopped to fasten a button on her blouse.

"Come on in, Johnson." Masterson had a deep low voice that demanded and received respect.

Dwayne slowly entered the office. He didn't like being in the room at all. Not because Masterson made him nervous—he did. It was the layout. Everything was cluttered to the north side of the office where the south side was nearly empty.

The room was a minefield for Dwayne with four chairs and two clocks and two stuffed fish on the walls with those four glassy eyes staring at him. Six bookshelves, each with four shelves, and Bill's desk was messy and jammed with papers; and Dwayne almost gagged—dirty dishes left over from lunch.

"Problem, Dwayne?"

"All good, sir."

"Leah. Something is bothering her. Any ideas there, chief?"

"Ah . . . um—" Dwayne noticed that a pair of Bill's pants were piled on the floor near the corner of the room. One shoe was upside down on the pile of slacks. The other loafer was out of view. Dwayne couldn't be sure if his boss was wearing trousers as he was still seated.

"Leah is on me about going to the opera again. Johnson—Dwayne buddy, do me a solid and take her for me."

"Pardon?" As if the room wasn't bad enough. Now this. He was beginning to lose his breath.

"Rachael got me a pair of tickets for tomorrow night. Some Christmas thing. You game?"

"Ah, sure . . . why not?" He had no interest in going to the opera; however, another minute in that room and he would vomit for sure.

"Great. Always good to know I can count on you, Dwayne." Masterson opened a drawer in his desk, removed an envelope, and then handed it to Dwayne. "Take her for dinner as well, okay?"

He nodded and noticed that Masterson was wearing short pants.

"Great work today, Johnson, as always."

Dwayne couldn't breathe, let alone answer. He nodded, turned, and exited the room. Moving so quickly and without thought, he almost knocked Rachael Creed over and spilled the dual cups of coffee she was carrying.

"Damn it, Dwayne, be careful!" She made eye contact with him. There was purpose in those blue eyes; he was certain that she was trying to tell him something with her glare.

"I . . . um . . . am sorry."

Dwayne walked by the cubicles of the other call staff; he noticed that Mike and Rodger were still working their call lists. Rodger glared at Dwayne and Mike made a rude hand gesture. Daniel sounded like he was rushing through the questions, in a hurry to finish the allocation that Bill expected from each team member. Haste never helped make the quota nor did it do anything for achieving a successful contact.

He smiled and whispered good-bye.

After powering down his PC, counting everything on his desk, dropping the floppy in a bin outside Leah's office, and washing his hands, he left the building.

Three hundred and twenty-seven was the number of days in a row that he had made seventy-seventy-five. Seventy calls with 75 percent of the marks giving up the goods.

Walking to his car, he knew that there were twenty-one parking spots before he reached his Corolla. He made three circles around the car to make sure it had not received any tampering.

Once inside, he fiddled with the seat and mirror adjustments, inhaled a long breath and began his drive for home. "Turn left at the lights, signal, break, and turn—and turn. Now accelerate to speed. Drive and drive."

He drove by the bus stop and as always, looked for Black-Coat Girl. Dwayne wondered about her day and if she ever thought about him. He decided that she did and this made him happy.

After waiting his turn behind two of his neighbor's cars at the automatic gate at the parking level of his building, he maneuvered the Toyota to his designated stall.

Dwayne put a hand inside his jacket and touched the envelope with the opera tickets. Black-Coat Girl wouldn't take pleasure in the show; however, if invited, she would be a good sport and play along. She would enjoy the dinner before, engaging him in intelligent conversation about her European backpacking trip from her high school grad year. Her face would light up as she speaks of London, Paris, and of course, Venice.

"You'll come with me, Dwayne, to Venice, won't you?"

"Well yes, of course." Dwayne saw his neighbor Mrs. Feldspar looking at him as he conversed with himself. The woman stared like it was the craziest thing she had ever witnessed.

He walked around the Toyota for a second time, knowing that he could not leave the bird dropping on the roof of the vehicle overnight. He popped the trunk and removed a bottle of spray cleaner and a rag and went to work on the mess. He dared not look at the gunk, as he knew it would turn his stomach.

Satisfied that his paintwork was no longer fouled, he made his way to the elevator and rode to his floor, holding his breath the entire way. Outside the lift door, he noticed that the maintenance people had attempted to clean the coffee stain from the morning. He could still see the blemish in a few areas and that bothered him. There was no possibility that he would be able to last the evening without working the carpet until it was immaculate.

Chapter II

No more than five seconds had passed after he entered his apartment when he began to wash his hands. He plugged in the kettle and readied a teacup and bag. A vision of his car roof and the half-dried drop of bird feces began to weigh heavily on his mind, returning him to his sink for another wash. He scrubbed at his fingers and under each nail until his skin was pink.

When he was happy that his hands would rival any surgeon's level of hygiene, he unplugged the whistling kettle and poured his mug full. He wiped the counter three times even though it was spotless and then sat at his kitchen table, sipping tea.

Dwayne's mind wandered to Black-Coat Girl. Part of him was certain that she was never aware of him staring at her each morning at 8:37 AM. If she did notice, she probably thought that he was some leering freak. Still, he fantasized that she did more

than just notice. Right now, he decided she was in the bathtub, trying desperately to rid herself of the disapproving, judging glances from her day, and dreaming of the kind face from the white imported sedan. She hoped that by some strange coincidence he would stop and ask if she would like a ride. That was why she smiled at him like she did. It was her way of inviting him to talk to her.

Dwayne could not take the chance that Black-Coat Girl would laugh at him. He was happy enough to see her almost every morning. Dreaming about her was much easier and safer than meeting her. It would have to do.

Taking his seat at the kitchen table, he reached and pulled the morning paper across the counter into view. The cover of the paper was never a good place to start, and so he opened the rag to page A2. The second page was a gold mine for Dwayne's counting game. It contained the contents, contact us and a strange number puzzle called Conceptis Sudoku. He found, circled, and counted every three on the page and smiled with delight when the tally came to thirty-seven.

Dwayne had no need for television, the Internet, or even radio when he could add up all the examples of his favorite digit. The third and fourth pages were disappointments; however, the fifth was promising with a full-page ad for backyard hot tubs. After the three count only went to seven, he quickly switched to nines. Eighteen nines were pretty good he thought; however, he never fully trusted a figure that looked so much like a six. A measure of sevens on the same page ended at a dozen, when the phone rang. He waited until the fifth ring and then answered.

"Dwayne?"

"Leah?"

"Yes, it's me." Leah sounded nervous on the line, and Dwayne wondered why she was calling him at home.

Leah didn't spend any time on pleasantries, and this began to worry him. He glanced at the newspaper page, anxious to rejoin the count and hopefully find at least one more seven.

"Bill just told me about his little plan for tomorrow and I was a bit cross with him. He shouldn't have imposed on you like that."

"It's really no problem. I'm sure it will be fun." He had forgotten about the opera night.

The line was silent for a few seconds before Leah spoke. "I'm sure it would be—it's just that . . ."

"Is there something wrong?" Was Leah suddenly ashamed to be out with him? He began to feel uncomfortable with the conversation.

"No, not with you. It's just not . . . appropriate for a married woman to be out on a date-type evening with her former boyfriend."

"Oh?"

"You understand, don't you?"

"Well sure. I guess." He tried to concentrate on what Leah had just told him; however, the count was twelve and twelve has a two in it.

He tried to shake the sevens from his mind.

"Okay, Dwayne, I'll see you tomorrow."

He thought about his conversation with Leah and then decided not to dwell on it. The count of sevens continued and tallied at fifteen. The numbers came slowly until he hit the

jackpot pages of the vehicles ads. After half an hour of the bounty that was the automotive section, Dwayne was ready for bed. First, he cut a page from the paper and set it aside. It was a BMW dealership advertisement, and it featured thirty-one threes and thirty-one was good enough for the book. In a drawer was a scrapbook, and Dwayne took care to paste the Beamer ad on a page of its own.

He showered, brushed his teeth, washed his hands, relieved himself, and then gave the hands another scrubbing. He chose the light blue pajamas and crawled under the covers.

Next to the bed on the night table was an empty 5X7 photo frame. He pretended that it was a picture of Black-Coat Girl. He smiled at her, blew a kiss, and said good night.

The next morning, Dwayne awoke feeling good about the day. In his mind's eye was the smiling face of his bus stop beauty. Dreaming of her always made him happy. She was heading to another day at her job where her colleagues admired her and her employer appreciated her talents.

He would call nearly a hundred people, interrupting their busy day to pester them with stupid questions about cornflakes or underarm deodorant. This rewarding work would only occur after he survived yet another humiliating prank by the Gang of Three.

Half an hour later, he was in the Corolla and only seconds from the intersection where she would be waiting for the bus. The light went yellow, and he slowed, until the light turned red. He stared at the empty bench, and he felt his heart sink in his chest. He knew the direction from where she walked and he scanned the sidewalk, seeing only a teenage guy and an old woman. Disappointment filled him with a sense of heaviness.

Perhaps the light rain that was falling had caused her to take a taxi to work. She often was not out in bad weather, and there were a few flakes in the drizzle.

Then he saw her, walking from the convenience store with a take-out coffee cup. She took a sip, and then she looked up and checked the street. Was she looking for him?

She saw him and stopped walking, tilted her head slightly, smiled, and then waved to him. She didn't just wave to him, did she?

Dwayne couldn't believe what had just occurred. He felt his hand rise slowly and wave as his heart jumped from normal speed to a gallop. She pointed up and toward the intersection and he wasn't sure why.

Then a horn sounded behind him. The light was green. Black-Coat Girl smiled again, shrugged her shoulders, and then waved good-bye. He just stared at her.

The horn was long and irritated.

Her face turned into a look of amusement, and she began to giggle. She shook her head vaguely and mouthed the words bye-bye. Her breath made a cloud of steam in the cold morning air.

Dwayne had timed intersections all over town. He memorized the red times of many of the cities' traffic lights. Some, with left-hand turns held traffic for over a minute. Hers was one of the quicker ones, remaining red for less than twenty seconds.

No matter how long the lights lasted, it was never long enough.

"Move it, ASSHOLE!" A bellowing angry voice said.

Dwayne drove for the office. His entire body felt invigorated and alive. There was no denying what had just happened with Black-Coat Girl. She was interacting with him and him alone. Certainly she thought he was crazy sitting at the light staring at her. However, she didn't look away or appear uncomfortable with his gaze.

Previously she had given him smiles, made eye contact, and now she was waving. This person knew he existed. He could no longer dismiss these things as coincidental.

He parked his car and felt like he could fly to the office entrance. Anything was possible. He would make one hundred and thirteen contacts today, and he didn't care what Rodger and the others had waiting for him.

"Go ahead and shit on my desk," he whispered. "Bring it on!"

Dwayne made his way to his cubicle and checked his chair before sitting. He sat and powered up his PC. In the next cube, he could hear Leah and Tanya Costa talking. Costa was worried about a weather forecast that called for heavy snow by late morning. Leah didn't believe it was cold enough for flakes to stick.

Three minutes later, Leah gave him his disk for the day and then she left the area without conversation. By ten that morning, he still had not found the hidden gift deposited by Rodger or the others. Occasionally the trick was nothing. They would take pleasure in his relentless searching for the item.

In the bottom drawer of his desk was a Tupperware jar full of jellybeans. He opened the drawer while he questioned an older woman about her favorite football team over the phone. Without looking, he reached his right hand, removed the jar lid, and scooped his fingers into the jar for beans. He felt lukewarm liquid and quickly pulled his hand away from the jar and held his fingers out to his side.

Urine!

He gagged. He stood abruptly, put his dry hand to his mouth, and heaved. Bolting from his cube, he almost fell in the hallway between the cubicles. Keeping his good hand to his face, he jogged for the bathroom. As he passed the other callers, he heard a male voice call out.

"Oh-oh. Johnson's got a juicy one!"

Dwayne had no idea what Mike's comment meant, and he was in no position to ask him. Dwayne slammed open the bathroom door and stood for seconds in indecision.

Wash up or vomit?

He ran the hot water and pumped a handful of pink soap from a dispenser next to the sink. He washed and washed again and continued until his hands and fingers were bright pink and scalded.

In his cubicle, tucked in a filing cabinet was a box of surgical gloves. He pulled on a pair, carefully lifted the offending jar, and then walked to the washroom.

After the mess was deposited, he ran the sink tap until it was hot again. Then he coated his hands in liquid soap and worked a brush from his cuticles to his elbows. It took more than twenty minutes of intense scouring for him to feel like he was ready to return to his desk.

He had lost ground and would really have to pick up his pace to have a record day. As he dialled and made call after call, he was vaguely aware of the office buzz.

Voices were chatting instead of calling, and he heard snippets of the conversations. Blizzard, one voice said. Another remarked that there was more than four inches already on the ground. He was skeptical. He peered across the call floor to the windows and saw what all the fuss was about.

Large fluffy snowflakes were falling at an alarming pace. He continued making calls. Few marks had time for surveys that afternoon. The storm had everyone agitated as they worried about the evening commute in a foot of snow.

His success rate was reaching a personal low. Still he made calls. By one o'clock, Dwayne was certain that less than half of his attempts were getting positive responses. On any other Friday afternoon, he would be flying through his list, quizzing marks, and collecting e-mail addresses.

His thoughts were of that morning at the intersection—that smile and those eyes, both so friendly and welcoming. He longed to hold her, to hear her voice, and to learn her real name.

Bill Masterson was trying to get the call floor's attention. "Everyone," Bill began. "I've checked the numbers and you guys just aren't reaching your marks. So tally what you have, burn 'em, and then give your disks to Leah."

"That's it?" Danny asked. "You're calling it?"

"Yeah, go home—and watch the roads. I want you all back tomorrow in one piece finishing these calls."

The office became loud with voices conversing about the short day and the weather situation. The city was unfamiliar with snow, especially in the third week of November. Normally, this amount of accumulation doesn't fall until January or later and so no one would have winter tires on their vehicles.

Outside the flakes swirled around him on a breeze. The snow on the ground didn't crunch, as it was wet and already melting. The air smelled clean, and he looked up at the mass of giant tumbling snowflakes.

Dwayne sat in his car and started his engine. He watched Danny, Mike, and Rodger kneel and pick up handfuls of snow as soon as they exited the building. A second after chucking several balls at each other, they set their sights on Dwayne.

Dwayne reversed from his parking spot as the three men charged through the snow toward him. He shifted into gear and accelerated too quickly and his front wheels spun in the slush. He wasn't moving. Snowballs began to slam his windshield and roof. He shifted into reverse and then drive and gained enough traction to pull away from the attack.

Dwayne knew what to do in the adverse conditions. He told himself to brake gently and to ease down on the gas pedal. He was fine.

At the intersection, he began to look for her. He knew the gesture was ridiculous, as he never saw her in the afternoon. He braked at the red light and came to a complete stop. Again, he looked at the bench and thought about taking a walk in the snow with her.

Without warning, Dwayne's Corolla was slammed from behind.

The force of the impact jarred his teeth, and the air bag erupting from the steering column smacked his face. The Toyota was pushed forward and into the intersection. A red minivan driving through the green light was not able to avoid him and slid into his right front fender. Two more vehicles lost control and joined the fray.

Dwayne gripped the steering wheel so tight that his fingers throbbed. He looked around, not sure if he should get out or stay put in his seat. He remained in the car, listening to voices outside and his own pounding heart.

A man with glasses and a ball cap was at Dwayne's door window, and he was shouting something.

“You okay?” The man’s face reddened as he yelled.

Dwayne wound down the window and looked at the guy.

“You okay?” The man said again.

“Yeah,” was all Dwayne could get out.

“I called 911. You sure you’re okay? You have some blood on your mouth.”

Dwayne put his hand to his lip and then looked at the red on his fingers. He instantly felt woozy. “Think so, sure.”

“Okay then, I’m gonna check on the others.”

Dwayne nodded. His jaw throbbed and his neck felt stiff.

“Goddamn snow, huh?” the man said before he turned away.

Dwayne nodded again. He looked over at the bus bench where he first saw her. One smile from her and he was hooked. In the distance he heard sirens, and every few seconds the wail sounded louder.

A shiver went through him, chattered his teeth, and lingered in his hands as a tremor. His door opened, and a woman with a toothy grin moved into the doorway. She said her name was Myra and that she was an EMT.

“What is your name, sir?”

Dwayne just stared at her. His jaw trembled with another shiver. Myra flashed a light in his eyes and asked him for his full name again.

“Dwayne Randolph Johnson.”

“Hello, Mr. Johnson. Looks like the old air bag caught you pretty good.” Myra asked him if he was in any pain.

Dwayne said no. Myra dabbed the blood on his lip and chin and then checked his pulse and blood pressure.

“Do you know what day it is, sir?”

“Friday. No no, it’s Thursday.”

“What is your birth date, Dwayne?”

“August 1, 1973.”

“What is your mother’s name?”

“My mother?” Dwayne had no idea what his mother had to do with a car accident.

“Yes. It’s a standard question.”

He nodded. “Joyce Johnson.”

Myra recommended that he go to the hospital to be fully checked out. She could take him in the ambulance. The doctor could start the forms for an insurance claim if Dwayne deemed it necessary.

“No. No ambulance. No doctors.” He shook his head and felt a twinge of pain in his neck. “I just want to go home.”

“All right then. You have a nice day,” Myra said and then she was gone.

The next happy face at his door was a twenty-something male. He introduced himself as a police constable. Dwayne didn’t catch his name.

The constable was asking questions about the accident and all Dwayne could think of was that this guy was way too young to be a cop. Young and not very big. The guy was smaller than Dwayne.

Dwayne described the collision as best as he could and received a business card with a file number from the constable. He was alone in his crippled car again.

Outside, a tow truck was working on the minivan still coupled to his front fender. The truck had a light bar on the cab roof with a bank of amber lights flashing. Dwayne watched the red and blue lights from the emergency vehicles streaking and flashing the white blanket of snow.

He was so cold. The minivan moved away on the tow truck's hook. Would he ever be warm again? The third face to appear in his doorway was a loud large man with a shaggy beard. He smelled of coffee and sausages.

"You goin' to the Docs, boss?"

He shook his head.

"Need a ride home?"

"Please."

The bearded man called himself Ted, and he said he would be only a few minutes hooking Dwayne's car.

"Okay then, shall we roll?" Ted said at Dwayne's door.

Dwayne swung his legs to the street and quickly felt cold slush fill his shoes. When Dwayne stood, he felt dizzy, his head spun, and the pain in his jaw and neck increased.

"Hey, boss," Ted placed his hand on Dwayne's shoulder. "Might be a good idea to see a doctor."

Dwayne shook his head and followed Ted to the passenger side of the tow truck. Once inside, Ted shifted into gear, made a U-turn in the intersection, accelerated to freeway speed, darted around traffic, and ran both yellow and red lights.

Dwayne thought he might need to vomit and that made him nervous. He closed his eyes and only opened them when a loud voice came over the two-way radio. Ted lowered the radio volume and continued his aggressive driving.

Dwayne signed an invoice and then fumbled with the cab door before he stepped from the truck. At the front entrance of his building, he unlocked the door, walked the thirty-five steps to the elevator, and pressed the call button. As he approached his apartment, he heard the phone ringing before he had his key in the lock; and when he entered his suite, he was welcomed by Leah's voice over the answering machine.

Leah's message concerned work, something about going in early tomorrow and staying late to make up for the shorter day. His head pounded so painfully that he ignored the call.

In the kitchen, he poured himself a tall glass of orange juice and then removed a bottle of rum from the cabinet. He topped off the glass and then stirred the concoction. Sitting at the table and sipping his drink, he hoped the alcohol might be enough to calm the pain that was taking over his body. Three more gulps and he had room for more rum.

Drinking like this always made him think of his father—a man who was never short of excuses to put back a few too many. Dwayne had slipped with booze before and ever since had promised himself that he wouldn't allow it again.

Part of him wished that it were Friday so he wouldn't have work tomorrow. However, the weekends afforded him far more time than he needed to catch up on chores and such. Work challenged him every day and despite his coworkers, he enjoyed his job.

With his drink refilled, Dwayne hesitated to take his spot in the kitchen. He was exhausted and felt that a nap before dinner might go a long way in helping him feel better. He moved to the living room couch, and when his drink was finished, he lay down and quickly drifted off.

Dwayne was standing on the street next to a bus stop, and she was walking toward him with her face aglow with her intoxicating smile. Her brown eyes were so warm and welcoming. He returned her grin and waited for her to reach him. She opened her mouth and began to speak.

“Dwayne? Are you there? Pick up—it’s Leah.” Black-Coat Girl had Leah’s voice. Dwayne’s confusion mounted, and then he woke up.

He quickly picked up the receiver and put it to his ear. “Hello, Leah? It’s me.”

“Dwayne? Is everything okay?” she said with a hint of concern in her voice.

“Yeah, why?”

“Didn’t you get my message? Bill says if you want to skip tomorrow with the snow and work Saturday, it’s okay.”

“Oh, I fell asleep. A nap, I guess.” He looked at the clock on the wall and noticed that it was almost nine at night.

“I see. Dwayne, what is wrong with your voice? It sounds funny.”

He touched his lower lip, now swollen to three times its normal size. “Oh, my face is kind of sore.”

He described the accident to Leah as best as he could. Then he told her he would take a taxi and be in an hour earlier than normal.

“Dwayne, that’s crazy. Take tomorrow off and forget about Saturday too. If you feel up to it, come back on Monday at the earliest.”

Dwayne thought about Leah’s words. Taking Friday off was out of the question. Black-Coat Girl was always there on Fridays.

“You still there?”

“Uh-huh. I’ll see you tomorrow, Leah.”

He found a bag of ice in the freezer, made himself one last rum and OJ, and headed for his bed without showering or even washing or brushing his teeth.

Together, the ice pack, and the drink were dulling the throb in his head; however, the combination had little effect on the increasing discomfort in his lower back and neck. He downed the remaining liquid in one long swallow, set the glass next to the alarm, and placed the ice on the floor. He hoped that sleep would come quickly. Bill would want to catch up on the calls after the short day, and the pressure would be on him to lead the team in calls and returns. He closed his eyes.

Chapter III

Dwayne slammed his fist down on the alarm a second after it first sounded. He swung his legs to the floor and sat up quickly. A jolt of pain began in his back, shot up his spine, and exploded in his neck.

“Jesus!”

He stood and was immediately met with a wave of dizziness and another stabbing ache in his neck. Two steps brought him another blast in his lower back. Somewhere in the medicine cabinet were painkillers. Dwayne hated pills as they often caught in his throat, melting for a few seconds, filling his mouth with bitter acid taste.

He reached for the glass on the floor, took it with him to the bathroom, and then found the medicine he needed. He placed three Tylenols on the counter and then used the

drinking glass's solid bottom to grind the pills into fine particles. With his hand, he swept the crumbled powder into the tumbler.

After forcing down the chalky mixture, he completed his morning toilet routine and then dressed as quickly as his battered body could move. He called three taxi companies, and each dispatcher told him it would be at least an hour's wait because the snow had slowed all transportation to a crawl.

Dwayne stared out his living room window at pure white and shook his head. When the kettle whistled, he allowed it to boil for eleven seconds and then he filled his travel mug.

"Time to bus it," he whispered.

Dwayne had only walked on the snow-covered sidewalk in front of his building for a moment before he cursed himself for not wearing his rubber boots. The temperature was well above freezing, effectively turning the streets into a sloppy mess.

At the bus stop, he counted his fare for the fifth time and then shook off his shoes and remembered that he was looking for the one-twelve bus.

Dwayne looked away to hide his swollen face when another rider nodded hello. The bus was late, and his feet were wet and two more customers joined the queue.

The bus driver was old enough to have greying almost-white hair, and he glanced at Dwayne's face long enough to make Dwayne uncomfortable. His fare paid, he kept his head down to avoid eye contact and made his way to a seat near the back of the bus.

Not even three minutes passed when he realized that the bus would take him to Black-Coat Girl's stop at the exact time that he drove by each morning. What chance was there that she would get on his bus? His heart rate doubled when he came to the conclusion that only two or three different buses serviced his street.

At each stop, several riders boarded the bus and soon it was standing room only. He thought that even if she did ride the one-twelve, she might not see him through the crowd.

Two blocks from the stop, his pulse began to gallop and his breathing labored. One block—half a block—then the loaded bus stopped. He was too deep in the bus to see the passengers waiting to embark.

The person sitting next to him stood and headed for the exit, so did five others. The aisle to the front was almost clear, and he could watch the first new rider climb the entrance steps, pay his fare, and proceed to a seat.

The next person was her. He could see her dark hair and pale skin. His stomach twisted, and his heart danced out of rhythm for a few seconds.

She waved her fare card at the driver and turned to find an empty seat. She looked right at him, and her face lit up with a smile. She made no attempt to choose any other spot and walked straight to Dwayne and swung in beside him, as the bus lurched and then pulled into traffic.

Dwayne was certain that his heart would explode or he would asphyxiate from his inability to inhale. He cleared his throat.

She turned to him and said, "No car today?"

"No." His voice sounded pathetic to him.

"Oh." She looked at his bruised cheek. "An accident?"

"Yes." He struggled to fill his lungs and focused his rambling thoughts.

She smiled. "Does it hurt?"

"No, I took some meds."

“Ah, good drugs can cure anything.”

“Just Tylenol.” He glanced at her and cleared his throat again. She was even more beautiful from up close. Her eyes were so deep, dark, and intelligent; and her face was kind and understanding.

She nodded; and after a moment of silence, she said, “I see you drive by every day.”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Sorry if I freaked you out—staring and all.” He tried to smile.

“If you did, would I sit next to you?”

“Guess not.”

“I have wondered about you though.”

His heart fluttered again. “Oh, really?”

“Of course. You’re red light guy.”

Their eyes met in a long lingering stare that normally would make Dwayne gag with discomfort. Not with her. He wanted to tell her everything about how he thought of her day and night. “I look for you . . . at that stop . . . each day.”

“I know.” She grinned. “I watch for your car, and when I see you it makes me happy. Like you are one of the few things—that aren’t a mess . . .”

She stopped her sentence as if she was worried about saying too much. Still, her honesty and openness was shocking and refreshing.

“It makes you happy to see me each day?” he blurted and then felt his face blush.

“Of course.” She looked at him and then away, and then her eyes met his again. “You’re my twenty-second boyfriend.”

He was tongue-tied. He struggled for words; however, he said nothing. Then he felt doubt creep in. She could be playing with him saying these things to get a reaction. Stringing him along until he said something stupid and embarrassing.

She looked at him again and then held out her hand as if she wanted to shake. “I’m Dee-Dee Roland.”

Without hesitation, he told her his full name and then shook her hand. She had a firm grip, not at all soft and dainty like most women he had greeted.

“If you want to know what the *Ds* stand for, you’re going to have to take me out for coffee or a drink, Mr. Johnson.”

“Oh, I . . . um . . .”

“I don’t think we can go back to just grinning at each other until the light goes green, Dwayne. Do you?”

“No, you’re right.” He smiled. Don’t be so nervous, he scolded himself and then he cleared his throat.

“Okay. This is my stop.” She opened her purse and removed a business card. “This is my work card. My cell number is there too.”

Dwayne took the card and returned Dee-Dee’s smile.

“Okay, nice to meet you, Dwayne. The next move is up to you.”

He said good-bye and watched every second of her walk to the exit. Before she stepped down and through the doors, she turned to wave, shrugged her shoulders, and smiled. Then she was gone.

He watched her on the street, and when the bus passed her, he stood to see her through the rear window. He continued to gaze at her as she knelt to purchase a newspaper from a coin box.

Dwayne took his seat and whispered to himself, “Did that just happen?” He was convinced that he had dozed and dreamed that Black-Coat Girl was Dee-Dee. He shook his head. No woman was that open and honest. It was a dream. He glanced down and read the emerald card in his hand.

The Green Factory
Organic Produce and Hemp Attire
D. D. Roland, head buyer

The card said that Dee-Dee was a buyer, which to Dwayne meant she had the most important job at the store. She was in charge of finding new products and keeping inventory stocked. Suppliers would send their salespeople to see her and she could make or break those vendors.

Dwayne’s mind was a blur of thoughts of her. She talked to him like he was a normal person. She knew he was nervous during their brief meeting, and yet she did not tease him for mumbling or for not keeping up his end of the exchange.

She wants to go out for a drink!

How could he possibly get up the nerve to call her, to ask her out for a coffee or perhaps to a pub? Sure, he’d make that call and then he’d march into Rodger’s cube and tell him to screw off.

He stood on the sidewalk for a few seconds before he began his walk to the office. As he passed the warehouses of different companies of the industrial park, he noted the addresses on the north side of the street, 2933, 2953, etc. These numbers kept his mind from obsessing about what to do about calling Dee-Dee. He couldn’t walk on the other side or even look to the south as he knew the numbers 2922 and even worse, 2888 were there. The thought of catching a glimpse of those digits sent a shiver down his spine. When he reached his work building, he smiled and thought to himself that Masterson Marketing LTD had the greatest address of all: 3335.

As soon as Dwayne reached the call floor, he headed for the bathroom. All the time he spent on the bus thinking of Dee-Dee had kept his mind from just how filthy public transit was. He washed thoroughly and then dried. He reached for the bathroom door and then decided that the grime and germs were not all gone and so he scrubbed again. A handful of paper towels kept his palm from touching the disgusting door handle, and then he made his way to his cube.

At his desk were two chairs, and on the desk were four PC mouses and a second keyboard stacked on top of his. He discovered that his stapler, three-hole punch, and electric pencil sharpener also had partners. His jar of paperclips was missing, thus two jars remained. In each of the jars were four writing utensils. His eyes darted around his desk from one problem to another and back again. Each time he looked at a change, he became more agitated. His heart began to gallop as his anger mounted.

Eight things were changed on his desk. Eight!

Nausea came over him as he stepped away from his desk. He turned and jogged toward the boardroom. In the room, he knew that there were eleven chairs at the main table, three potted cacti, and twenty-seven halogen light pots recessed into the ceiling.

But what if Rodger and the others had altered the boardroom too! He stood a few meters into the room, placed his hands on his legs, and bent to catch his breath. Certain that he would not vomit, he began to count the room. As he tallied the items, he began to calm down. When a third count was complete, he was feeling near to normal.

“What are you guys doing here?” Leah’s voice sounded just outside the boardroom.

Dwayne heard giggles, and he knew that Rodger and the others were having a wonderful time at his expense. Leah opened the door, paused for a moment, and then walked to Dwayne.

“Dwayne, are you okay?” she said in a soothing voice.

“I’m okay. My desk is not.”

Leah sighed and then left the room. Dwayne took a chair; the same seat he sat in at every meeting since his first day of work. Several minutes later, Leah returned and informed him that she had his things replaced to normal.

Dwayne first noticed that his jar of paperclips was still missing. He looked in the trashcan and then his bottom drawer and finally found the jar in his second filing cabinet. He could hear Leah talking to the Gang of Three.

“Stop messing with Dwayne and his desk,” she said with a stern voice. “If he goes home now, or heaven forbid ever quits, you guys will be working twelve-hour days to catch up with his calls. If this happens again, I’ll talk to Bill about each of you.”

The warning was empty. Dwayne had long ago lost count of how many times Leah had threatened to report the guys to Masterson. Still he admired her effort on his behalf.

He inserted the floppy into his PC, read over the survey questionnaire, lifted his receiver, and dialled his first call. As the mark answered his questions about frozen pizza, his mind drifted to his meeting with Dee-Dee.

She showed no shyness or discomfort when she spoke to him. She certainly didn’t seem to be put off by him in any way. He glanced at her card, and set it at the top right corner of his desk. He had already memorized her work and cell numbers.

“You call strangers all day,” he whispered. “This should be easy.”

Dwayne dialled another from his list. A woman in her fifties was less than willing to cooperate with him despite the free fast-food coupons he offered.

“I don’t eat that garbage,” she hollered and then hung up the phone.

Dwayne dialled the first three numbers of the Green Factory and then pushed disconnect. He challenged himself to make thirty-five calls by 10:00 AM, and if he did, he would call Ms. Roland.

An hour later, he added up his calls and found that he had made only thirty-three.

“Fifty by noon and I’ll call her.”

At lunchtime, Dwayne had made his quota to make his call. He dialled the factory number, and a man answered. Dwayne hung up. His confidence needed a boost so he took a long drink from the hip flask.

He coughed, trying to clear some mucus from his throat and then dialled Dee-Dee’s cell number. He hesitated to push send and then decided that he needed another sip of liquid courage. Each time he dialled the number, he lost his nerve and then lowered the handset to his desk.

It would be easy to just let the chance meeting with Dee-Dee become the only of its kind. Calling and talking to her would take all the guts that he could summon. She wouldn't have given him her card unless she wanted to get together. He had to be strong for once in his life. "Do it!" he whispered.

The flask was empty.

He connected the call.

He believed that her answering on the third ring was a good omen. "Hello?"

Dwayne was speechless.

"Hell-low!" she said in a singsong voice.

Still he said nothing. His heart pounded and his stomach twisted.

"This is the part where you talk," she said, with a hint of laughter in her tone.

He sighed softly, doubting that she could hear.

"Dwayne?"

He cleared his throat. "Dee-Dee? Yes, it's me, Dwayne."

"Well, I didn't think you would call."

He swallowed hard. "I . . . I almost didn't."

"Well, you called at the perfect time. I'm having about the tenth cup of coffee for the day."

"I was just about to go and boil water for tea?"

"Tea?" She sounded like she was offended by the mention of the drink.

"You don't . . . don't like tea?"

"It's fine, I guess. But you can't beat a good jolt of java, you know?"

"Never did like it." His heart was beating at triple speed, but he was doing it. He was talking to her like a normal person.

"How is your face?"

"My face?" Dwayne said.

"Yeah, you have bruises from your accident."

"Oh, it's not bad. I should call the insurance company about the claim." He wasn't sure why he spoke of the insurance.

"I see. Will you fix your car?"

"I think it might be totalled."

"Hmm. One less vehicle polluting."

"You don't drive?"

"God no. Damn cars are the number one cause of global warming."

Dee-Dee spent the next few minutes informing him about all the damage car exhaust was doing to the environment. She knew all the stats for how much polluting materials were emitted for every hour a motor vehicle operated.

"Well, Dwayne, I should get back to it, you know?"

"Yeah, me too." He didn't want the call to end.

"Okay then, I'll talk to you soon."

"Dee-Dee, do you want to do something after work?"

"Well, Dwayne, I always do something after work."

He cleared his throat. "I mean with me, together."

"Are you asking me out on a date, Mr. Johnson?"

"I . . . I guess."

"Hmm, so you're not sure?"

“Yes, I’m . . . I’m sure. Would you like to have dinner with me?” He was shocked at his own words. Dinner was an entirely different thing than coffee or a drink. So many hurdles to overcome during a meal. “If you don’t have plans.”

“Well, I do need to eat. Do you think you’re worthy of my Friday night?”

“Pardon?” He could feel his confidence slipping. He uncapped the flask and shook the last drop into his mouth.

“Friday night is the second biggest social evening of the week. I can’t just use it up on anyone.”

“Oh, some other night then?” His racing heart returned.

“Tonight will be fine, Dwayne.”

Dee-Dee took charge of the time and the restaurant. She would be by in a taxi to pick him up at the office at six thirty.

Dwayne wrote the details of the arrangements down on a sheet of paper. He read the words over and over and decided that the get-together would be okay, despite the six in the time. “Dinner is for seven anyhow,” he said to himself.

“Is everything okay, Dwayne?” Leah said as she looked into his cubicle.

“Huh?”

“You were just staring at something on your desk. Bad news about your car?”

He looked at her and noticed a concerned frown on her face. “No, nothing like that. Everything is fine.”

“Good, Bill was wondering if you were interested in some overtime.”

“I can work until a little after six,” he said and as he did, he smiled. The grin caused a sting in his injured jaw and cheek. He couldn’t help it. He smiled again.

“Oh, going out tonight?” She sounded a little more surprised than he would have liked.

“Yes, I have a dinner date with a young lady.” Dwayne liked the way his plans for the evening sounded. Leah nodded and then left the cube. Her shoes were loud on the floor and could be heard all the way to Bill’s office.

Masterson would not enjoy learning that Dwayne couldn’t stay late. However, Dwayne didn’t care. He had worked every late shift and extra weekend that his boss had offered him over the five years of employment.

Six o’clock came quicker than Dwayne could ever have imagined. He finished burning his day’s work to CD and then powered down his workstation. In his filing cabinet was a Ziploc bag of toiletries and a small towel. He dropped the CD off at Leah’s and then he made his way to the bathroom. After checking and rechecking that he was alone, he then locked the door.

He brushed his teeth, making sure that each tooth received eleven strokes and his tongue seventeen. He ran a rechargeable shaver over his beard and then washed his face. His hands were scrubbed for a second and then a third time, and he applied deodorant yet again.

The bruise on his cheek was now dark yellow mixed with purple. He shuddered when he thought of the accident and how out of control he felt sliding in the snow and the other vehicles crashing into his.

The person Dwayne saw in the mirror was not someone he believed could pull off this dinner. Dee-Dee will see his shit and she’ll get suspicious, he thought. She’ll excuse herself and go to the washroom and never return.

He washed his hands, then repeated his teeth, shaved, brushed his hair, and rubbed his hands until they were red. Dwayne took a long breath and was about to repeat when someone knocked at the washroom door. He paused, cleared his throat, and then began to wipe around the sink.

Another knock.

Dwayne gathered his things, opened the door, and burst through the doorway without even noticing who was waiting to use the facilities. His watch told him that he had less than fifteen minutes before Dee-Dee arrived.

With his toilet kit stored in his cubicle, Dwayne decided to wait for Dee-Dee outside. As soon as he passed through the main entrance, he felt the cool evening air on his still damp face. It was just above freezing, and the remaining snow was wet and slushy and a breeze had a moist feel that promised more rain.

He moved to the area where the smokers consumed their poison, and he noticed that there were exactly six plastic chairs and two small tables. This would not do at all. He turned away from the six-two and stood looking across the parking lot.

Dee-Dee was three minutes late. Dwayne tried to make excuses for this tardiness and decided that there was still a taxi shortage due to the snow.

The perimeter of the parking lot was lined with maple trees. Planted three years previous, Dwayne knew that twenty-seven trees made up the group. He counted them, becoming anxious when he could only tally twenty-six.

He followed the boulevard, counting each tree out loud. At the spot where the twelfth tree normally stood, he found only a few branches jutting from the snow. He reached down and pulled the tree from its icy blanket. The sapling was broken off a few inches above the ground. Dwayne realized that someone had hit the maple when they carelessly parked their vehicle. He felt angry that one of his coworkers had killed the tree and thus caused an unsightly gap between tree eleven and thirteen.

A horn sounded, and he turned to see a bright red taxi with black roof driving toward him. He dropped the tree and tried to smile.

“Breathe,” he whispered to himself.

Chapter IV

Dee-Dee leaned over and kissed him on the cheek a second after he sat in the right rear seat of the taxi. He fought off the urge to wipe her saliva from his face and smiled. She looked happy with a warm smile accentuated by the blood red lipstick on her full lips. He dared not lower his gaze from her eyes as she had on a black top that showed more breast and cleavage than he was comfortable seeing. Not that he didn't like what he saw; he just didn't want to stare at the view all night.

She was asking him about his workday and the insurance company and all he could say was fine and good. He thought that Dee-Dee had no idea just how stunning she was. If she knew, then there was no way that she would be in a taxicab heading to a restaurant to have dinner with him. Attractive people dined with others of their kind.

She was telling him about a strange customer at the store as he tried to listen. However, the back of the seat in front of him had a collection of holes that someone had stabbed with a pen and he needed to count each indent.

“What are you thinking right now, Dwayne?” she said, interrupting her story.

“Huh?” He couldn’t tell her how he wanted to stick a pen in each hole and count.

“Nothing important.”

“Every thought is important.” She wasn’t going to let this go. “They make us who we are.”

He made sure his throat was clear before he spoke. “I was thinking . . . how amaze—how beautiful you are.”

“Good answer. Total bullshit, but good just the same.”

“It’s true.” He felt shyness creep in.

“You may believe that, and that’s sweet. But you weren’t thinking it just then were you?”

“No.”

“Dwayne, if we have a chance at all, we need to be honest with each other.”

“Okay, I . . . um . . . I was thinking about these holes,” he said, pointing to the damaged backseat.

“Yeah. So do you think the person was pissed off or did they just not give a shit?”

Dwayne had no idea why someone would jab a pen into a taxi seat, he just wanted to count it. Perhaps the guy was horny and the stabbing mimicked sexual thrusting. “The guy was just a dick,” he said, shrugging.

“How do you know it wasn’t a woman?”

“I don’t.”

“Maybe she was at a party with her boyfriend and she caught him kissing some other chick. She got out of there and called this cab and did that in anger.”

Dwayne noticed her mood has become irritated. “Did something like that happen to you?”

“Something like that happens to every girl, Dwayne.”

“We are here,” the driver said with a heavy accent. Dwayne hadn’t even noticed the guy during the ride. The fare was almost thirty-five dollars, and he gave the man a pair of twenties. The driver wore a bright orange turban, and his breath was so strong that Dwayne could feel it in his eyes.

Dwayne offered Dee-Dee his hand, and he helped her to her feet. He closed her door and stood next to her on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant. The sign on the establishment said Bombay Palace.

“What kind of food is this?”

“Indian.”

She must have noticed the concern on his face. “You don’t like Indian?”

“It’s just that everything is so hot.”

Dee-Dee assured him that she would find something on the menu that was mild. He was skeptical; however, he wanted to show that he was flexible and open to new experiences.

Dwayne held the door for her, and she smiled at him and he whispered to himself that it would be okay. As they entered, a woman with an enormous white-tooth grin and a long, flowing, colorful dress met them. The greeter immediately recognized Dee-Dee and said that her regular table was ready.

The dining area was modestly decorated with framed prints of what Dwayne suspected were Indian gods and goddesses. The walls were trimmed with an endless string of gold LED Christmas lights, and the ceiling was one large smoked mirror.

Dwayne held Dee-Dee's chair while she sat, and then he took another across from her. He looked at her and saw that she was smiling, and then her expression changed.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, as she reached her hand to touch his.

Dwayne clenched and unclenched the hand that she didn't touch. This was stupid, he thought. He couldn't pull this off, no way. Dee-Dee knew he was uncomfortable and she placed her free hand on his and rubbed his fingers gently. His irritation grew.

"Dwayne, what is it?" Her eyes were full of concern.

"I . . . um—" He stood and took one of the unused chairs and moved it to the next table. She began to do the same with the remaining seat, and he shook his head. He also picked up one place setting, a water and wine glass and took them to other tables.

He sat down, unable to look at her for a moment. She touched him again and he slowly raised his eyes to meet hers. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "If you . . . if you want me to go—it's okay."

"Go? No, it's fine. Do you feel better now?" Her touch on his hands was comforting, and her smile somehow said that it was no big deal.

He nodded.

The woman who met them at the entrance glided by and filled two glasses of water and set a pair of menus. Dee-Dee reached out and held a third glass for the woman to fill, and then Dee-Dee indicated that the extra cutlery setting was to stay on the table.

Two minutes later, a man dressed in a white robe appeared and asked if he could take an order. Dee-Dee said that she would have her usual and the man smiled and nodded.

"And you, sir?"

Dwayne looked at Dee-Dee and after a few seconds, she remembered that Dwayne had no idea concerning Indian food and less about what to order.

"Oh, he will have the buttered chicken, rice, and vegetables."

"Thank you, so nice to serve you again, Ms. Roland." He bowed slightly, removed the menus from the table, and glanced at the extra setting before moving to the kitchen.

"You must come here a lot?"

Dwayne wanted to say something about his moving the fourth setting and chair. However, it appeared to be a non-issue with her. She kept the third setting like it was a normal practice. No one, not even his parents had done this for him before. She was amazing.

"Well, they stopped their delivery service a while ago, so now I'm here at least once a week."

He nodded.

"So, Mr. Johnson. Where are you going each morning when I see you?"

"Work," he blurted without thinking.

"Oh, I thought you were stalking me or something."

"Really, no, I would never do that." He felt his face warm and then the sensation spread to his arms and chest.

"I dunno, Dwayne, every day at exactly 8:27 AM? I mean, five minutes early or later and you would miss me."

"I leave at the same time for work. It's routine—honest."

She looked him up and down as if she was a detective looking for telltales of a lie in his body language. Her face was serious and then it became angry.

"What?"

"I'm kidding." She giggled. "Jesus, you should have seen your face."

"Kidding?"

"Of course. Do you think I would have given you my number if I thought you were a stalker or something?"

He thought about her words for a few seconds. "I don't know. Maybe you are someone who would be into that . . . danger and what not." He wasn't sure where this was coming from; however, she seemed to like it and played along.

"You think I'm looking for a thrill? Hmm? You think I like tempting fate—dating guys that are dangerous?"

"Maybe. You are kind of mysterious with the trench coat and the piercings in your eyebrow and sometimes you would pretend not to see me at the bus stop. Like you were a tease."

"That's me, Dee-Dee Roland, psycho bitch looking for a lover that will nail me or nail me to the wall."

They laughed together. Her voice and the way she smiled gave him the confidence to talk about himself and to be open and honest. He managed to keep at bay all of the things about his personality that had chased people away in the past. He felt as though he had a grip on it, at least for the time being. However, the urge to leap to his feet, bolt for the bathroom, and wash his hands was overwhelming.

Instead of fleeing, he decided to keep his mind busy with conversation. "I'm surprised that you came out with me."

"Why?"

"You know."

"No, actually I don't." She straightened in her seat.

"Well—I'm . . ." He lost his nerve to speak about himself. "I'm not Brad Pitt."

"Even better. You have a young Harrison Ford thing going."

Dwayne felt his face warm. He looked away for a moment.

She asked him about his work, and he did his best not to bore her with the details. She listened closely, asked questions as if she was truly interested, and made comments about his boss and coworkers as the conversation moved along.

"It's the dullerest job you've ever heard of, isn't it?" he asked.

Dee-Dee shook her head slightly, closed her eyes, and then leaned her head back with her mouth open as if she was fast asleep, and then she made a soft snoring sound.

He smiled. She was incredible. Even with her tongue hanging out, she was stunning.

"Oh my goodness." She sat up straight when the meals arrived and feigned a yawn.

Three plates of food were placed in front of Dee-Dee. Each was piled with a stew like food. He wasn't sure, but he didn't think there was any meat in her choices.

The waiter said something in Indian, and Dwayne was shocked when Dee-Dee answered in the same tongue.

"You speak . . . the language?"

"Hindi. Just a little. I ordered the house white. Do you mind?"

"Sounds good." A drink or three might help him keep his things controlled.

"Do you speak any other languages?"

"Yes, it's a hobby of mine. Is your chicken okay?"

Dwayne had not tried any of his meal, but said it was very good. "How many?"

“How many guys have I slept with?” She had the same grin that she used when she was calling him a stalker.

“I’m sure you’re still pure, Dee.” He smiled.

She laughed and paused to dab her mouth with her napkin.

“No, how many languages?”

“Hmm—thirteen, including English. Six Asian and as many European. But truthfully, I’m only fluent in French, Spanish, and maybe German.”

“Amazing! You could eavesdrop on the UN.”

“Like I said, it’s just a hobby. You going to eat or just stare at me?”

Dwayne quickly cut a large piece of chicken and stuffed a forkful in his mouth. He couldn’t reply when she asked him if he liked his food; he had to continue chewing until he made room for words.

“Very tasty,” he said finally. “Would you like to try it?”

“No thanks.” She shook her head. “I don’t eat chicken.”

“Oh, don’t like it, or are you allergic?”

“Nope, I don’t eat any meat, fish, or bird.” She said like it was perfectly normal.

“Oh, so you’re a vegetarian?”

“Used to be. Now I’m a veagan.”

“Not sure I know what that is.”

“Veagans don’t eat or consume animal products of any kind.”

“I knew a vegetarian who ate eggs.”

“Not even eggs. I don’t drink milk or eat honey or anything that has milk or honey in it.”

“Wow, that really limits what you can eat.”

She shrugged. “Animals have suffered at the hands of humanity for a million years. I don’t do my part any longer.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Your shoes, Dwayne, are they leather?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Veagans like me, we don’t wear leather or fur of any kind.”

“Amazing. It must take a great deal of commitment to remain true to those beliefs.”

“Not really. It’s just habit.” She smiled.

He wasn’t sure, but he thought he detected a hint of worry in her eyes. “Is it healthy to eat only vegetables? I mean, isn’t the human body designed to eat meat? We do have canine teeth like a predator.”

“People need protein. But it doesn’t have to be animal protein.”

“I see.”

“Does any of this bother you, Dwayne?”

That worry had returned in her. He thought about her question and realized none of her admission changed how he felt about her.

“No, not at all. I admire your dedication to your beliefs.”

“Good.” A happy smile formed on her face, and then it became a bright beam.

“Because some people think it’s really strange. They think I’m a crazy.”

“I know how that feels.”

She nodded.

The waiter poured two glasses of wine from a carafe and then set the decanter next to Dwayne. Dwayne looked at the glasses for a moment and tried hard to ignore it. Dee-Dee took the carafe and filled the remaining goblet. He wanted to stop her, to tell her that the gesture was not necessary. He could not.

She held up her glass and so did Dwayne. "To new beginnings," she said and then clinked his glass to hers.

He sipped his wine and continued eating. The vegetables were steamed and also buttered. The rice was yellow and almost too spicy for him; however, he didn't complain or admit anything negative about the meal.

"I'm looking for someone that I can trust, Dwayne," she said suddenly. "I feel in my gut that you might be that person. Am I correct?"

He swallowed his mouthful, wiped his face, nodding the entire time. "Yes, I mean, I have my stuff as you know . . . but you can trust me . . . always."

"Good. You can trust me also."

"I already do."

"Really. You don't even know me."

"Uh-huh. But I have a really good sense for people who will or won't hurt me."

Dee-Dee looked away, deep in some distant memory. Then she glanced at him and forced a smile. Her brown eyes scanned his face, and then she returned to her meal.

After more than a minute of silence, she began to talk about herself. Dee-Dee told him about her work and that she often went away on overnight business trips and that she was flying out to San Francisco to the annual organic industry conventions.

"I fly out next Wednesday."

"I don't fly well," he said.

"Oh, it's not so bad."

"I um . . . totally freak out. Last time I flew was two years ago. I had to be sedated just to go to my grandmother's funeral in Montreal." Now it was his turn to avert his gaze.

"Lots of people hate to fly. Don't worry about it."

"Okay."

Dee-Dee ordered more wine and smiled at him when he looked surprised about her increasing the alcohol level of the date.

"No one is driving, right?"

"You're right." He didn't know why he questioned the wine. It was very good and with each glass he felt more comfortable.

"Besides, it'll help you seduce me."

"Um—" He felt his face flush. "I wasn't . . ."

"You're way too easy, Mr. Johnson."

In an effort to move the subject away from sex, he turned the talk to music. He realized his nervous spell had him rambling on about why he liked jazz, and he noticed that Dee-Dee had little to add to the conversation. Likewise, Dwayne hadn't heard of most of the folk artists whom Dee-Dee listed as her favorites.

"So music isn't our thing," she said. "How about hobbies and other interests?"

He thought about her request for a moment and decided that he wouldn't invent any leisure pursuits; he would continue to be honest. "Don't really have any." Then he started again, interrupting her as she began to speak. "I . . . um—sorry."

“No, finish.” She gestured for him to continue.

“I run the United Way fund-raising campaign at work.” He then remembered that he had only become involved with the charity to spend more time with Leah Flanagan.

“That’s important work, Dwayne,” she paused as if to collect her thoughts. “I work with three non-profit animal shelters. One for cats, another for dogs, and then a wildlife rescue refuge.”

“Wow, you sure do love animals.”

“I guess. Mostly I like how animals are so sincere. They don’t care if you are wealthy or poor, don’t dress like a model, or have tattoos and a nose ring. As long as you love them, they love you back.”

Dwayne was silent for a minute or more. Dee-Dee continued to detail her volunteer work with the animals. “What do you think about that?”

“Well, I’m not sure if there is a heaven. But if there is such a place, I think that a person who saves God’s creatures is sure to make it.”

She reached across the table and touched his hand. “Never thought of it that way. Thank you, Mr. Johnson.”

“So are you a member of PETA?” She was staring at him, and he hoped that another question would stop her gaze.

“I used to be. But they seem to be more about signing up Hollywood stars than they are about animal rights.”

Dwayne was taken aback when she said that she was a card-carrying member of the official *Star Trek* fan club.

“Really? You didn’t get it as a gag gift or something?”

“No way. The sci-fi channel is all I watch.”

“Classic or TNG?”

“*Deep Space Nine*.”

“*DS-9*? Come on.” She wasn’t kidding. Dee-Dee knew the shows and lingo of the *Trek* universe.

“How about you?”

“Classic all the way.”

The conversation quickly turned to alien races, planets, and starships. She was telling him all about her favorite episodes when the waiter arrived to take any dessert orders.

Dee-Dee looked into Dwayne’s eyes and then asked for the bill.

“So now, what?” Dwayne asked.

“Coffee, I mean, tea?”

He nodded and took the check before she had a chance to scoop it up. He scanned the total and handed the waiter his Visa.

“There is something about you, Dwayne Johnson.”

He quickly began to worry on what she was talking about. The wine was definitely helping him cope with his urge to count the golden Christmas lights and it was curbing his need to bolt to the bathroom to wash and rewash his hands and face. Was she seeing something else?

“I’m not sure, Dwayne. But I could get very used to hanging out with you.”

She touched his hand again, and he did something he almost never practiced. He took her hands in his, held her, and moved his thumbs over her fingers. “Me too.”

Dwayne found the bathroom after a minute of searching, washed his hands, used the urinal, and washed again. So far, the evening was progressing extremely well; he was proud of the way the dinner went. He took a long breath.

Dee-Dee was speaking in Hindi to the restaurant staff when he found her. She said good-bye to her friends and pointed toward the front door.

Outside the restaurant, the rain had returned; a light drizzle that Dwayne thought would freeze during the night and cause a black-ice epidemic.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“Nope—you?”

He shook his head.

She smiled, then reached for his right hand, and began to walk down Tenth Avenue. Normally, Dwayne’s need to count would require him to tally the sidewalk cracks, telephone poles, or at least inventory the threes in homes and business addresses. For the time being, aided by the wine and a desire to appear normal for Dee-Dee, his calculating had ceased.

Suddenly, she swung herself around to face him, and then she kissed him on the mouth. She put her fingers to his lips so he wouldn’t speak, moved away, and then guided him into a Starbucks. “I’ll order—find a seat.”

Dwayne heard her words; however, for a moment he was fixated on the kiss and he just stood without moving. He looked at her in the line-up, and she smiled. He turned around and noticed for the first time that the place was packed with customers.

Near the entrance, he found two stools and a space at the counter. He sat in one and pulled the other close to himself to save it for Dee-Dee. Outside the window, a teenage couple stood near to each other and shared a single cigarette. Behind him, the crowd seemed loud and he had the feeling they were regrouping before hitting the next nightclub or house party.

“Not sure if you’ll like this,” Dee-Dee said, as she took her seat next to him.

Dwayne opened the plastic lid on his cup and found that his drink was foamy on top. He glanced at her.

“It’s a chai tea latte. Try it.”

He lifted the cup and took a sip. He immediately tasted cloves and other spices.

“So?”

“It’s good. I like it. Tastes like Christmas baking or something.” He noticed that her drink was also white and foaming on top. “What is that you have?”

“Cappuccino.”

“Don’t those have milk in them?”

“Uh-huh. Mine is made from soymilk. It’s not the same, but it’s still pretty good.”

The chat about their drinks was keeping the conversation away from the kiss. She caught him off guard with it and he didn’t react or return the affection. Not that any warning would have helped him. He still had a problem with the entire act of kissing, and despite the fact that he was extremely attracted to her, the thought of swapping saliva made him shiver.

Dwayne could barely hear her over the volume of noise in the shop. Someone was yelling to a friend from the street about his order, and everybody else spoke louder to be heard. She was asking him something, and when he shrugged his shoulders, she slid off her stool and spoke into his ear. “Let’s go. It’s too loud.”

Outside, the noise was tolerable although still not great for conversation. She pointed to the front steps of an apartment tower. The concrete was dry, and he cupped his tea in both hands. Dee-Dee sat and placed a hand on his leg just above the knee. She eased herself closer and hugged him.

"I'm getting cold," she said.

"Me too. Should we call it a night?"

"Trying to get rid of me?"

"Of course not."

Dee-Dee called a taxi on her cell phone and then snuggled next to Dwayne. He couldn't remember when he had last been this close to someone. She rested her head to his chest and occasionally he could feel her breath on his neck.

She raised her head and slowly moved in for another kiss. This time he did his best to return her affection.

"That was better," she whispered.

"Sorry, I'm not very good at this."

She smiled. "You just need more practice." She leaned in again.

"It's just that . . ."

"Less talking, more lip action."

He cringed at her touch. Damn it, he thought to himself. Everybody does this. Why does it make him so uncomfortable?

"Do you want to kiss me, Dwayne?"

When he hesitated with an answer, her face contorted into a pained look.

"It's not you. I just have a thing about it." He took a reassuring breath and moved in to kiss her. He almost gagged; but this time was longer, deeper, and wetter.

When she eased her tongue to his, he had to summon all of his resolve not to turn away and retch. He pushed at all of his aversion to having another person's saliva in his mouth. Using a technique he learned in counselling, he told himself over and over that there was nothing to be so repulsed by.

"Mmm, that's nice. You're getting it."

Dwayne had as much trouble after the kiss as he did during the act. He scrambled to keep his mind from focusing on the excess liquid in his mouth. Standing, he moved along the steps toward a shrub and spat into the soil.

"You need to spit after kissing me?" She stood with an insulted look on her face.

"No, I burped," he lied, "and a little acid and food came up."

She seemed to understand and offered him a sip of bottled water. He took a swallow and when he handed her the bottle, he saw the taxi. "Cab's here."

She sat next to him and held his hand. They shared a comfortable silence, and when the taxi stopped in front of a low-level apartment complex, she leaned to him.

"This is me."

He looked past her to see her building.

"Coming up? I make wonderful fruit smoothies. I think I have some vodka or rum to throw in."

Dwayne couldn't believe the words that came from his mouth. "Sure, Dee. That would be nice."

Chapter V

The lobby of her building was decorated with warm-colored paint, wallpaper, and trim. The floor was tiled in a brown slate, and he began to believe that this was an expensive residence. Once in the elevator, she pushed the button for the fifth floor. There was a faint odor of cigarettes in the lift and a sign on the wall about an upcoming strata-council meeting.

When the lift car stopped on five, she looked at him. "The woman led the boy to her lair. She would take him as she had all the others—and leave nothing." She grinned and let out an exaggerated laugh like a B movie villain.

At the door to 503, she worked the key and glanced up at him. "Don't worry," she said in a low voice. "We can talk and have a drink if you're not ready."

Was his discomfort that obvious? He wondered as he moved into her suite. She stepped in behind and quickly entered numbers on an alarm keypad. The system beeped twice.

He heard more than one cat purring and felt movement around his feet before she turned on the lights. With the entrance area illuminated, he looked for the felines and couldn't see any of them. He kicked off his shoes, and she took his coat.

"That's Rufus and Girl-cat." She offered him wine or a vodka drink. "I'm having white rum with a splash of lime."

"Sounds good."

The apartment was tastefully done in eggshell yellow with the east corner being a medium brown feature wall. Furnishings weren't cluttered, with a couch and love seat positioned for the TV and for taking advantage of the view of the city.

"Grab a seat."

Dee-Dee walked the perimeter of the living room, lighting candles as she moved. She smiled at him at his spot on the couch. Her face was aglow in dull candlelight, sending a shiver through him as he was reminded of her beauty.

Music played a singer with only a piano and acoustic guitar to accompany her. Dee-Dee was busy in the kitchen, and he could hear her chipping at ice with a tool.

"The clicker is there—put something on if you like."

With the television on, he muted the sound and began to surf the channel selection. He stopped on the sci-fi network and waited for the commercial to end.

Dee-Dee appeared in front of him with short glasses of ice and green liquid. She handed him one and sat next to him.

"What's on?"

"Should be old Trek."

A minute after the forty-year-old episode came on the screen she began to ask him about the plot. "Who is that?"

"Ricardo Montalban. Remember this one? The second movie is the sequel. 'Wrath of Khan.'"

"Oh yeah. Khan was the best of those movies."

He nodded and then sipped his drink. The ice-cold liquid felt hot going down his throat. Sips became long swallows, and he instantly felt more at ease as he finished his glass.

"Good, huh? I'll get you another," she said, as she stood.

Dwayne counted thirteen candles still burning around the room. The flickering light and soft scent of wax helped to ease his nervousness. Dee-Dee seemed to take longer with the second drink, and he could no longer see or hear her in the kitchen.

He turned his eyes to the screen, an ad about the latest version of the George Foreman Grill. When Dee-Dee returned, she had forgone her skirt and blouse for an oversized blue and white T-shirt and nothing else.

The shirt was extremely formfitting, and he looked away to avoid staring at her. She handed him his drink and asked him if he wanted to turn off the set.

He nodded and the screen went blank. The singer on the stereo and the occasional pop of crackling ice were the only sounds for several minutes. She looked at him like she was going to kiss him, and he was certain that she could hear his pounding heart. Then she whispered.

“Oh, I put this on because the outfit wasn’t very comfortable.”

He swallowed most of his rum.

“Why don’t you loosen the necktie? This isn’t the office.”

He began to remove his tie, and then she leaned close and brushed his hands away. She held the tie from both ends like it was a restraint. “Now I have you, Mr. Johnson.” She kissed him. “Is that okay?” she whispered.

“Mmm, hmm.”

She kissed him again and then undid the top button of his shirt. “Still okay?”

“Yi—” He cleared his throat. “Yes.”

More buttons opened and more kisses fell on his lips. The rum was hitting him, and he smiled. She put her lips on his chest and kissed his left nipple and then his sternum.

“Your heart is just pounding. Are you sure this is okay? I’m not rushing you?”

He struggled to get the words out. “Ah . . . no.” More throat clearing. “This is fine.”

“That’s not very convincing.”

Dwayne looked away in an attempt to summon all of the courage and confidence he would need over the next few minutes.

“I’m sorry, I’m just not very good at this.”

He hated that he had so little experience with women. Leah was his first and last, and despite her kindness in the matter, she had also shown frustration and impatience during his more awkward times.

“That’s okay. Just let me take the lead and if something makes you uncomfortable then let me know.”

He counted the candles again and this time he saw a dozen still lit. In the doorway to the kitchen sat one of her cats. Large and majestic, the feline was sitting, staring at him as if he was the animal’s prey. What if it attacked him? Was a house cat dangerous? The cat was black, and Dwayne wasn’t sure if the creature’s fur was streaked or spotted. Most of all, he wondered where the smaller one was hiding. Was this their routine? One sits at the perimeter and gets the victim’s attention while the other moves in to jump on the person’s face all claws and teeth. He put a hand to his neck when he imagined the pair slashing at his jugular with extended claws.

Dwayne gagged when he realized that the larger cat was licking its fur. Soon the pet would be completely damp and contaminated by cat spit.

“You’re sitting in his spot.” She looked at Dwayne like he should know better.

“Huh?” He glanced at the still grooming feline.

“Rufus always sits next to me and then my boy will curl in my lap.”

“Oh? Why do I get the feeling that he would kill me in my sleep?”

“Old Roof? No, he’s not the one to worry about. It’s her.” Dee-Dee cocked her head toward the cat sitting next to the stereo system at the far wall.

The smaller female rose to all fours, walked across the living room as if on cue, and placed her forehead to her partner’s face. Rufus refused for a second and then seemed to think better of his actions and began to wash his mate between her ears and on the top of her head.

Dee-Dee unfastened the last button on Dwayne’s shirt and began to move her flat hand around on his bare chest. She made swirls around his navel and in a continuous motion, undid his belt buckle and pant snap.

His heart shifted into overdrive, pounding in his chest. She lowered his zipper, glided her hand beneath his boxers, and moved her fingers about him.

“Oh my goodness, Mr. Johnson,” she said in a playful voice.

She eased off his trousers and then threw her leg over and straddled him. Next, she pulled her extra-large tee up and over her face. Dwayne quickly noticed that she wasn’t wearing panties. She continued to use her hand on him and then she moved her lips close to him.

“Do you want to help me out of this bra?”

Dee-Dee guided his hands to the front closing clasp of her brassiere. When the clip opened and the lacy black material slipped away, he gasped and then took a long breath. He needed a break; however, he couldn’t ask her to move away from him. Not now.

He reached for his drink. She handed him his glass and took a long swallow of her own. She was smiling down at him with a grin that he had not seen in her before.

When the last of the liquid went down, he was left with three chunks of ice. He didn’t want to spit them out as he had already given up his glass to her so he chewed them. Perhaps he crunched the ice too loudly because a look of irritation came over her face.

Then Dwayne saw fear and confusion in Dee-Dee’s eyes. She pushed away from him, knelt for her shirt on the coffee table, and then she turned away from him.

“Dee?”

She took another step from him.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to . . .” Dwayne had no idea what he had done to disgust her so intensely.

All of his insecurities, nervousness, and fear came rushing at him. He had offended this wonderful woman to the point that she could not look at him, and he had no clue as to what he had done to incur it.

He found his boxers and pulled on his shirt. His pants were missing, and Dee-Dee still had not turned to face him.

When she did look at him, she put her hands up as though she knew what he was doing. “This is where you suddenly remember that you need to get going.”

“No, I . . . um, was just feeling strange sitting naked. I—unless you want me to go—I am sorry, Dee.”

“No, it’s my fault. It’s not you.”

She stood with her shirt held tight across her chest as if she was now ashamed to let him see her. He stood and slowly walked to her. Then he stopped, uncertain if he should hold her, stay away, or just finish dressing and leave.

“When I was fifteen—almost sixteen—my parents were on holidays and my brother Dave had his friends over for a drinking party in the basement.” Dee-Dee paused for a few seconds and then continued her story. Her brother and his friends invited her down to join their drinking game. Dave wasn’t very good at the game and soon passed out.

“Then those boys turned their sights on me. They got me wasted and then they got . . . me . . . naked, and then . . .”

Dwayne looked into her eyes, and he knew the rest of the story. He nodded and then guided her to the couch. After that, he cleaned up the drink glasses. He found a jar of instant coffee and some teabags. He boiled water and then brought her a mug of coffee.

She smiled her thanks and then motioned for him to sit.

“It was the ice,” Dee-Dee said softly.

“Pardon?”

“The ice. When it happened, I was so drunk that I couldn’t stop them. One of the boys, his name was Denny, he didn’t join in. He just sat there chomping ice cubes.”

“Jesus.”

“That’s all I heard. Laughing and that damn ice.”

They were silent for more than a minute until something thumped into a wall. Then there was a growling sound and a long hiss. Then a blur of motion on the floor charged into the living room a meter in front of the couch. The cats were rolling on the carpet, kicking, scratching, and even biting each other.

Dwayne stood. “My god! They’re killing each other!”

“They’re playing. Watch and see.”

The battle ended with both combatants taking positions a few feet apart. Tails and backs were up as the two walked apart in opposite directions, only to charge again and begin round two in the middle of the room.

“This could go on for hours,” she said.

She put her hand out for him to take. “I’m really tired. This was an awesome night, but I need some sleep.”

“I guess I’ll call a taxi . . .”

“I have a queen size—there’s lots of room if you can keep your hands to yourself.”

After the bedtime hygiene rituals were complete, Dwayne met her at the center of the bed. She stared into his eyes and kissed him softly.

“Thank you for not thinking I’m completely weird,” she said.

“Same to you.”

Dee-Dee’s eyes flickered, opened, and then closed again. “Night, Mr. Johnson.” She closed her eyes and turned away from him.