

Ray Pierce stood under a blue construction scaffolding outside a club on 4<sup>th</sup> street, smoking a damp cigarette. Beneath the soles of his shoes, through the concrete, he could feel the pounding party music, like the heart of a caged animal. He'd stopped to get out of the rain, which had suddenly started driving down like steel knives following a sickening peal of thunder only moments before. It was just after midnight, and he'd been wandering the streets for hours after his shift at Staples.

As he stood there smoking, he watched the idling limousines, glimpsed a few half-familiar faces he recognized from the tabloids, along with the usual supporting cast of drug dealers and sex-escorts. All in all, a rather shabby affair. Ray would know. As a former lead writer for *AdBiz*, he'd covered more than a few of these kinds of events at the launch of some new box of soap or celebrity perfume.

In the time it took to smoke three inches of soggy tobacco, the rain had let up enough to make it to the subway entrance on Broadway. Ray took one last inhale and threw the rest of the cigarette into the gutter. That's when he saw her.

She was walking through the thickly-painted red door of the club, laughing, talking on a Nokia cell phone. She used her free hand to help her talk, her face over-animated, smiling, flirtatious, as if whoever was on the other end could actually see her. She stood

beside Ray for about fifteen seconds, yammering, and then disconnected the call and dropped the phone into her bag. Her hand instantly reappeared with a tube of lipstick, slim as a rifle cartridge, which she applied slowly, as she looked out at the rain, frowning slightly. She turned, the lipstick still at her lips, and saw Ray watching.

Ray blushed in spite of himself, looked away, and turned back again. The woman was still looking at him, smiling, saying something that Ray had to reconstruct.

“Are you with the party?”

“No,” Ray said, “I just stopped to get out of the rain.”

“Hmm too bad.”

She held out her arm and nonchalantly slashed a fatal-looking red smear across the delicate tendons of her left wrist.

“I can’t quite decide. What do you think? Is it me?”

“I think it looks better on your mouth.” Ray said, surprised at his own cleverness. He nodded towards the red door. “Is the party that bad?”

“Typical fund raiser. This one for the MTV crowd, so maybe it’s a little sleazier.”

“What are you raising funds for?”

“Ben Haskins for Senate. We desperately need him in this country right now. Don’t you think?”

“Sure.” She continued looking at him, the whole time with that dazzling smile. On impulse, Ray caught her wrist. She didn’t pull away. He lifted her hand and peered down at the mark she’d made. “I think it could even be an emergency. Do you need help?”

“What kind of help did you have in mind?”

Ray studied her face. She looked like someone, Debbie Harry, maybe, when she was younger. Her face glowed with a kind of manic excitement. Ecstasy, maybe? The drug, that is.

“What’s your name?”

“Does it make a difference?”

“No,” Ray said, playing along. “Not really.” He nodded towards the club. “Are you here with someone?”

She looked off somewhere unspecific. Then she returned her gaze to Ray. Her eyes were...what? He'd never properly be able to answer that question. Maybe they were like the end of a sentence that had begun so promisingly but that would always be left unfinished.

She said, “Everyone's with someone. The real question is how far would you go.”

“What do you mean?”

“For love. How far would you go?”

She pointed to the posters lining the brick wall behind him. Ray hadn't noticed them before. It was the same black-and-white poster, repeated, halfway down the block, like the still of a film comprised of a single frame frozen for eternity. The only contrast on the poster was the startlingly vivid color of lipstick on the model's sensuous mouth shot in extreme close-up. Ray could see it now, the ad's tag-line, *How far would you go for love?*

“Let's see,” she said. “Give me your wrist.”

Ray held out his arm and watched as the woman unhurriedly unbuttoned his shirt cuff. She pushed up his sleeve and Ray felt his heart pick up speed and the sweat break out under his arms. She used the lipstick to write her phone number up his forearm. It looked like he'd put his arm through a window and cut himself on a jagged shard of glass.

“Would you go this far?” she asked, smiling up at him like a movie-star. She slowly screwed the lipstick back into the tube, it's red tip suddenly obscene, wet and shiny, retracting like a dog's penis.

“Wait,” Ray said.

“Now we match,” the woman said, holding up her red wrist again.

“Wait a minute.”

She was already backing towards the club, smiling, waving with just the tips of her fingers.

“Ciao,” she said.

And she passed through the heavily-painted red door beyond which Ray was not permitted to go.

Back at the apartment, Ray stood at the bathroom sink and washed his arm. The lipstick number smeared into a scarlet incomprehensibility as if the skin of his forearm had been peeled away. He scrubbed his arm until all but the faintest trace of red remained, the rest running down the drain with the soapy water. He'd already memorized the phone number. He recited it back to himself so that he wouldn't forget it.

He dried his arm on a towel and then he put toothpaste on his toothbrush. He brushed his teeth, spitting bits of meat and greens from some forgotten meal into the basin. Then he sprayed the crown of his head with Minoxidil. He stared at himself in the mirror. In the harsh bathroom light, he figured that he probably looked the way he'd look ten years from now. It wasn't a pretty sight.

Beth called to him from the bedroom. “Are you coming to bed soon?”

She was already undressed, burrowed under the sheets, flipping through the pages of one of the romance manuscripts she edited for Longview Press. Tonight was “together-night”—a kind of warm-up for the plan they had to move in together come spring. That was the plan, but lately, Ray had been having doubts. Lately, he'd begun to ask himself if he could really see himself spending

the rest of his life with Beth. The real problem was that the answer he kept coming up with was “yes.” Ray set about turning off all the lights but hers. He sat on his side of the bed and pulled off his damp socks.

Sex, like everything else with Beth, was regular, safe, assured. There were no droughts, no floods. It came like rain in temperate climates, enough to keep things from dying out completely. There were the quick and efficient blowjobs, the maintenance handjobs, the obligatory weekend morning intercourse. They usually fucked in the missionary position because it best accommodated Beth’s general lack of interest. Once in a while, he put it into her from behind or she roused up the energy to climb on top. But mostly, she just lay there beneath him, face composed as if she were forming a mental to-do list for the day ahead, and waiting for it all to pass. To keep it up, Ray often thought of Beth tied up, or raped, or even strangled. He’d had thoughts like that for as long as he could remember. They didn’t bother him much anymore. People, he reasoned, thought up all kinds of crazy shit to get themselves off. They just didn’t go around broadcasting it to each other. That’s what Ray told himself, anyway. But how could he know for sure? How could anyone? And did we, really, even want to know?

Ray set the alarm on the nightstand. He said, “Just let me check my voicemail.”

He quickly dialed the number he’d memorized on the cordless, waited a few moments, and heard the woman’s recorded greeting. She sounded cool and businesslike. Her name was Charlotte, the machine said. Ray stared at Beth reading and waited until the woman on the phone finished and then he hung up without saying a word.

Beth lowered her manuscript. “Any messages?”

Ray said, “Nothing. Just the ex-wife. The usual. She didn't get a check fast enough. Bitch.”

At Café Fiorello where they were having lunch, Ray sat at a small outdoor table and waited for Charlotte to return from taking a cell-phone call. It was the second time during lunch she'd gotten up to take a call. She came back five minutes later, weaving her way between the crowded tables, smiling. She was wearing a long peasant skirt, a tight black top, and straw sandals.

“Sorry,” Charlotte said, when she reached the table, “Business. It's 24-7 when you do what I do.”

“What is it that you do, exactly?” Ray asked.

“Consulting. PR, mostly. And you?”

“Magazine writer. I do an arts and business column for *AdBiz*.”

“Cool.” She toyed with the lime wedge in her drink. “Did you always want to be a writer? Was that your dream?”

Ray shrugged. “I wanted to write fiction, but I found I hated pretending. I tried nonfiction, but I have no patience with facts. So I compromised and became a journalist.” Charlotte smiled, as if he'd told a joke. A waiter passed their table with the remains of a ruined lobster: nothing but an empty red shell and disconnected antennae waving at nothing. “You know, when I didn't hear from you I figured you didn't want to meet after all. Three calls...I'd given up hope.”

Charlotte shifted her eyes down, staring at a fading water ring on the tablecloth. She looked somehow pleased. She glanced back up at Ray. “You shouldn't ever give up hope.”

Her eyes were no older than sixteen. That's how it would always be, Ray decided. She could be a hundred and those eyes would still radiate innocence and sexual possibility. He was in over

his head. Ray knew it forty feet away from the restaurant when he first caught sight of her. He should turn back for the shore. But he knew he wouldn't.

"I was out of town most of the month," she said. "I've been in the middle of a divorce and there's been so much—stuff."

"You're married?"

"Only in the legal sense."

"Is there any other sense?"

"We've been separated for nearly three years. But it's almost over now. Just some formalities. Is that a problem? I'll understand if it is."

"No," Ray said, after some hesitation. "Not for me it isn't."

"Good. It's been complicated. Lot's of legal details to sort out. John--that's my ex..."

"Soon-to-be-ex."

"Yes, soon-to-be ex. He was into the custom-made suits, the fancy cars, the Patek Philippe watches. He wanted the big house. That kind of thing was never important to me. But I can't give up everything I worked so hard for. I can't let him steal my entire life. It's not about the money. He's being so incredibly petty and vicious. You wouldn't believe it."

"Yeah, I'm afraid I would. You're with someone for ten, fifteen years, and it all ends up being about who gets the forks."

Ray needed a cigarette. He took a pack of Camels out of his inside jacket pocket, but put them back again, wondering if the latest no-smoking laws permitted him to smoke even outdoors.

"You're bitter, aren't you?" Charlotte asked.

"Realistic. You don't really know the person you love until you stop loving them."

"Do you think that you hate women, Ray?"

"I don't know. I always end up loving them too much to say for sure."

“I’m serious, Ray.”

“Of course not. Why do you even ask?”

“Because John hated women. When you said that, you sounded a little like him.”

“I’m sorry. It was a joke.”

“Many a truth in jest,” she said.

The waiter cleared away their plates and brought the two espressos they ordered in spite of the day’s heat. Charlotte showed Ray her new shoes, a gift from her mother in Chicago, she told him. She mentioned a brand name that Ray guessed was supposed to mean something, though he’d never heard of it, and mentioned a price of several hundred dollars. She then made an expression to let him know how silly she thought it was to spend so much for shoes.

“My stepfather was quite wealthy,” she said. “He died two years ago. I guess I’ll be a millionaire someday.”

Ray followed the line she drew with her partially exposed leg. He let his gaze travel along her calf to her delicate ankle. He lingered a moment at her silver pedicure. When he looked up again, Charlotte was already looking across the street at Lincoln Center as if she were gazing into forever. She ran a manicured finger along the rim of her water glass.

“As a little girl, my father would take me to the opera every Sunday when it was in season. The last time I went, it was with John. We had a terrible fight and he walked out on me. I haven’t been back since.”

“I’ll take you sometime. If you’d like.”

Charlotte refocused her eyes on him. “Classy Ray.”

“You’re beautiful. I’ve wanted to tell you that ever since the night we met.”

She smiled, touching the back of his hand where it lay on the table.

“And now you have. Thank you, Ray. That’s sweet.”

She reached into her handbag and took out her cell-phone again. Ray thought that she was going to take another call, but instead she turned it off and dropped it back into the bag.

She said, “Did you know that in outer space your heart starts to shrink?”

“What?”

“It’s true.”

“No fooling? How do you even know such a thing?”

She laughed and Ray felt how the grinding boredom steadily eating away at his life, the boredom you can forget is even there, that malaise of everything, was suddenly and miraculously gone. This is why, he thought, we bother to get up in the morning, why we evolved out of the goo at the dawn of time, why we trouble ourselves to breathe in and out. This is why we build rockets to fly into space where our hearts shrink...this feeling he got when she smiled.

Charlotte licked her perfect teeth and the wine she was sipping was reflected on her face. “It’s just one of those things you hear somewhere, I guess, and then it becomes a part of you. Don’t you know a lot of useless stuff?”

“Practically everything I know is useless.”

Ray took hold of Charlotte’s wrist and turned her hand over, palm-up, on the white table-cloth among the bread crumbs. He traced his finger over the delicate cerulean veins that she’d garishly slashed with the lipstick that first night at the club.

Charlotte dropped her head of loose blonde curls and looked up at him again from under her thick lashes. She wasn’t, however, looking at Ray, but somewhere just off to the left of him. “I’m really very shy,” she said. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Inside an over-airconditioned hotel room on 57<sup>th</sup> street, Ray fucked Charlotte for the first time. He was lying on top of her, kissing her face, as he thrust into her. In spite of the room's chill, their flesh where it touched on their chests and bellies was covered with sweat and made squelching swamp noises as they strove against each other to reach that little bit of paradise on earth.

Charlotte pulled her mouth away. Her lips were slightly peeled back from her teeth. She looked almost wasted by illness. "I want to bite you," she moaned.

"Yes."

"I mean it. I want to hurt you."

Ray was close to orgasm. He didn't care what she did. "Then do it," he rasped. "Do it."

She pressed her mouth to his chest.

Her teeth, sharp.

"Harder," Ray moaned, wincing, talking to her, talking to himself. "Harder."

He thrust into her faster and harder, trying to stay one stroke ahead of the rising wave of pain.

He did, by cumming.

Ray stood in front of the hotel room mirror as he finished dressing. He examined the wound on his left pectoral. The half-ring of inflamed flesh was tender to the touch. He vaguely wondered if a bite from another human being was dangerous, as dangerous as an animal bite, for instance. Could it infect him with some kind of pathogen, like tetanus, or worse, AIDS?

Behind him, still naked on the bed, Charlotte was lying propped on one arm, drawing patterns on the bedspread with a finger. Between her carelessly positioned legs, a silvery streak was

leaking out of her. Ray watched her in the mirror. She looked preoccupied, as if she were the only one in the room.

He had tucked in his shirt by now and was carefully knotting his tie, all part of his disguise. He broke the awkward silence.

“When can I see you again?”

“I don't know,” Charlotte said absently, not looking up. “I'm going out of town for a few days. Business, again. I'll call you.”

Ray figured that meant never.

Selling ballpoint pens and printer cartridges wasn't what Ray Pierce thought he'd be doing at forty. But that's what happened when the economy went south and subscription rates went down because people were accessing their news online nowadays. After eleven years at *AdBiz*, Ray had finally fallen victim to some bean counter's calculator in Accounts Payable, a sacrifice to fatten up the bottom line.

He'd gotten a decent enough severance package, reflecting, perhaps, the growing tendency disgruntled employees had lately of returning to their old places of employ and shooting the joint up, starting with the managers. After eleven dreary years of writing articles about innovative point of sales techniques for hawking deoderants and herbal diet pills, reporting on the endless shuffle of incompetent over-compensated industry bigwigs from one company to another, Ray might have welcomed the change as the kick in the ass he needed to jump-start his hopelessly stalled life.

But the layoff had come only a year after the long and acrimonious divorce with Angie and it was the last straw. He'd only just been getting back on his feet financially when Saul Makewitz called him into the office to break the bad news. It was back to the lawyers after that, another three months of swimming with Angie's sharks to adjust the settlement, another ten grand added to Ray's

already x-rated legal bill. So what? Now it would take forever and a day to pay off instead of just forever.

There was truly nothing like divorce court to rudely awaken a married man to just how little he actually owned in the eyes of the law, especially if the ex-love-of-his-life were determined enough to take it all. And Angie had proven herself as determined as cancer. Ray had heard that infidelity could do that to a woman, turn her into a terminal illness, *but her own infidelity?* Ray hadn't expected that—not Angie's cheating or her righteous indignation when she'd been caught at it. She felt entitled to her affair and defended herself so aggressively that Ray himself nearly came to believe that the only way his ex-wife could possibly have reconciled herself to Ray's mere existence was to screw a fellow counselor in the family crisis center where she worked.

By the time she'd had her day in court about all Ray had left was the right to keep working to pay her more until, at last, he finally caught a break and dropped dead at his desk. To that end, he took an almost grim satisfaction in donning the red Staples polo shirt and guiding people to the printer cartridges for not much better than minimum wage. Living well is the best revenge unless you have a parasite living off of you. Angie's twelve percent of what he was earning now was a lot less than her twelve percent of what he was earning before. She was convinced that Ray had gotten fired just to spite her. The expression she wore that last time in court was truly something astonishing: her mouth drawn to a tight red button straining to hold back hell itself. Ray savored the image like the trophy head of some exotic safari animal in his mental Hall of Revenge. Divorce, in Ray's estimation and experience of it, seldom made a human being out of anyone.

Truth was, Ray had tried to get another job in the industry. At least until all his old contacts stopped returning his embarrassingly frequent and increasingly desperate calls and all his leads ran into

dead ends. For the last six months, he was drifting through the job at Staples just to keep his nose above water and for the boxes of stolen envelopes. He discussed possible new careers with Beth that seemed as realistic to him as fairy tales, while eating his way steadily through the last of his severance and then his meager savings. Something would have to be done and soon, hence the talk of moving in with Beth, a prospect that still filled him with dread, like walking into a crypt you suspected was going to be slammed shut behind you, burying you alive.

After meeting Charlotte and her expensive shoes, Ray wished he'd put a little more effort throughout his life into becoming a rich and successful bastard. It really was important. Women like Charlotte didn't come cheaply, and they didn't stay cheaply either. No, they did not, not in the long run anyway. But he wasn't considering the long run anymore and hadn't in a very long time.

Thinking of Charlotte now in the middle of aisle seven, Ray touched the place on his chest that she'd bitten. Under his red Staples polo shirt, the bruise ached in a way that awakened his memory of the pleasure that had accompanied it. By afternoon that pleasure had turned a spectrum of all the purple colors, like the horizon on the last day of earth. You could still see the small marks of her teeth framing the lurid wound, the shape of her mouth like the gate to some perverse pleasure garden. With his hand in his pocket, he subtly shifted his hard-on to a more comfortable position.

"Eat your heart out," Ray muttered under his breath.

He was addressing the world in general.

He was punishing Beth for what Angie had done. Beth, who didn't deserve it. Angie, who didn't care. He was punishing himself, too, but in a much more complicated way. At least that's what Ray was telling himself when a middle-aged guy with a grave blanket of scorched-looking hair laid across his otherwise bald head

interrupted Ray's meditation to ask where he could find those little copper things that hold loose-leaf pages in a report together.

At that moment, life, real life, seemed very, very far away.

A week later, Charlotte took him back to the carriage house in Montcrest where she said she was living until her divorce became final. The carriage house was situated in the back of a large faux Tudor mansion in the hills above the tidy upscale commuter suburb. Charlotte fumbled with the keys to the door and disabled the alarm. Ray followed her inside. The place was neat and well-decorated but the fact that it had previously been some kind of garage or barn was left otherwise undisguised. There were two floors—the upper one a converted bedroom loft—but they didn't make it that far. Charlotte pulled Ray towards the daybed in front of the French doors. They undressed each other desperately, dragging each other down onto the cushions.

“When you showed up at the diner this morning and said you were sick,” Ray said, between kisses, “I thought you were trying to tell me you'd changed your mind about us...”

She'd been almost a half-hour late. Ray sat at the counter while he waited over a third cup of coffee and figured he'd been stood up. The one good thing about New Jersey is that you could still smoke in the restaurants and he'd been chain-smoking the entire time. He was finishing what he'd decided was going to be his last cigarette when Charlotte finally showed up. She slumped onto the stool beside him as if she were exhausted, like someone had pulled her plug. She was sniffing and announced almost aggressively, as if she thought Ray would challenge her, that she thought she was coming down with something. Ray ordered her some tea and somewhere in the middle of sipping at it, Charlotte

apparently had a sudden change of spirit and invited him back to the carriage house.

Now she put a finger to his lips. “Sssssh...Let’s not talk. Lie back and let me take care of you.”

Ray reclined against the pillows as Charlotte straddled him. She reached around behind her and fondled his cock.

“How do you want it? In my mouth, my hand, inside me?”

“Inside you.”

She smiled. “I was hoping you'd say that.”

She guided him between the damp folds of her outer sex and slid slowly backwards onto his cock. He reached up and played with her tits, her brown nipples puckering up. She rode him so hard, so hungrily, that it was difficult for Ray to feel anything at all at first. He had to concentrate for a while to find his rhythm and then it all came back to him. He grabbed one of her hands and put the tips of her fingers between his lips and sucked at them. They tasted like the inside of her. She watched him carefully, gauging, as he got closer to orgasm. He held her gaze as long as he could until he finally had to shut his eyes against the blinding white light on the other side of his orgasm.

When he opened them again, Charlotte was coming back from the bathroom with a damp towel. She knelt beside Ray, who lay there like a corpse on the daybed, and gently wiped his groin.

“I didn't know if I should cum or not,” he said, when he could finally speak.

“I want you to do whatever you want,” Charlotte said softly. “Always.”

“What about birth control?”

Charlotte focused her attention on what she was doing with the towel. She seemed to be avoiding Ray’s eyes. “I’ve had an operation,” she said.

She sat back on her heels and pointed to the scar on her lower abdomen. She traced it almost fondly with her finger, as if it were the engraved signature of someone she loved.

Or a name on a tombstone.

“See?”

Ray had, in fact, noticed it earlier. But now he turned over on his side to take a closer look.

“They thought at first it might be cancer. Of course, I was scared to death. Between the divorce and being sick, it was almost too much to handle.”

“But it wasn’t? Cancer, I mean.”

“No.”

“Do you mind if I touch it?”

Charlotte looked up and met Ray’s gaze. She nodded. “If you want,” she said softly.

Ray traced the path of the scar along Charlotte’s belly. He touched it delicately, the way Charlotte had just done, as if the scar marked the place of some new surgically implanted erogenous zone. And, sure enough, she closed her eyes, savoring the touch. Without opening them, she continued to talk.

“I was shocked when I first saw it. The doctor didn't tell me the scar was going to look like that. You don't think it's ugly, do you?”

Ray looked at the pink plastic zipper that disappeared into her light brown pubic hair. “No, it's sexy. Everything about you is.”

And he meant it.

“Does it bother you...that I can't have babies?”

“No, of course not. Why should that possibly matter?”

Charlotte shrugged. “I don't know. It might bother some men. Maybe I’m not woman enough for them?”

“That’s ridiculous,” Ray said. “You’re more than enough woman for any man.”

She laid her hand on his. “Thank you, Ray,” she whispered.  
“I mean it.”

A shivering tear was running over the roundness of her cheek.

Ray wondered if someone had told Charlotte she was inadequate, her husband, her father, maybe, some fucking man or other, someone had damaged her in some way, that was clear already; maybe that was why she seemed so oddly orphaned. He was angry at the man who might have hurt her, but Ray also knew that anger was ambiguous. If he were being honest, he was just as grateful to whoever had hurt Charlotte, because otherwise she wouldn't be here with him.

Sometime later rain began tapping against the French doors. They'd fallen asleep together. Ray woke first and looked across the gloom that had leaked into the room while they slept. The ivy covering the windows trembled. Beside him, Charlotte stirred.

“It's raining.

“What time is it?”

“Almost seven.”

“*Seven?*” Charlotte sat bolt upright, like she'd just waken from a nightmare. “Shit, why didn't you wake me! I have to go.”

“Go?” Ray sat up reluctantly as Charlotte bounced off the daybed. He watched her frantically searching the floor for her panties. She was utterly indifferent to her nudity, bending in front of him as if they'd already been married for a decade-and-a-half. “What's the big rush?”

“I have a dinner engagement with a friend,” she said, now down on all fours. “You've got to leave.”

“Hmm, a *friend.*” Ray meant it to sound like a joke, but somehow it didn't quite come out that way.

“Yes, really, a friend.” Charlotte stood up, her discarded panties hooked on her fingers. “That's her picture on the bookshelf. Joan owns this place. Her and her husband.”

Ray rolled off the daybed, stepped into his pants, and crossed the room. He picked up the framed picture that Charlotte indicated, one of several on the built-in bookcase. In the photo he saw a plain, nondescript, white woman and a cherubic, bearded, middle-aged Indian man. Her husband, no doubt. And between them, somehow dominating the camera's attention, stood a tall, tanned, smiling man who looked like someone Ray should recognize, but didn't. He had that well-bred "money-look" that was more than the sum of his expensive clothes, impeccable grooming, and obvious self-confidence. It was the look that only generations of unlimited power could give a man.

"She was with me at the party the night we met," Charlotte said.

"Everyone's with someone," Ray recalled.

"Huh?"

"Nothing, just something you said that night. I guess I should be relieved. I figured you were with a man that night. I must have missed your friend. But that wouldn't have been hard."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. She's a little eerie looking, that's all."

"That's not a very nice thing to say."

Ray was thinking that the woman in the picture had a vacancy about her, like a burnt-out light bulb. It was a color photograph but she looked like she was in black-and-white.

"She's just a bit faded, that's all. Like your complete opposite. I guess it's not hard to guess who the guys hit on when the two of you are out together."

"Okay, Ray. Knock it off. Don't make fun of her."

Charlotte crossed the room and yanked the picture from his hand. Ray was taken off-guard by her reaction. He watched as she carefully returned the framed photograph to its place on the book shelf.

“Hey, I didn't mean anything by it. Don't be upset. Really, I was just joking. I'm sorry.”

Charlotte was looking at the trio framed there with the kind of wistful tenderness usually reserved for those no longer around.

“She's my best friend. I owe her so much...this place, it's hers. Her and her husband, Rudra. He's a multi-millionaire. Computers and stuff. When I left him, John took control of the business, the house, everything. He was so angry. I was terrified of what he might do next. I was practically homeless.” She turned back to Ray. “Do you have any idea what that's like? Joan took me in when no one else would. I owe her everything.”

“I'm sorry. Really I am. Listen, if you invite me along, I'd like to meet her. What do you say? Dinner's on me.”

“Not tonight. Maybe another time.”

He expected her to turn down the offer. He wasn't entirely disappointed, feeding the wife of a multimillionaire couldn't be cheap. Ray was standing beside Charlotte now, testing her shoulder with his touch, as if her rejection might burn him. She didn't pull away, but didn't respond either. He looked passed her face at the photograph.

“Who's the other guy, anyway?”

“That's Ben Haskins.”

“The senator?”

“Why yes, of course.” The smile flickered on her lips, but didn't quite ignite. “He's going to be the next president.”

Ray wondered if maybe he'd misread Charlotte's expression before. Perhaps the wistful tenderness wasn't directed at her colorless friend and her Buddha-like husband after all, but at this ageless guy with the perfectly greying temples of a soap opera doctor. What's more, perhaps it wasn't a look of wistful tenderness, but of unrequited sexual longing. Ray felt a knot of

jealousy twist inside him. Millionaires, senators, future presidents...what the hell was he doing here?

“Listen, forget I opened my big mouth. Okay? I don't want to ruin what happened this afternoon. Really. It was...amazing, you know, like something you only see in a movie.”

Charlotte looked up at him, eyes shining, but with what emotion it was impossible to say.

“Yes it was,” she said, searching his face for something. “It *was* like a movie, wasn't it?”

“I'll call you?” Ray said, hopefully.

“Yes, do that.”

That evening, on the drive back to the city through a steady drizzle, he hoped he hadn't already ruined everything. He hoped he'd see her at least one more time before she dumped him, because dump him she would, that was a certainty, and Ray would've had to be a fool to think any different...