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Just Passing Through

Romance / Suspense

12,000 Words

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Anyway, happy reading. ☺

Prelude

I believe there comes a time in every man's life when he needs to stop what he's doing and take a good look at the choices he's made and the direction in life those choices take him. Ultimately, bad choices will lead you down the wrong path in life -- nearly every time. Though sometimes, no matter how hard you try to make the right choices, fate still finds a way to somehow make you regret it.

I discovered this as I lay bound by wrists and ankles in the trunk of a cherry red 1963 Corvette convertible, somewhere on Route 322 in Pennsylvania.

Chapter One

But no, the story doesn't start there. Perhaps I need to rewind to this morning, just after leaving Philadelphia, where I'd picked up the Corvette. I'd decided to take the so-called scenic route since I'd never seen Pennsylvania before. Besides, it was a warm, June morning, and this was my first time driving a convertible.

I took the smaller highways through the foothills to avoid the dizzying fumes of the interstate, without wandering too far from civilization. This road trip was a welcomed distraction to my busy and sometimes stressful life back in Detroit.

All of that changed thirty miles west of Lewisburg. I noticed a smell in the air that didn't quite mesh well with the aromas of nature I'd been inhaling all morning. I looked down at the Vette's dashboard and noticed the temperature needle wasn't where it had been all morning, and was now surging well into the Nuclear Zone. I pulled off to the soft shoulder of Route 322, quickly shut the engine off and pulled the lever to pop the hood.

Feeling defeated, I just sat there, watching the steam begin to rise from the edges of the hood. It amazed me how a good day can turn so bad so fast. But these are the problems you anticipate when you put your faith in a forty-four-year-old car.

I got out and stretched my legs. I looked at my watch and realized I'd been in the car nearly four hours. It was ten a.m. now, and the temperature felt like the mid eighties. It sure didn't feel this hot and balmy when the wind was whipping through my hair at 65mph.

I looked up and down Route 322. I hadn't seen civilization since passing west through Lewisburg a half hour ago. I made the mistake of leaving the map in the backseat - not a good idea in a convertible - so I had no idea how far the next town was. From where I stood, there was a whole lot of nothing in both directions. Evergreen trees lined both sides of the road to the east and west, and showed no breaks, which would have indicated a roadside house or business.

I studied the Vette from the side of the road. I wasn't angry with the car. I could feel only sympathy. It broke my heart to see such a beautifully-sculpted work of art, dead on the side of the road like a common Chevy, smoke billowing from its hood.

I burned my fingers twice trying to open the hood from the wrong end. When it finally opened, a small mushroom cloud of white smoke escaped into the air and filled my olfactories with that same sickly-sweet smell I'd experienced earlier. After waiting a few minutes for the engine to cool, I began a cursory inspection to find the source of my strandedness. It didn't take long. See, this big rubber hose at the front of the engine was broken. I wasn't real sure what it did, but the fact that steam and a green liquid poured out *never* meant good news.

I picked up my cellphone from the backseat. (It was an older one, unable to be carried off into the wind at 65mph like the map, but the newer Nokia or Samsung would've easily taken flight.) I turned it on, but I already knew what I'd find. No signal. I hadn't been able to use it since leaving Philadelphia. Thank you, [insert name of cellphone company with a shoddy network, roaming charges and hidden fees] for being there when I needed you most.

Not many cars had gone by while I and the dead vintage Vette sat on the side of the road. The traffic was mostly semi-trucks who gave me a friendly horn-honk and kept going.

I looked back at the car, and knew I had only one option. When the engine completely cooled, I started the car and pulled back onto the highway, west into the Pennsylvania foothills, stopping every half hour to let the engine cool. I could only pray I didn't blow the thing up.

Chapter Two

I think I played this little stop-and-go game for over eight hours. I don't know for sure. After a while, the hours and minutes kind of mixed together. By now I had shed all my clothing but my shorts, and my sweaty legs and back were sticking to the vinyl seat, making this road trip nearly as uncomfortable as possible. The breakfast I'd had at McDonalds this morning had long since run its course and I was beyond starvation. When the hunger pangs stopped and the migraine hit me at full-throb, it officially became the worst road trip of my life.

I began nodding off at the wheel when my eyes caught a glimpse of a road sign in the distance -- the first one I'd seen since Lewisburg. As I approached it, I could see it read: *Welcome to Oasis - Population: Not Many.*

Not long after passing the sign, I began seeing evidence of this so-called Oasis. A barn here, a grain silo there. An old Ford tractor, circa 1940, sat rusting in a field. Up ahead, a tiny little shack held a sign declaring it the Oasis Cafe.

I pulled into the gravel parking lot and found I was not the only one patronizing the tiny restaurant. A small motor home was parked at an angle in front of the building, while next to the building was a small Dodge Aries.

Up close I could see the Oasis Cafe was little more than a mobile home converted into a restaurant. I shut the car off, got out and locked the doors. (A habit of being born and raised in Detroit.) It occurred to me afterward how futile an act this was, since I'd left the top down.

I'd never felt more out of place in my life. My cellphone was suppose to be my lifeline to civilization; my connection to my home and work in Detroit. Out here in Oasis I was cut off from everything familiar to me. But I assured myself this was only a temporary setback. I'd be back in Detroit in no time.

It was six p.m. now and there was still enough daylight to look up and down Route 322 and see a small handful of tiny buildings dotted along the roadside. Oasis wasn't much, but it was more than I'd seen in the last eight hours.

I walked into the cafe and took a seat near the front window, to keep an eye on the car -- another Detroit-instilled habit. There were only a few people inside. An elderly couple sat at a booth at the rear, while a girl in her early twenties sat on a barstool pretending to read a magazine. Each one looked at me with indifference for only a second, then turned away.

Almost immediately, the waitress approached. "Hey hun, what can I getcha?"

I looked up at her. It was obvious she was using makeup to cover her real age, which could've been over sixty. She had long, bleach-blonde hair that looked dead from decades of chemicals.

"A mechanic," I said, answering her question.

She looked over at the young girl on the barstool and exchanged a look. She turned back and smiled. "Sorry, sweetheart. We only serve food here."

I sighed. "Okay, how about a cheeseburger and fries?"

I feel I must explain myself here. I always order a burger and fries from places I've never eaten before. The way I see it, there's no way one can mess up meat and potatoes.

When the waitress walked off with my order, I noticed the girl at the bar had put her magazine down and was now staring at me. At my glance, she got up from the barstool and walked over to me. She looked nothing like the women I'd known in Detroit. She was tall and slender, with dishwater-blonde hair and a beautiful pair of jade green eyes. She looked like a hard-edged tomboyish country girl, but she presented herself with an aura of class, grace and poise. I was never one to fall over myself in the presence of beauty, but this one could easily make me lose my composure.

"I hear you're having car trouble," she said as she sat in the seat across from me.

I smiled. "No one ever seems to have car trouble close to home, do they?"

She raised an eyebrow. "And where's home?"

"Detroit."

She cocked her head to the side and seemed to ponder my answer. "You could say you *are* close to home."

"How do you figure that?" I asked with some intrigue.

"If you were driving up from, say, Florida...you'd almost be home by now."

A pause. "Ahh, touché, my dear." The last thing I expected to find in Oasis Pennsylvania was someone who could captivate my heart in less than ten seconds.

She glanced out the window. "That's a pretty little thing ya got out there."

I allowed a half-smile. "Thanks, but it's not mine. I was paid by its owner to drive it from Philly to Detroit."

She nodded, as if this were the answer she'd expected. "Is the trip worth the money?"

I shrugged. "It was until the radiator hose blew up eight hours ago."

The waitress came back with my order, and before she set the plate down, she noticed the girl at my table. She glanced at me, then looked back at her and smiled. "Oh, how cute. Now you be nice to this young man."

The waitress finally put the food down, which I immediately began to scarf down. I tried my best to control my manners, to no avail. My stomach had control of me now.

The girl in front of me seemed amused by this act. She watched wordlessly as I inhaled the food, maintaining a slight smirk. I feared what she might think of me, so I did my best to explain.

"Sorry. I haven't eaten since Philadelphia," I said in my defense, as I used a napkin to wipe the grease from my fingers. "I'm Alex. Alex Egan," I said, extending my grease-free hand to her.

She shook the proffered hand with a surprisingly firm grip. "I'm Kelly," she said with another mesmerizing smile.

"So Kelly, is there a mechanic in Oasis that can fix a radiator hose?"

"There's only one mechanic in Oasis that's fully qualified to work on pretty much anything," she said as she stood. "Let's go."

I dropped a ten on the table and followed Kelly outside. She got into the passenger seat of the Vette, and following her lead, I got behind the wheel.

"Still runs, right?" she asked.

I nodded. "As long as we're not going far," I said, starting the car and turning onto Route 322.

There was very little to be said about the tiny town of Oasis. I didn't see a single man-made structure that looked less than fifty years old. The only thing that really stood out was a string of old trolley cars on a disconnected railroad track in the middle of a field. I never did ask her about that.

At her command, I made a right turn on an almost invisible dirt road. The road didn't appear to have a name, and was marked only by the rotting remains of what was probably an old farm house. I couldn't believe this was someone's idea of an oasis.

We'd only driven a half mile down this bumpy dirt road when we approached an old two-story Victorian-style house that was in bad need of countless repairs. I'm sure it was gorgeous back in its day, but now, like everything else in Oasis, it looked ready to fall over out of sheer exhaustion.

"Turn in here," she said, pointing at the driveway of the old house.

I did as I was told and pulled up to an old barn behind the house. Kelly jumped out and slid the huge barn door open, revealing a dark, cavernous interior. At the wave of her hand, I drove the Vette inside.

I carefully stepped out into the darkness the same time Kelly hit the lights. The barn was mostly empty, save for a wall of toolboxes, some power tools, an air compressor, a small refrigerator and a pile of firewood.

Kelly popped the Vette's hood and opened it -- on the first try. I was impressed. "Ooh, a 327. I haven't seen one cherried out like this in a long time. Holley carburetor..." she leaned in closer, "850 double-pumper. Edelbrock intake manifold, Hooker headers, Accel ignition system. Someone put a lot of work into it."

This confused me, but I said it aside. "So where is he?"

She looked up from the engine. "Where's who?"

"The mechanic."

She rolled her eyes. "You're looking at *her*. What, women can't be mechanics?"

While I did my best to retrieve my foot from my mouth, Kelly put the car's front-end on a pair of jack stands and crawled under it. When my embarrassment subsided, I launched into small-talk mode.

"So I guess that's your house out there?" I asked.

"Parents' house," she said over the sound of a ratchet. "They died four years ago. My brother Kenny and I live in it now."

I nodded, but realizing this wasn't a viable response (because she couldn't see it), I added, "It's a nice place."

"Pfff. It's a rat's nest. Look at it! It's ready to fall over. The only thing holding it together is the termites holding hands. I'd love to get rid of it and leave Oasis but my brother doesn't want to sell it."

"So why not just walk away from it?"

"No money!" she said with a dry laugh. "Jobs in this dinky little town pay enough to keep us alive, but not enough to let us out."

Kelly crawled out from under the car, holding the radiator hose in her hand. "Now this could be a problem," she said, handing it to me.

I studied the hose as if I'd been a seasoned mechanic. "Yep, it's definitely cracked," I said, pretending to understand what she meant.

"Well...yeah, but see, the hose is new. It means something made the engine overheat before it cracked."

"So that means..."

"It means get comfortable. You could be here a while."

Chapter Three

Despite Kelly's suggestion, I didn't get comfortable. To do that would've required a small miracle. Instead, we cracked open some Cokes she kept in the fridge, and I spent the next couple hours handing her tools and praying the problem wasn't anything serious. I felt like the car was having an operation and I was in the waiting room.

At two a.m., Kelly poked her head out from under the hood and confirmed my worst fears with the two words I dreaded the most: "Head gasket."

I slumped over the steering wheel where I'd been listening to long-forgotten eighties music. *I got me a Chrysler, it's as big as a whale!*

"So I'll be here a while?" I asked, getting out of the car.

She rolled her eyes. "There could be worse places to be stranded." She walked over, took my hand and led me from the barn. "C'mon, I got a guest bedroom I can put you in."

She was right. The house was a rat's nest. Upon entering, I noticed the sickly-sweet smell of decades of nicotine caked onto the walls, which were either cracked or had holes. The furniture looked over twenty years old and was falling apart. The TV was a nine-inch black-and-white.

"Told ya it's a dump," she said, leading me to the spare bedroom.

I said nothing to this. I could've agreed with her - *wanted* to agree with her - but that would've been rude. Instead I asked, "I don't suppose you have a phone, do you?"

She shook her head. "Nope, but there's one at the cafe." She gave him a thoughtful look. "Is there, ya know, someone at home you need to call? Let them know you're stuck out here?"

I tried my best to suppress a smile. I may not know women very well, but I knew when one was fishing for information. "Actually, no. The house is empty and I doubt it'll miss me."

She nodded and gave a satisfied smile. "Good! We'll go back to the cafe tomorrow to order the head gaskets." She led me to the bedroom and opened the door. "Sleep fast. Tomorrow comes sooner than you think," she said, and shut the door behind me.

Morning wasn't quite what I'd expected. For one thing, it was only three a.m., according to my watch. I sat up in bed and tried to listen for whatever sounds woke me up so early. Toward the far end of the house, I could hear loud, arguing voices. They were that of Kelly and a man I assumed to be her brother, Kenny. I wanted to ignore what was none of my business and go back to sleep, but when I heard a smacking sound, I was out the bedroom door.

I found them in the kitchen. Kelly was standing up from the kitchen floor. The man towering above her looked to be six feet and 250lbs of brickhouse muscle that seemed to exude undeserved authority. His barrel-sized chest was covered with a blue plaid sleeveless flannel shirt, topped with a very bald and shiny white cranium that reminded me of an oversized queue ball. I was instantly assaulted -- not by his fist, but by the brutal impact of his body odor.

He turned to me when I walked in. "This don't concern you. Leave."

I looked at Kelly, who was now sitting at the kitchen table. Her left eye was already beginning to turn purple. She stared at the floor.

Ignoring the Neanderthal, I walked over to Kelly and pulled her chin up, forcing her to look me in the eye. "Would this be Kenny?" I asked, hooking a thumb over my shoulder.

She nodded, and turned her eyes back to the floor.

I turned my attention back to Kenny and considered my options carefully. Being that I weighed in at a mere 170lbs, it was more than obvious who would win this fight. Kenny seemed to be looking me over and drawing the same conclusion.

"Kelly tells me you have a '63 Vette out there," he said, rubbing a hand over his bald scalp.

I nodded. "It blew a head gasket. She's fixing it for me. I'll be gone when she's done."

"Uh huh...well, you can sleep in the barn until then," he said, pushing me out the back door. "I don't like strangers in my house."

After he slammed the door in my face I walked back to the barn. With the lights out, I felt my way to the driver-side door of the Vette and got in. Reaching under the seat, I pulled out my snub-nose .38 revolver. I checked to make sure it had the preferred number of bullets in the chambers and slipped it into my pants. If Kenny decided to start something with me, I wanted to make sure it'd be a fair fight.

I turned on the radio, ignoring the droning of eighties music that seemed to plague every station in Pennsylvania. Instead, I thought about Kelly. She was still in the house with that overfed hillbilly on steroids. I wanted to help her, but what could I do besides gunning the guy down? A little voice in my head told me not to interfere; not to get involved in someone else's problems. I didn't like that voice, though. It sounded like the voice of a coward.

Chapter Four

I awoke the next morning to the sweet aromas of fried eggs, bacon, biscuits and gravy. I opened my eyes and found Kelly holding breakfast under my nose.

"Breakfast in bed," she said. "Well, okay, breakfast in car."

I took the plate and started on the eggs as she climbed into the passenger seat with her own plate.

After several moments of eating in silence, she spoke. "Sorry 'bout Kenny. He lost fifty bucks at the pool hall last night. He wasn't in a good mood when he got home."

I wondered to myself who would dare beat Kenny at a game of pool, much less try and collect money from him. I tried not to doubt the truthfulness of her story as I studied her face. She'd used a lot of make-up to hide the evidence of Kenny's violent temper, and I thought she did a commendable job of it. I figured she'd had lots of practice.

"Does he hit you a lot?" I dared to ask.

She shook her head. "No, no way. That was a once-in-a-blue-moon thing. But he's my brother -- that's what brothers do, right?"

"Maybe as kids," I said, "but how old are you two now?"

"I'm 22, he's 28. Okay, we're not kids anymore, I know." She put her fork down on her plate and stared off at nothing. "You probably think I'm just making excuses for him."

I sighed. "Ya know what? It's none of my business. Let's go into town and work on ordering those gaskets."

We drove back to the cafe in her brother's old rusted '78 Ford pickup. She'd assured me he wouldn't mind. We pulled up in front of the cafe, and as I started to get out she said, "Wait here, I'll only be a minute."

I did as I was told, and watched Kelly disappear through the door. It was another hot and balmy morning, and rolling down the windows in the truck did little to staunch the sweat dripping down my forehead. It irritated me to know that I should've been pulling into my driveway by now. If all had gone well, I'd be back in Detroit by now, well rested and ready to go back to work. But no, things don't always go as planned, do they? Instead I'm stranded in some tiny little town in central Pennsylvania, sweating in a thirty-year-old pickup, watching over my shoulder for a steroid-driven ape named Kenny, wishing I had a change of clothes, and in bad need of some aspirin for my growing migraine. This is where a person might ask themselves, *What else can go wrong?* And magically their situation gets worse. So I won't say it.

My thoughts were interrupted when Kelly climbed back into the truck. "The parts will be here this evening," she said. "We're suppose to meet the delivery guy here at six."

I nodded and changed the subject. "Why did you want me to wait out here?"

She nodded toward the cafe. "Thelma's still here -- the waitress you met last night. She saw me leave with you last night, but if she sees me return with you the next morning....well, you know what she'd think."

I turned to her, failing to hide the smile from my face. "And that would be a bad thing, right?"

We pulled up in front of the barn, and immediately I knew something was wrong. The barn door was open, which wasn't how we'd left it.

I quietly climbed out of the truck, running a hand along my waist to make sure the gun was still there. With Kelly behind me, we went inside.

"That's a pretty little car ya got there," Kenny said from atop a bail of hay with a beer in his hand. He climbed down from his perch. "You must got some money to have a car like this."

Kelly jumped in. "I told you Kenny, it's not his. The owner's paying him to drive it back to Detroit."

Kenny finished the rest of the beer, crushed the can and tossed it into the backseat of the Vette. "You'll believe anything, Kelly. 'Specially from someone yer sweet on." He walked up to me and, inches from my face he whispered. "Next time you might wanna think about mindin' yer own business."

I returned the whisper. "You ever lay another hand on her, I'll *make* you my business."

The retort seemed to startle him a bit, but he quickly recovered. "Kelly, get his car fixed and get him outta here," he said and left the barn.

We spent the rest of the afternoon stripping down the engine. For Kelly, it was fairly easy work to remove the intake and exhaust manifolds and the heads, but since most of the parts were aluminum, it had to be done slowly and carefully. Though I helped her anywhere I could, we didn't talk much. She'd barely said anything since Kenny left. It amazed me how different she was when he was around, and how quickly she could turn into the poor, helpless victim when he showed up.

"Why do you let him treat you like that?" I asked in an attempt to break the silence.

She just shook her head. "Alex...it's always been like this. Since our parents died, I do everything for him. I cook and clean and keep our lives in order. He says he'd be lost without me. So when another guy comes around, he gets worried I'll run off and leave him helpless."

Helpless wasn't a word I'd use to describe Kenny, but I kept that to myself.

"So what are you going to do?" I asked. "Be your brother's maid for the rest of your life?"

As she worked, tears began dropping from her face onto the 327's exposed pistons. "I don't know, Alex. It'll go on like this till it stops. What choice do I have?"

I found myself so frustrated with her meek attitude, I almost kicked a dent in the fender. "You always have a choice, Kelly! No one controls you but YOU! And you'll see that as soon as you quit acting like the victim!"

She continued staring at the engine block, tears now streaming. "What time is it?" she asked in a whisper.

I looked at my watch. "Five thirty," I said.

She dropped the torque wrench to the ground. "Let's go," she said, walking out of the barn.

Chapter Five

We parked in front of the cafe and I shut the engine off. She'd asked me to drive the pickup, but she didn't tell me it was because she couldn't see the road through her tears. The delivery truck hadn't arrived yet, and since Kelly wasn't talking, I laid my head back in the seat and closed my eyes.

I had a mix of emotions running through me. I was angry at her for refusing to take a stand against her brother. I felt guilty for yelling at her earlier. Perhaps those were words she wasn't ready to hear. And worst of all, I felt fear for what might become of her long after I leave Oasis. But what was I suppose to do? I can't save *everyone* on this miserable planet. So why is she the exception? Why am I insisting on making her my problem? I already knew that answer: because ever since I first saw her at the cafe, I haven't been able to control my rising feelings for her. I wanted to save her from everything in her life that ever made her sad or angry. I just wanted to take her in my arms and...

"Here he is," Kelly said, breaking my reverie.

I looked out the window as a little yellow truck kicking up dust pull into the parking lot and park next to us. Kelly slid out and greeted the driver. After a few exchanged words, Kelly waved me over.

The kid, who looked no older than sixteen, handed the gaskets to me. "Do these really go to a '63 Corvette??" he asked with a kind of annoying enthusiasm.

I just smiled and nodded, hoping that'd be the end of it.

"Wow...must be a sweet ride!" he unfortunately continued.

I gave him a dry smile. "It was until yesterday."

He looked at me with some confusion, failing to catch the meaning. His face then brightened when he caught on. "Ohhh! Yeah...well, a car like that would be a sweet ride even if you had to push it!"

His overuse of the words 'sweet ride' were making my headache worse, so I handed him my credit card in an attempt to change the subject. I'd hoped at best, the shiny, chrome-plated Mastercard would distract him.

He went back to the truck and wrote down the credit card information, then handed it back to me. With no more unnecessary words, Kelly and I climbed back into the truck.

"So the owner will pay you back, right?" she asked.

"Huh? What owner?"

She eyed me suspiciously. "The owner of the Vette."

"Oh...well yeah, he can afford it."

She continued to stare at me for a second, then looked away and let out a deep sigh. "My brother makes me act like that," she said, staring out the window. "Like a helpless victim. But when he's not around, I eventually turn back into a nice, normal human being."

I watched her as she said this, and I could feel my heart breaking. I couldn't stop myself from reaching over and taking her hand in mine and saying, "Come back to Detroit with me."

She turned her jade green eyes to me in astonishment. For a second, she looked like all of her problems and worries took flight and left her heart open. But that look didn't last long. That same melancholy cloud overshadowed her face and her eyes turned to glass. A tear streaked her cheek before turning back to the window.

"He'll find me, Alex. He did last time I tried to leave."

I waited for her to continue. When she didn't, I pressed her. "What happened?"

"When I was eighteen, just before my parents died, I tried to run off to New York. He found me at a motel twenty miles from Philadelphia. I came home that night with two black eyes."

"Your parents didn't do anything?"

She shook her head. "Mom was deathly afraid of him. She once said Kenny wasn't hers; that he was birthed by Satan. Dad was afraid of him too, but he didn't let that stop him. He took a stand and kicked Kenny out."

"Obviously that didn't last," I surmised. "What happened next?"

She took a deep breath. "A week later they were in a car accident. They went off the road and into the Susquehanna River. Kenny moved himself back in after the funeral, and I knew better than to object. I learned that if I shut up and did as I was told, there'd be fewer bruises on me."

I sat in silence, working vehemently at keeping my anger in check. Finally I hit the key to the truck and drove back to the barn.

It momentarily amazed me on the short drive that this rickety old pickup could stay on the road for three decades. Much could be said for Kelly's mechanical skills with just one look at this truck. I looked down at the dashboard and saw the odometer had just reached an even 98,500 miles. Wonder how many times the odometer's flipped over?

The rest of the evening went smoothly, with no surprise visits from Kenny. As I handed her the tools, Kelly put the engine back together. When I wasn't handing her tools, I watched her face. She had an unexplainable glow about her -- a look of beautiful serenity, as she put the car back together. I dared not say a word to her. She looked happy in her own world of gasoline engines and power tools, and far be it for me to bring her back to reality.

But at 9:30 the spell was broken as she shut the hood. She looked up at me for the first time that evening and flashed a quick smile. "Ready to fire it up?"

I handed her the keys. "You're the automotive genius that brought it back from the dead. You do the honors."

She got behind the wheel, and without hesitating, she turned the key. The engine cranked over lifelessly for several seconds as Kelly held a determined look. A cloud of blue smoke shot from the exhaust and the engine spit and sputtered and finally coughed to life. Her determined look turned into a smug smile, her own satisfaction of successfully rebuilding the upper-engine of a classic muscle car.

But her smile soon faded, as reality forced itself on her. She shut the car off and got out. She walked up to me but kept her eyes on the ground. "Time to go, Alex."

I felt frozen in place by her words as I too was dragged back to reality. My misadventure in Oasis was drawing to an end, and I found myself wishing the car hadn't started.

Kelly opened the barn doors, which was my cue to back the car out. I stopped outside the barn, and she walked up and put a hand on my shoulder. "You won't forget about me, will you?" she asked with another sad smile.

I put my hand on hers, and as she read my thoughts, her smile faded. "Please don't ask me to go with you."

I slid a hand across her cheek, if for no other reason than to feel her beautiful face one last time. "Then how are we suppose to live happily ever after?"

With glassy eyes welling up with tears, she turned away and walked into the house.

Chapter Six

As much as I hated to do it, I backed out of her driveway. Pulling up to the intersection of Route 322, I found myself turning east, instead of west toward Detroit. I wanted to stop for a bite to eat at the cafe, since I still had no idea how far the next town was.

Despite the time of night, the Oasis Cafe was empty. As before, Thelma the waitress was still there.

I took a seat next to the window -- you know, out of habit. When she saw me, Thelma came over.

"Leavin' so soon?" she asked.

I nodded. "Places to go..."

"Shame yer not takin' Kelly with ya."

I smiled. "Wow...can't hide anything in this town, huh?"

She sat down across from me. "Course not, sweetheart! Fella on one side of town sneezes, someone from the other side will say Bless You."

"I asked her to go with me, but she doesn't want to."

She frowned. "Oh, she wants to. Believe it! Ain't seen her smile so much as she did last night. But that brother of hers...birthed by the devil! He's keeping her hostage and treating like a slave!"

"She knows that, but she doesn't want to do anything to change that. What more can I do?"

"Well something needs to be done. And soon! I saw the shoddy make-up job she did on her new black eye. I swear, that boy barely gives her time to heal before whappin' her again."

"But she said he doesn't do it that often," I said.

"Oh suuure, only every couple days. Tell me Alex, what do *you* think is a fair grace period after hitting a lady?"

I held my hands up in surrender. "Okay, point taken," I said, and thought for a moment about Kenny's brickhouse arms and all the beatings Kelly must've taken from him in her lifetime. "I'm surprised he hasn't done any permanent damage to her."

"Damage isn't what I'm worried about honey. I'm afraid he'll kill her."

"He wouldn't kill her, would he?"

"Did she tell you what happened to her parents?"

"Sure, something about a car accident."

"Ha! Accident my britches...he killed them!"

"Why do you think that?"

"Oh, I don't think sweetheart. I *know*! Everyone knows. First of all, it happened four days after Kenny's dad kicked him out. Now there's yer motive. And when they pulled his parents' bright red Chrysler Lebaron from the river, the fender had a brand spankin' new gash on it."

"Okay, but how do you know Kenny did it?"

"C'mon now honey, don't you ever watch Matlock? I do. That Andy Griffith makes it look so easy. Anyway, I was the only one to see Kenny's old pickup that night. Right fender had a big ol' red streak on it! Course he's spray-painted over it since then. Hun I tell ya, that's all the evidence I need right there."

So Kenny was already a killer. If he can kill his own parents, why not his sister too? "What does Kelly have to say about her brother being a murderer?"

Thelma sighed, and turned her eyes to the table. "I've talked to that girl so many times. The Good Lord knows I've tried. But she says flat out it ain't true. Says he was with her the

night her parents' Lebaron went into the drink. Ya ask me, she knows he did it -- she's just too scared to admit it to anyone but herself."

"What about the police? Didn't they investigate it?"

"Oh sure, they did their little investigation. Officers Hughes and DuBois -- Hewey and Dewey, I call 'em. They came out and took a statement from Kenny...looked at his truck...but those two half-wits are scared to death of Kenny. They wouldn't dare arrest him."

I thought for a moment about the \$2,000 in Traveler's Checks I left in Kelly's toolbox. I had a feeling it wouldn't be nearly enough to get rid of him.

"So he's going to kill her," I concluded.

She nodded. "Maybe not today or tomorrow, but someday. We all know he's capable of it now."

I thanked Thelma, jumped up and dropped a ten on the table, completely forgetting I hadn't ordered any food. I jumped in the Vette and threw up a roostertail of gravel as I pulled out onto Route 322 and sped back to Kelly's house.

Chapter Seven

I pulled up in the driveway of the house I never expected to see again. I shut the engine off and listened. I could hear nothing but the nighttime sounds of nature wafting through the air from the forest behind the house: katydids, chirping crickets and the distant hoot of an owl.

And shattering glass, followed by a scream.

I pulled the .38 from my pants and stepped onto the old decrepit porch, hoping not to make any noise. I went inside, and made my way to the back of the house where I'd heard the screams.

I found Kenny and Kelly in the kitchen. Kelly and a broken lamp lay on the floor, both in bad shape. Kenny had her pinned to the floor, a long, jagged-edged knife held to her throat. Blood dripped from a large cut on her forehead, probably from the lamp.

It was at that moment I regretted having never fired my little .38 revolver -- not even at a firing range. I'd hoped I would never need to fire it, but this night was proving me wrong.

"Get off her Kenny," I said in a hard, commanding voice with my .38 pointed at his back from ten feet away. I knew my aim wasn't that good.

Kenny slowly turned to me, still holding the knife to her throat. His eyes widened with surprise and he turned back to Kelly. "You said he was gone!"

He slowly stood up and shook his head as if this intrusion were a mere inconvenience. "What are you tryin' to do, city boy? You tryin' to play superhero?"

I held the .38 steady. "No Kenny, I'm trying to stop you from doing to her what you did to her parents."

Kenny held the knife high above his head and charged after me. "You're not taking her from me!"

I had done everything in my power to avoid this moment, but here it was nonetheless. I thought back to the words of the gunshop owner who'd sold me the gun. *If someone's charging at you, just aim center-mass and fire.* I'd forgotten to ask him what center-mass was, but there in that old, musty kitchen, I figured it out. I aimed for Kenny's heart and fired.

Just a half second before his 250lbs of bone and muscle connected with my wiry 170lb frame, I saw a small, red hole appear on him, nowhere near the center of his chest, but instead on his left shoulder. It's just as well. The collision smacked my head against the wall, knocking me unconscious, and my incredibly poor aim no longer mattered.

"Rise and shine, city boy."

I slowly opened my eyes and found Kenny towering over me, my gun in one hand and a beer in the other. The front of his once-blue flannel shirt was now brown with dried blood.

Rotating my aching head, I looked around as best I could, and found I was lying on the dirty livingroom floor. I tried to raise a hand to my throbbing head, and found my arms were tied together behind my back, and my feet were tied to each other with a little slack, I assume so I could walk.

"Where's Kelly?" I asked with a scratchy voice, suddenly noticing she wasn't there.

He took a drink of beer, then belched. "Sounds like you've taken a likin' to her, city boy. Don't worry about her, you won't ever be seeing her again."

I could've easily taken that statement in one of two ways, but since I always fear the worst, my heart leapt into my throat. "You killed her," I concluded.

He smiled a toothy, dark-yellow grin. "I always told her I'd kill her before I'd let someone take her from me. But right now, you have *you* to worry about."

He picked me up by my arm, pulling me to my feet. "C'mon city boy, you got yerself a date with a mountain."

He walked me outside to the Vette, still parked next to the house, then reached into my pants pocket and extracted my keys. He popped the trunk and without a word, unceremoniously dumped me in.

"Get comfortable," he said. "We got ourselves a long drive." He shut the trunk, let out a huge beer belch, got into the Vette and drove us away from Oasis Pennsylvania, destination unknown.

Interlude

So here I lay in the trunk of a cherry red '63 Corvette convertible, half intoxicated from the exhaust fumes and contemplating all the decisions I'd made in the last two days that led me to lying in the fetal position on top of a spare tire.

What made me think I could just fly into Kelly's life and rescue her from the clutches of evil like some Saturday morning superhero in multicolored spandex? I was just trying to do the right thing, wasn't I? I tried to do the noble and chivalrous thing by spirited her away from this place, but she refused every effort I made of talking sense into her. But I did my best, right? I mean, I couldn't force her to leave with me. That's kidnapping in many states, and felonies aren't really my thing.

So why did I go back to her house despite all of this? It's simple, I guess. Two days ago I fell in love with her, and would pigheadedly stop at nothing to bring her back to Detroit with me.

In the end, I decided to follow my foolish heart, and it led me here to the trunk of a car. My decision was made now and I would live with it.

Though probably not for long.

Chapter Eight

I floated in and out of consciousness for what felt like two hours, during which time I barely noticed the incline of the road we were on. I then recalled the mountain Kenny mentioned earlier.

Probably due to carbon monoxide poisoning, I almost didn't notice the car stop and the engine shut off. The trunk popped open, allowing the sudden sunlight to burn my retinas and further advance my migraine.

"Ready to die?" Kenny asked, my gun in his left hand, and the knife earlier held to Kelly's throat, in his right.

He pulled me out of the trunk and stood me on my feet, never taking the gun off me. I felt the contents of my stomach rise into my throat and I almost blacked out. Instead, I vomited on his shoes.

When I stood back up, Kenny gave me an approving grin. "Good job, city boy, yer aim's getting' better!"

As my head cleared, I looked around. The road we'd been traveling on dead-ended at a turn-around, and we were surrounded by pine trees. With the gun pointed at my head, he directed me to a narrow dirt path that ran between the trees. As we walked down this dirt path, I would occasionally grab tree limbs and let go, causing them to slap Kenny in the face.

"Ain't funny city boy, knock it off," he would say.

I laughed to myself. I wasn't as afraid of him as I probably should have been, because I knew something he didn't, that may very well deliver me from this seemingly inevitable situation.

As we walked, I struck up a conversation. "Is this what you did with the last guy that showed an interest in Kelly?"

"No, most guys ain't as hard-headed as you, and knew how to take a hint. No, the last guy lived, but he walks with a permanent limp."

"Your obsession with Kelly is sick and twisted," I dared to say.

Kenny grabbed my arm, wheeling me around to face him. I found the barrel of my .38 touching the tip of my nose. "You don't talk to me like that, hear? It ain't sick *or* twisted. She's the only family I got left!"

I shrugged indifferently. "Sure, only because you put the rest of your family in the river."

He lowered the gun a bit and took a step back. "Mom and Dad spent too much time working against me. Always telling me 'No'. Kelly did everything for me Mom was suppose to do, and she knew better than to say no to me."

"Then why did you kill her?"

His frown slowly grew to a grin. "Like I said, if I can't have her, no one can. C'mon city boy, keep walkin'."

The dirt path soon ended at the rocky ledge of a cliff. Standing at the edge, I looked out over the expanse of central Pennsylvania. It was a beautiful sight. I felt as though I could see Detroit from this vantage point. I very briefly looked down and estimated a 2,000-foot drop into the forest of evergreens below.

"Nice place, ain't it?" Kenny asked behind me.

I nodded. "Sure do know how to pick the spots."

"Down there in them trees, the wolves'll pick ya clean and scatter yer bones all through the hills 'fore anyone'll even know yer gone."

"Thanks for the visual," I said, turning back to him. The knife had returned to his right hand, with my gun in his left. "So you really think you need two weapons to kill me?"

He smiled. "Actually, I was gonna let you choose the weapon of your demise."

“That’s nice of you,” I said, mulling over my response. “I’d take a bullet over several stab wounds any day.”

“Good choice, city boy,” he said, tossing the knife over the edge and raising the gun to my head. “You know what they say, don’t ya? *You never make it outta this world alive...*” and he pulled the trigger.

Click.

I opened my eyes and feigned confusion. “That’s strange. Usually my head explodes when you do that. Try it again.”

Click. Click. Click.

When his frustration grew to a near-breaking point, I landed my hardest punch to his face and dove for the ground behind him. The punch was only meant to distract him; I wasn’t foolish enough to think I’d actually inflicted pain on him.

He turned and glared at me with cold eyes. “You tryin’ to make a fool of me with an empty gun?? Ohh, too bad, city boy,” he said, dropping the gun to the ground. “Now you die the hard way!”

Before I could move, he lunged at me with a tremendous force. He pinned me down and wrapped his hands around my throat. “Die, city boy!” he screamed, as I began to black out for what could be the last time.

Gasping for air and losing my vision, my mind reverted back to childhood; to the school playground. Recalling that experience, I did the only thing I knew how to do to take down someone larger than me.

I tickled him.

I dug my boney fingers into his sides, making him squirm like a pig and squeal like a schoolgirl. When he lost his grip on my throat, I gave him a knee kick to the stomach and pushed him off me.

I ran to the cliff’s edge where I saw him drop my gun. I snatched it up and aimed it at him.

He looked at me incredulously. “Did I choke all the sense outta ya? Gun’s empty, remember?”

“No, you just thought it was,” I said, and pulled the trigger. The little .38 erupted in my hand, and I swear I saw the surprise on his face before the bullet even hit him.

I saw the trick in an old western movie. The cowboy put two bullets in the gun, side by side, leaving four empty chambers between. Warning: doesn’t work with a semi-automatic.

I looked up at Kenny and realized I’d finally achieved center-mass. He was right, my aim was getting better.

Kenny didn’t fall. He stumbled; he coughed blood. But he didn’t drop. With a dazed look on his face, he stumbled over to the edge of the cliff and sat down, feet dangling over the edge.

“You really messed up this time, city boy,” he said, spitting large amounts of blood over the edge. “If I die, Kelly dies too.”

I walked over and knelt down next to him. “No, you said Kelly was dead!”

He shook his head, making himself dizzy. “No city boy, *you* did. I never said she was dead. But unless I tell you where she is, she dies too.” Again he spat more blood. His eyes were at half-mast and his head was drooping. He was fading fast.

“Then where is she?!?” I yelled hysterically, grabbing a handful of his shirt.

He smiled his yellow-toothed grin. “See ya, city boy.” He leaned over and dropped from the cliff, his shirt tearing free from my hand. I watched helplessly as his lifeless boy descended without a sound two thousand feet into the trees below. The only sound Kenny made was a

delayed *thud* was his body hit the ground, that seemed to echo throughout the valley and into my head.

Chapter Nine

Despite the Vette being forty-four years old, it handled quite well at 120mph. Rounding each curve, feeling the centrifugal pull of gravity stopped by the tires never losing grip on the road, it made me proud to drive an American-built car.

After only fifteen minutes on the road, the sky began turning dark and rain began pelting me in the face. When I could no longer see the road, I pulled over and put the top up.

I wasn't sure how far I was from Oasis. I had no idea how long Kenny had been driving or how fast he'd been going, and I wondered to myself just how much time I had left to save Kelly. How much time did Kenny allow himself to return before she dies? Days or hours? How could he possibly effect her death post-mortem?? Kenny wasn't a smart man by any stretch of the imagination, and wasn't likely have been able to rig up some sort of time-delayed device.

Or maybe he could have. Anyone who'd seen an episode of Macguyver could figure out how to do it. With that thought, I pressed the gas pedal a bit harder.

I saw the smoke in the sky before I reached Oasis. I almost didn't notice it, as the black smoke contrasted against the dark gray sky.

I wasn't ready for what I saw when I pulled into Kelly's driveway. The barn was a pile of charred, smoldering wood. It had already collapsed, and flames still rose from the wreckage in a few places, but most of it had been extinguished by the rain, which was steadily growing heavier by the minute.

I got out and walked over to what was left of the barn. Smoke and steam rose up from the destruction, making it hard to see that it would take days to sift through it all.

"Stupid, Kenny...real stupid," I said quietly to myself, realizing what the idiot had done.

Through the staccato of rain around me, I barely heard the little Dodge Aries pull into the driveway behind the Vette. I turned and saw Thelma emerge from the car, holding a plastic bag over her head in a futile attempt to thwart the rain. She had seen the smoke from the café, and immediately drove over. I told her of the day's events, Kenny's last words and his eventual demise.

"So she...Kelly was in there?" she asked, choking on her words.

Thelma had long since discarded the useless plastic bag and her make-up was dripping down her face. With her horrified expression, she looked like she'd aged twenty years in just minutes.

I could only look her in the eyes for a second. I stared at the ground, my head hung heavy with guilt. "I was too late to save her."

"It's not your fault sweetheart. There's not a snowball's chance in Hades you could've made it back here in time."

I looked back at the smoldering lumber of the barn as her words echoed through my head. She was right. There was no way I could've made it back in time. Then a thought occurred to me. I couldn't have made it back in time – and neither could he.

I shook my head. "This isn't right, Thelma."

She nodded. "I know. She should've left with you."

"No, I mean all of this," I said, waving a hand over the remains of the barn. "Something's not right. There's no way Kenny would be stupid enough to torch the barn with Kelly in it and expect to be able to come back for her two hours later!"

Thelma looked up at me, puzzled. "Then why'd he burn it down??"

I thought for a moment. "It's a diversion. He wanted me to think she was dead." I turned to her with sudden realization. "She wasn't in there."

Chapter Ten

Thelma and I spent the better part of an hour doing a thorough search of the house. By then, Thelma was getting fatigued and had to stop. I never stopped yelling Kelly's name as I searched every inch of the two-story Victorian.

"Where else could he keep her?" I asked Thelma as we rested on an old, dusty couch.

"Somewhere else," she said with a sigh, "somewhere far away from here."

I couldn't hold my frustration anymore. I stood up, swatted a lamp off an old end-table. "Kelly!!" I screamed her name and punched a hole in the wall.

We went out the back door and walked toward the barn once more. Kenny's old pickup was parked not far away. I walked over to it, looked in the back and peered through the windows, though I wasn't really expecting to find her in there.

I opened the door and slid in behind the wheel as Thelma stood next to me. I could still smell Kelly in the truck, and I found myself slipping from denial to acceptance.

"What are you thinkin', Alex?"

I stared blankly at the dashboard. "I'm thinking there's no way I could even begin to search for her. She could be anywhere within a 50-mile radius of here. And she could already be dead."

"C'mon honey, come back to the café with me. I'll make ya lunch and we can decide what to do from there."

I eventually nodded in agreement, but before I got out, I noticed something I'd already been looking at. Another thought popped into my head, and I spat out the words I was thinking. "She's still here."

Thelma gave me another puzzled look. "How do you know that?"

"Because I was the last one to drive this truck," I said. "I remember on the way back, the odometer had just flipped to 98,500 miles." I pointed at the dashboard. "It hasn't moved since."

She gave me a skeptical look. "Okay, but how do you know he didn't take off with her in your car?"

"Because he didn't have the keys yet!! He didn't take my keys from me until right before he put me in the trunk! Wherever he took her, it was on foot."

I climbed out and looked around. The property sat on a large piece of land surrounded by a dense forest of evergreens – much like the rest of Pennsylvania I'd seen so far. The rain still pummeled our heads as we walked around the smoking lumber of the barn.

"We've looked everywhere, Alex," Thelma said. "I can't imagine anywhere else she could be."

I stopped and closed my eyes. I turned my face skyward, letting the downpour massage the tense muscles in my face. I tried to visualize in my mind's eye all the places she could be – all the places I would never think to look. The rain on my head was soothing my drum-rolling migraine, and I was finally able to think clearly.

It wasn't till then that I heard a sound. A strange sound; one that didn't belong.

"Thelma...do you hear that? That gurgling sound?"

She listened for a moment. "No, I don't hear it."

"It sounds like...I don't know, like water echoing in a tube."

"Oh, that...it's a storm drain. It drains water into an underground river. It's right over there," she said, pointing to the corner of the property, near the edge of the trees.

I bolted at a dead run, leaving Thelma far behind. Now I saw clearly another place Kenny could have stashed her.

Sunken into the ground was a round iron grate, about three feet in diameter. I looked down inside, but only saw darkness.

"Kelly!!" I yelled into the drain, hearing nothing in return but rushing water. There was barely enough room to insert my fist into the drain, but I knew that would accomplish nothing. I grabbed onto the iron grate and pulled with everything I had in me.

"Don't hurt yerself honey," Thelma said when she came up behind me, "you'll never lift that thing off."

"Why? Is it locked? Welded??"

"Well no, but it weights about three hundred pounds! No one could lift that with their bare hands."

I looked back at the drain cover. "I'll bet Kenny could," I said grimly. "Do you have a flashlight?"

"Yeah...I got a little one on my keychain," she said, opening her purse and handing me her keys.

The tiny plastic flashlight did very little to illuminate the darkness below.

I almost didn't see the light reflect off of Kelly's sparkling, jade-green eyes as she looked up at me, but when I did, my heart nearly leapt up into my throat.

"She's down there!!" I screamed hysterically at Thelma. I grabbed again at the grate in desperation. "C'mon Thelma, help me!"

She just stood there and shook her head. "Sorry honey, I'm sixty-two years old! What do you want from me?"

I sat back for a moment and thought. "Do you have a bigger flashlight?"

"Sure, I got this floodlight thing that plugs into the cigarette lighter.

I handed her keys back to her and she did her best little-old-lady sprint back to her car.

I turned back to the grate. "Kelly! I'm still here! I hope you can hear me...I'm not leaving you again!"

I heard the little car pull up behind me, the door open and then the trunk, as I continued a futile effort to lift the grate.

"Here, how's this?"

I turned around. "Aughhh!!" I yelled, grabbing my face as I was blinded by the 200-watt halogen bulb a few feet from my eyes.

"Sorry..." she said, handing the light to me. When I regained my vision, I aimed the floodlight into the sewer, and for me, time stopped. The inside wall of the sewer was cement, with little steel ladder rungs sticking out to climb in and out. About twenty feet down, Kelly was gagged, and tied by wrists and ankles with duct tape to the ladder rungs. But what shocked me into an immediate sense of urgency, was what I saw around Kelly's waist. The underground river was flooding, and the water level was now rising up through the sewer. The heavy rains still had not yet begun to let up, and Kelly was in immediate danger of drowning.

It was even more obvious to me now Kenny hadn't been blessed with intelligence. He wanted to hold on to her, out of sight, probably all day, but the moron never considered the possibility of a sudden storm and flash flood.

I stood up and explained the situation to Thelma.

"Alex, you can't lift that grate! And any tools that might've helped were in the barn, and there isn't time to go sifting through the ashes."

I stood up and closed my eyes. People use to tell me I had a *mechanical brain*, good for piecing together a puzzle, or reconstructing a problem in my mind to find a solution. I now used this ability to visualize how to lift this three-hundred-pound piece of iron.

I went to Thelma's trunk and found it mostly empty. I lifted the carpet to reveal a tiny spare tire and scissor jack. And nothing else.

"Where's the water level?" I yelled to Thelma.

She aimed the flashlight into the sewer and yelled some reassuring words to Kelly. She turned off the light and walked up behind me. "It's up to her neck, Alex! Got a plan yet??"

"No!!" I yelled in frustration. "Unless you have a thick piece of rope, there isn't much I can do!"

I slammed the trunk of the Dodge and something caught my eye. I saw it through the rear window, sticking up from the back seat. I opened the driver-side door and grabbed it.

"Alex!" she yelled as I ran back to the sewer. "What do you think yer gonna do with my fishin' pole?"

I disconnected the spool of fishing line from the reel and studied it, instantly recognizing the light-blue monofilament line.

"This's fifteen-pound line, right?"

"Course it is...I wouldn't use anything else. You fish?"

"Dad took me when I was a kid. He'd always say '*Never use anything less than fifteen pound line, 'cause ya never know what ya might hook!*'"

I tied the end of the line to the sewer grate, and slid under the front-end of the Dodge with the spool in my hand.

"Well, yer dad had a good point, Alex, but that sewer grate weighs a lot more than fifteen pounds!"

"I know that," I said, wrapping the spool around the front axle and holding it out from under the car. "Here, take it. Wrap it through the grate and hand it back to me."

In seconds she handed it back to me. I wrapped it around the axle again and handed it back to her as I explained. "Fifteen times twenty is three hundred, right?"

"I guess so," she said, handing the spool back to me.

"So all we have to do is wrap this thing more than twenty times, and we'll have a rope capable of lifting over three hundred pounds."

I couldn't see it, but a smile crossed Thelma's face, and I noticed she was passing me the spool much faster now.

After five minutes of this, I slid out from under the car. "Tie it off at the grate. We wrapped it thirty times, which means it should lift four hundred fifty pounds. Now start the car, put it in reverse, and let's get her out of there!"

Thelma did just that. She put the car in reverse and backed up slowly to take the slack out of the line. When the little Dodge stopped, she slowly hit the gas.

My heart sank when I saw the front wheel start spinning on the wet, slippery grass. I jumped up on the hood, using my weight to give the tire more traction.

I looked over at the iron grate just as one side began to lift. I slapped the hood. "More gas! It's working!" The Dodge's four-cylinder engine made a high-pitched whine as it reached its maximum RPMs.

Finally the grate lifted into the air, and flipped upside down. The sudden release made the car lurch backward, throwing me to the ground. But it didn't phase me. I was up and running before Thelma stopped the car.

I climbed down into the sewer, grabbing desperately at the steel rungs embedded in the cement. A quick look below reaffirmed my sense of urgency when I saw the water level was just under her nose. With her mouth duct-taped closed, she had only her nose through which to breathe.

I climbed faster into the darkness, which made me lose my footing. I dropped the remaining six feet into the water, submerging me for only seconds.

When my head broke the surface, I found myself staring into Kelly's green eyes. Even down here in the sewer, they were a beautiful and disarming sight.

Remembering her arm and leg bindings, I took a deep breath and pulled myself underwater using the ladder rungs. I grabbed at the duct tape wrapped tightly around her ankles, feeling it rip a little at a time. With a final pull, the tape broke and I felt her legs move.

I climbed higher up and did the same with her wrist bindings. When they took broke free, I felt her begin climbing the ladder, and I immediately followed behind her.

Chapter Eleven

“Oww!!” Kelly yelled when I pulled the duct tape from her mouth.

“Sorry,” I said sheepishly.

Kelly threw her arms around me and gave me a kiss that made the top of my head tingle. She pulled back and asked, “What took you so long??”

I pulled some slightly damp clothes from the backseat of the Vette as Kelly and Thelma gave each other a long hug and whispered things I couldn’t hear. Finally Thelma gave me a wave, climbed back into her little Dodge and left.

I followed Kelly into the house. She went upstairs to take a shower, while I found an empty bedroom to change clothes. I was waiting on the couch for a half hour when I heard a loud thumping sound coming from the stairs. I looked up and found Kelly standing there, a large suitcase next to her.

“So I guess Kenny’s dead?” she asked.

I nodded. “In his own words, picked clean by wolves, his bones scattered throughout the hills.”

She gave a rueful grin and giggled. Then her face turned serious and she looked up at me. “So does your offer still stand?”

Realizing a potentially HUGE problem, my eyes turned to the floor. “I uhh...Kelly, there’s something you should know about me first—”

“That’s not what I asked you,” she interrupted.

I put my arms around her and kissed her. “I love you, Kelly. And I would love nothing more than to bring my favorite part of this road trip back with me to Detroit.”

She grinned. “Good! That’s all I needed to know. Everything else can wait,” she said, passing me her suitcase. It felt like it weighed more than the sewer grate as I dragged it out to the Vette.

“Clothes?” I asked, though I seriously doubted it.

She helped me lift it into the trunk. “Some clothes...mostly tools.” She grinned sheepishly. “I love my tools.”

The rain had stopped and the sun was beginning to set as I put the convertible top down and, with Kelly at the wheel, we pulled out onto Route 322, headed for Detroit.

“Kelly, I still need you to know something about me, and I don’t think it can wait till we get to Detroit.”

She glanced over at me, her face a picture of childish curiosity. “What, are you dying of some disease? Are you an international spy? Pfff. Yer not married, are ya?”

I shook my head. “No, nothing like that. It’s just...that morning we met at the café – I lied to you about something.”

She raised an eyebrow and smirked. “Okay Alex, I admit ya got me intrigued. What did you lie about?”

I took a deep breath. “This car. I wasn’t being paid to drive it to Detroit. It’s mine.”

She kept her eyes on the road and simply nodded in understanding. “Must’ve cost ya a pretty penny.”

I nodded. “I gave \$124,000 for it.”

“Wow! Well, I hope it was worth it. But I mean...it’s just a car. Do you realize what better things you could spend your money on?”

I nodded again. “You mean like houses? Boats? Airplanes?”

She smirked. “Well...I guess, sure.”

I looked at her intently as she watched the road, fearing how she would take my next statement. “But I already have those things.”

She looked over at me for just a second, then hit the brake and slid off the road onto the gravel shoulder of the highway. “Oh yeah??”

I stared off into the distance at nothing. “I have a house I paid half a million for. It’s not a mansion, but it’s pretty big considering I’m the only one living in it. It’s the base of operations for my company, Egan Technologies. I have a custom-built Escalade with a built-in prototype computer my company designed. I don’t even remember how much I paid for it.”

She put her fist on her hip, a gesture that made me think she wasn’t taking the news very well. “And boats and airplanes?”

I nervously ran a hand through my hair and looked away. “I have a 70-foot yacht that was built as an underwater research and salvage ship, called the Nauticus. And an ultralight plane my company is designing is almost ready to be built.”

I could see her teeth were clenched and her jaw was set hard. This was turning into a nightmare. I had no idea she’d take it this hard.

“So yer rich then, is that what you’re trying to tell me?” she asked, the anger in her voice very noticeable.

I sighed. “My gross worth is somewhere over half a billion.”

She stared down at the wheel. “So why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

I shook my head. “People in Detroit recognize my face. I can’t go anywhere without people knowing who I am, and how much I’m worth. But out here, where no one knows me...I’m free. Free to be myself, and people can get to know me for *me* -- Instead of for my money.”

She continued to stare at the steering wheel. “I understand,” she finally said.

I put my hand on hers. “Does this change anything?”

She jerked her hand away and glared at me. “Let’s get something straight,” she said menacingly. “I love you, Alex Egan. I love you because you make me smile, because you make me happy, and because you rescued me from a life of misery.” Her lips upturned in a smile. “You’re my superhero, whether you choose to accept it. I do *not* however, love you for your car, your boat, your house, your half a million—“

“Half a billion,” I corrected.

“If you ever...for even a second, start thinking I love you for any of that garbage, please let me know in advance so I can slap some sense into you.”

I leaned over and kissed her. “Kelly...Detroit’s going to *love* you.”