

Rusch-CowboyCowboy GraceKristine Kathryn RuschFictionwiseCopyright © 2003 by Kristine Kathryn RuschScience Fiction. 13480 words long. First published in The Silver Gryphon, January 2003
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Cowboy Grace

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Science Fiction

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“Every woman tolerates misogyny.” Alex said. She slid her empty beer glass across the bar, and tucked a strand of her auburn hair behind her ear. “How much depends on how old she is. The older she is the less she notices it. The more she expects it.”

“Bullshit.” Carole took a drag on her Virginia Slim, crossed her legs, and adjusted her skirt. “I don’t tolerate misogyny.”

“Maybe we should define the word,” Grace said, moving to the other side of Carole. She wished her friend would realize how much the smoking irritated her. In fact, the entire night was beginning to irritate her. They were all avoiding the topic du jour: the tiny wound on Grace’s left breast, stitches gone now, but the skin still raw and sore.

“Mis-ah-jenny.” Carole said, as if Grace were stupid. “Hatred of women.”

“From the Greek,” Alex said. “Misos or hatred and gyne or women.”

“Not,” Carole said, waving her cigarette as if it were a baton, “misogamy, which is also from the Greek. Hatred of marriage. Hmm. Two male misos wrapped in one.”

The bartender, a diminutive woman dressed wearing a red and white cowgirl outfit, complete with fringe and gold buttons, snickered. She set down a napkin in front of Alex and gave her another beer.

“Compliments,” she said, “of the men at the booth near the phone.”

Alex looked. She always looked. She was tall, busty, and leggy, with a crooked nose thanks to an errant pitch Grace had thrown in the 9th grade, a long chin and eyes the color of wine. Men couldn’t get enough of her. When Alex rebuffed them, they slept with Carole and then talked to Grace.

The men in the booth near the phone looked like corporate types on a junket. Matching gray suits, different ties—all in a complimentary shade of pink, red, or cranberry—matching haircuts (long on top, styled on the sides), and differing goofy grins.

“This is a girl bar,” Alex said, shoving the glass back at the bartender. “We come here to diss men, not to meet them.”

“Good call,” Carole said, exhaling smoke into Grace's face. Grace agreed, not with the smoke or the rejection, but because she wanted time with her friends. Without male intervention of any kind.

“Maybe we should take a table,” Grace said.

“Maybe.” Carole crossed her legs again. Her mini was leather, which meant that night she felt like being on display. “Or maybe we should send drinks to the cutest men we see.”

They scanned the bar. Happy Hour at the Oh Kaye Corral didn't change much from Friday to Friday. A jukebox in the corner, playing Patty Loveless. Cocktail waitresses in short skirts and ankle boots with big heels. Tin stars and Wild West art on the walls, unstained wood and checkered tablecloths adding to the effect. One day, when Grace had Alex's courage and Carole's gravelly voice, she wanted to walk in, belly up to the bar, slap her hand on its polished surface, and order whiskey straight up. She wanted someone to challenge her. She wanted to pull her six-gun and have a stare-down, then and there. Cowboy Grace, fastest gun in the West. Or at least in Racine on a rainy Friday night.

“I don't see cute,” Alex said. “I see married, married, divorced, desperate, single, single, never-been-laid, and married.”

Grace watched her make her assessment. Alex's expression never changed. Carole was looking at the men, apparently seeing whether or not she agreed.

Typically, she didn't.

“I dunno,” she said, pulling on her cigarette. “Never-Been-Laid's kinda cute.”

“So try him,” Alex said. “But you'll have your own faithful puppy dog by this time next week, and a proposal of marriage within the month.”

Carole grinned and slid off the stool. “Proposal of marriage in two weeks,” she said. “I'm that good.”

She stubbed out her cigarette, grabbed the tiny leather purse that matched the skirt, adjusted her silk blouse and sashayed her way toward a table in the middle.

Grace finally saw Never-Been-Laid. He had soft brown eyes, and hair that needed trimming. He wore a shirt that accented his narrow shoulders, and he had a laptop open on the round table. He was alone. He had his feet tucked under the chair, crossed at the ankles. He wore dirty tennis shoes with his Gap khakis.

“Cute?” Grace said.

“Shhh,” Alex said. “It's a door into the mind of Carole.”

“One that should remain closed.” Grace moved to Carole's stool. It was still warm. Grace shoved Carole's drink out of her way, grabbed her glass of wine, and coughed. The air still smelled of cigarette smoke.

Carole was leaning over the extra chair, giving Never-Been-Laid a view of her cleavage, and the guys at the booth by the phone a nice look at her ass, which they seemed to appreciate.

“Where the hell did that misogyny comment come from?” Grace asked.

Alex looked at her. “You want to get a booth?”

“Sure. Think Carole can find us?”

“I think Carole's going to be deflowering a computer geek and not caring what we're doing.” Alex grabbed her drink, stood, and walked to a booth on the other side of the Corral. Dirty glasses from the last occupants were piled in the center, and the red-and-white checked vinyl table cloth was sticky.

They moved the glasses on the edge of the table and didn't touch the dollar tip, which had been pressed into a puddle of beer.

Grace set her wine down and slid onto her side. Alex did the same on the other side. Somehow they managed not to touch the table top at all.

“You remember my boss?” Alex asked as she adjusted the tiny fake gaslamp that hung on the wall beside the booth.

“Beanie Boy?”

She grinned. “Yeah.”

“Never met him.”

“Aren't you lucky.”

Grace already knew that. She'd heard stories about Beanie Boy for the last year. They had started shortly after he was hired. Alex went to the company Halloween party and was startled to find her boss dressed as one of the Lollipop Kids from the Wizard of Oz, complete with striped shirt, oversized lollipop and propeller beanie.

“Now what did he do?” Grace asked.

“Called me honey.”

“Yeah?” Grace asked.

“And sweetie, and doll-face, and sugar.”

“Hasn't he been doing that for the last year?”

Alex glared at Grace. “It's getting worse.”

“What's he doing, patting you on the butt?”

“If he did, I'd get him for harassment, and he knows it.”

She had lowered her voice. Grace could barely hear her over Shania Twain.

“This morning one of our clients came in praising the last report. I wrote it.”

“Didn't Beanie Boy give you credit?”

“Of course he did. He said, ‘Our little Miss Rogers wrote it. Isn't she a doll?’”

Grace clutched her drink tighter. This didn't matter to her. Her biopsy was benign. She had called Alex and Carole and told them. They'd suggested coming here. So why weren't they offering a toast to her life? Why weren't they celebrating, really celebrating, instead of rerunning the same old conversation in the same old bar in the same old way. “What did the client do?”

“He agreed, of course.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Is that it? Didn't you speak up?”

“How could I? He was praising me, for godssake.”

Grace sighed and sipped her beer. Shania Twain's comment was that didn't impress her much. It didn't impress Grace much either, but she knew better than to say anything to Alex.

Grace looked toward the middle of the restaurant. Carole was standing behind Never-Been-Laid, her breasts pressed against his back, her ass on view to the world, her head over his shoulder peering at his computer screen.

Alex didn't follow her gaze like Grace had hoped. “If I were ten years younger, I'd tell Beanie Boy to shove it.”

“If you were ten years younger, you wouldn't have a mortgage and a Mazda.”

“Dignity shouldn't be cheaper than a paycheck,” she said.

“So confront him.”

“He doesn't think he's doing anything wrong. He treats all the women like that.”

Grace sighed. They'd walked this road before. Job after job, boyfriend after boyfriend. Alex, for all her looks, was like Joe McCarthy protecting the world from the Red Menace: she saw anti-female everywhere, and most of it, she was convinced, was directed at her.

“You don't seem very sympathetic,” Alex said.

She wasn't. She never had been. And with all she had been through in the last month, alone because her two best friends couldn't bear to talk about the Big C, the lock that was usually on Grace's mouth wasn't working.

“I'm not sympathetic,” Grace said. “I'm beginning to think you're a victim in search of a victimizer.”

“That's not fair, Grace,” Alex said. “We tolerate this stuff because we were raised in an anti-woman society. It's gotten better, but it's not perfect. You tell those Xers stuff like this and they shake their heads. Or the new ones. What're they calling themselves now? Generation Y? They were raised on Title IX. Hell, they pull off their shirts after winning soccer games. Imagine us doing that.”

“My cousin got arrested in 1977 in Milwaukee on the day Elvis Presley died for playing volleyball,” Grace said. Carole was actually rubbing herself on Never-Been-Laid. His face was the color of the red checks in the tablecloth.

“What?”

Grace turned to Alex. “My cousin. You know, Barbie? She got arrested playing volleyball.”

“They didn't let girls play volleyball in Milwaukee?”

“It was 90 degrees, and she was playing with a group of guys. They pulled off their shirts because they were hot and sweating, so she did the same. She got arrested for indecent exposure.”

“God,” Alex said. “Did she go to jail?”

“Didn't even get her day in court.”

“Everyone gets a day in court.”

Grace shook her head. “The judge took one look at Barbie, who was really butch in those days, and said, ‘I'm sick of you girls coming in here and arguing that you should have equal treatment for things that are clearly unequal. I do not establish Public Decency laws. You may show a bit of breast if you're feeding a child, otherwise you are in violation of—some damn code.’ Barbie used to quote the thing chapter and verse.”

“Then what?” Alex asked.

“Then she got married, had a kid, and started wearing nail polish. She said it wasn't as much fun to show her breasts legally.”

“See?” Alex said. “Misogyny.”

Grace shrugged. “Society, Alex. Get used to it.”

“That's the point of your story? We've been oppressed for a thousand years and you say, ‘Get used to it!’?”

“I say Brandi Chastain pulls off her shirt in front of millions—”

“Showing a sports bra.”

“—and she doesn't get arrested. I say women head companies all the time. I say things are better now than they were when I was growing up, and I say the only ones who oppress us are ourselves.”

“I say you're drunk.”

Grace pointed at Carole, who was wet-kissing Never-Been-Laid, her arms wrapped around his neck and her legs wrapped around his waist. “She's drunk. I'm just speaking out.”

“You never speak out.”

Grace sighed. No one had picked up the glasses and she was tired of looking at that poor drowning dollar bill. There wasn't going to be any celebration. Everything was the same as it always was—at least to Alex and Carole. But Grace wanted something different.

She got up, threw a five next to the dollar, and picked up her purse.

“Tell me if Carole gets laid,” Grace said, and left.

Outside Grace stopped and took a deep breath of the humid, exhaust-filled air. She could hear the clang

of glasses even in the parking lot and the rhythm of Mary Chapin Carpenter praising passionate kisses. Grace had had only one glass of wine and a lousy time, and she wondered why people said old friends were the best friends. They were supposed to raise toasts to her future, now restored. She'd even said the "b" word and Alex hadn't noticed. It was as if the cancer scare had happened to someone they didn't even know.

Grace was going to be forty years old in three weeks. Her two best friends were probably planning a version of the same party they had held for her when she turned thirty. A male stripper whose sweaty body repulsed her more than aroused her, too many black balloons, and aging jokes that hadn't been original the first time around.

Forty years old, an accountant with her own firm, no close family, no boyfriend, and a resident of the same town her whole life. The only time she left was to visit cousins out east, and for what? Obligation?

There was no joy left, if there'd ever been any joy at all.

She got into her sensible Ford Taurus, bought at a used car lot for well under Blue Book, and drove west.

* * * *

It wasn't until she reached Janesville that she started to call herself crazy, and it wasn't until she drove into Dubuque that she realized how little tied her to her hometown.

An apartment without even a cat to cozy up to, a business no more successful than a dozen others, and people who still saw her as a teenager wearing granny glasses, braces and hair too long for her face. Grace, who was always there. Grace the steady, Grace the smart. Grace, who helped her friends out of their financial binds, who gave them a shoulder to cry on, and a degree of comfort because their lives weren't as empty as her own.

When she had told Alex and Carole that her mammogram had come back suspicious, they had looked away. When she told them that she had found a lump, they had looked frightened.

I can't imagine life without you, Gracie, Carole had whispered.

Imagine it now, Grace thought.

The dawn was breaking when she reached Cedar Rapids, and she wasn't really tired. But she was practical, had always been practical, and habits of a lifetime didn't change just because she had run away from home at the age of 39.

She got a hotel room and slept for eight hours, got up, had dinner in a nice steak place, went back to the room and slept some more. When she woke up Sunday morning to bells from the Presbyterian Church across the street, she lay on her back and listened for a good minute before she realized they were playing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." And she smiled then, because Jesus had been a better friend to her in recent years than Alex and Carole ever had.

At least Jesus didn't tell her his problems when she was praying about hers. If Jesus was self-absorbed he wasn't obvious about it. And he didn't seem to care that she hadn't been inside a church since August of 1978.

The room was chintz, the wallpaper and the bedspread matched, and the painting on the wall was chosen for its color not for its technique. Grace sat up and wondered what she was doing here, and thought about going home.

To nothing.

So she got in her car and followed the Interstate, through Des Moines, and Lincoln and Cheyenne, places she had only read about, places she had never seen. How could a woman live for forty years and not see the country of her birth? How could a woman do nothing except what she was supposed to from the day she was born until the day she died?

In Salt Lake City, she stared at the Mormon Tabernacle, all white against an azure sky. She sat in her car and watched a groundskeeper maintain the flowers, and remembered how it felt to take her doctor's call.

A lot of women have irregular mammograms, particularly at your age. The breast tissue is thicker, and often we get clouds.

Clouds.

There were fluffy clouds in the dry desert sky, but they were white and benign. Just like her lump had turned out to be. But for a hellish month, she had thought about that lump, feeling it when she woke out of a sound sleep, wondering if it presaged the beginning of the end. She had never felt her mortality like this before, not even when her mother, the only parent she had known, had died. Not even when she realized there was no one remaining of the generation that had once stood between her and death.

No one talked about these things. No one let her talk about them either. Not just Alex and Carole, but Michael, her second in command at work, or even her doctor, who kept assuring her that she was young and the odds were in her favor.

Young didn't matter if the cancer had spread through the lymph nodes. When she went in for the lumpectomy almost two weeks ago now, she had felt a curious kind of relief, as if the doctor had removed a tick that had burrowed under her skin. When he had called with the news that the lump was benign, she had thanked him calmly and continued with her day, filing corporate tax returns for a consulting firm.

No one had known the way she felt. Not relieved. No. It was more like she had received a reprieve.

The clouds above the Tabernacle helped calm her. She plugged in her cell phone for the first time in days and listened to the voice mail messages, most of them from Michael, growing increasingly worried about where she was.

Have you forgotten the meeting with Boyd's? he'd asked on Monday.

Do you want me to file Charlie's extension? he'd demanded on Tuesday.

Where the hell are you? he cried on Wednesday and she knew, then, that it was okay to call him, that not even the business could bring her home.

Amazing how her training had prepared her for moments like these and she hadn't even known it. She had savings, lots of them, because she hadn't bought a house even though it had been prudent to do so. She had been waiting, apparently, for Mr. Right, or the family her mother had always wanted for her, the family that would never come. Her money was invested properly, and she could live off the interest if she so chose. She had just never chosen to before.

And if she didn't want to be found, she didn't have to be. She knew how to have the interest paid through off-shore accounts so that no one could track it. She even knew a quick and almost legal way to change her name. Traceable, but she hadn't committed a crime. She didn't need to hide well, just well enough that a casual search wouldn't produce her.

Not that anyone would start a casual search. Once she sold the business, Michael would forget her and Alex and Carole, even though they would gossip about her at Oh Kaye's every Friday night for the rest of their lives, wouldn't summon the energy to search.

She could almost hear them now: She met some guy, Carole would say. And he killed her, Alex would add, and then they would argue until last call, unless Carole found some man to entertain her, and Alex someone else to complain to. They would miss Grace only when they screwed up, when they needed a shoulder, when they couldn't stand being on their own. And even then, they probably wouldn't realize what it was they had lost.

* * * *

Because it amused her, she had driven north to Boise, land of the white collar, to make her cell call to Michael. Her offer to him was simple: cash her out of the business and call it his own. She named a price, he dickered half-heartedly, she refused to negotiate. Within two days, he had wired the money to a blind money market account that she had often stored cash in for the firm.

She let the money sit there while she decided what to do with it. Then she went to Reno to change her name.

Reno had been a surprise. A beautiful city set between mountains like none she had ever seen. The air was dry, the downtown tacky, the people friendly. There were bookstores and slot machines and good restaurants. There were cheap houses and all-night casinos and lots of strange places. There was even history, of the wild west kind.

For the first time in her life, Grace fell in love.

And to celebrate the occasion, she snuck into a quickie wedding chapel, found the marriage licenses, took one, copied down the name of the chapel, its permit number, and all the other pertinent information, and then returned to her car. There she checked the boxes, saying she had seen the driver's licenses and birth certificates of the people involved, including a fictitious man named Nathan Reinhart, and viola! she was married. She had a new name, a document the credit card companies would accept, and a new beginning all at the same time.

* * * *

Using some of her personal savings, she bought a house with lots of windows and a view of the Sierras. In the mornings, light bathed her kitchen, and in the evenings, it caressed her living room. She had never seen light like this—clean and pure and crisp. She was beginning to understand why artists moved west to paint, why people used to exclaim about the way light changed everything.

The lack of humidity, of dense air pollution, made the air clearer. The elevation brought her closer to the sun.

She felt as if she were seeing everything for the very first time.

And hearing it, too. The house was silent, much more silent than an apartment, and the silence soothed her. She could listen to her television without worrying about the people in the apartment below, or play her stereo full blast without concern about a visit from the super.

There was a freedom to having her own space that she hadn't realized before, a freedom to living the way she wanted to live, without the rules of the past or the expectations she had grown up with.

And among those expectations was the idea that she had to be the strong one, the good one, the one on

whose shoulder everyone else cried. She had no friends here, no one who needed her shoulder, and she had no one who expected her to be good.

Only herself.

Of course, in some things she was good. Habits of a lifetime died hard. She began researching the best way to invest Michael's lump sum payment—and while she researched, she left the money alone. She kept her house clean and her lawn, such as it was in this high desert, immaculate. She got a new car and made sure it was spotless.

No one would find fault with her appearances, inside or out.

Not that she had anyone who was looking. She didn't have a boyfriend or a job or a hobby. She didn't have anything except herself.

* * * *

She found herself drawn to the casinos, with their clinking slot machines, musical come-ons, and bright lights. No matter how high tech the places had become, no matter how clean, how “family-oriented,” they still had a shady feel.

Or perhaps that was her upbringing, in a state where gambling had been illegal until she was 25, a state where her father used to play a friendly game of poker—even with his friends—with the curtains drawn.

Sin—no matter how sanitized—still had appeal in the brand-new century.

Of course, she was too sensible to gamble away her savings. The slots lost their appeal quickly, and when she sat down at the blackjack tables, she couldn't get past the feeling that she was frittering her money away for nothing.

But she liked the way the cards fell and how people concentrated—as if their very lives depended on this place—and she was good with numbers. One of the pit bosses mentioned that they were always short of poker dealers, so she took a class offered by one of the casinos. Within two months, she was snapping cards, raking pots, and wearing a uniform that made her feel like Carole on a bad night.

It only took a few weeks for her bosses to realize that Grace was a natural poker dealer. They gave her the busy shifts—Thursday through Sunday nights—and she spent her evenings playing the game of cowboys, fancy men, and whores. Finally, there was a bit of an Old West feel to her life, a bit of excitement, a sense of purpose.

When she got off at midnight, she would be too keyed up to go home. She started bringing a change of clothes to work and, after her shift, she would go to the casino next door. It had a great bar upstairs—filled with brass, Victorian furnishings, and a real hardwood floor. She could get a sandwich and a beer. Finally, she felt like she was becoming the woman she wanted to be.

One night, a year after she had run away from home, a man sidled up next to her. He had long blond hair that curled against his shoulders. His face was tanned and lined, a bit too thin. He looked road-hardened—like a man who'd been outside too much, seen too much, worked in the sun too much. His hands were long, slender, and callused. He wore no rings, and his shirt cuffs were frayed at the edges.

He sat beside her in companionable silence for nearly an hour, while they both stared at CNN on the big screen over the bar, and then he said, “Just once I'd like to go someplace authentic.”

His voice was cigarette growly, even though he didn't smoke, and he had a Southern accent that was soft as butter. She guessed Louisiana, but it might have been Tennessee or even Northern Florida. She wasn't good at distinguishing Southern accents yet. She figured she would after another year or so of dealing cards.

“You should go up to Virginia City. There's a bar or two that looks real enough.”

He snorted through his nose. “Tourist trap.”

She shrugged. She'd thought it interesting—an entire historic city, preserved just like it had been when Mark Twain lived there. “Seems to me if you weren't a tourist there wouldn't be any other reason to go.”

He shrugged and picked up a toothpick, rolling it in his fingers. She smiled to herself. A former smoker then, and a fidgeter.

“Reno's better than Vegas, at least,” he said. “Casinos aren't family friendly yet.”

“Except Circus Circus.”

“Always been that way. But the rest. You get a sense that maybe it ain't all legal here.”

She looked at him sideways. He was at least her age, his blue eyes sharp in his leathery face. “You like things that aren't legal?”

“Gambling's not something that should be made pretty, you know? It's about money, and money can either make you or destroy you.”

She felt herself smile, remember what it was like to paw through receipts and tax returns, to make neat rows of figures about other people's money. “What's the saying?” she asked. “Money is like sex—”

“It doesn't matter unless you don't have any.” To her surprise, he laughed. The sound was rich and warm, not at all like she had expected. The smile transformed his face into something almost handsome.

He tapped the toothpick on the polished bar, and asked, “You think that's true?”

She shrugged. “I suppose. Everyone's idea of what's enough differs, though.”

“What's yours?” He turned toward her, smile gone now, eyes even sharper than they had been a moment ago. She suddenly felt as if she were on trial.

“My idea of what's enough?” she asked.

He nodded.

“I suppose enough that I can live off the interest in the manner in which I've become accustomed. What's yours?”

A shadow crossed his eyes and he looked away from her. “Long as I've got a roof over my head, clothes on my back, and food in my mouth, I figure I'm rich enough.”

“Sounds distinctly unAmerican to me,” she said.

He looked at her sideways again. “I guess it does, don't it? Women figure a man should have some sort of ambition.”

“Do you?”

“Have ambition?” He bent the toothpick between his fore- and middle fingers. “Of course I do. It just ain't tied in with money, is all.”

“I thought money and ambition went together.”

“In most men's minds.”

“But not yours?”

The toothpick broke. “Not any more,” he said.

* * * *

Three nights later, he sat down at her table. He was wearing a denim shirt with silver snaps and jeans so faded that they looked as if they might shred around him. That, his hair, and his lean look reminded Grace of a movie gunslinger, the kind that cleaned a town up because it had to be done.

“Guess you don't make enough to live off the interest,” he said to her as he sat down.

She raised her eyebrows. “Maybe I like people.”

“Maybe you like games.”

She smiled and dealt the cards. The table was full. She was dealing 3-6 Texas Hold 'Em and most of the players were locals. It was Monday night and they all looked pleased to have an unfamiliar face at the table.

If she had known him better she might have tipped him off. Instead she wanted to see how long his money would last.

He bought in for \$100, although she had seen at least five hundred in his wallet. He took the chips, and studied them for a moment.

He had three tells. He fidgeted with his chips when his cards were mediocre and he was thinking of bluffing. He bit his lower lip when he had nothing, and his eyes went dead flat when he had a winning hand.

He lost the first hundred in forty-five minutes, bought back in for another hundred and managed to hold onto it until her shift ended shortly after midnight. He sat through dealer changes and the floating fortunes of his cards. When she returned from her last break, she found herself wondering if his tells were subconscious after all. They seemed deliberately calculated to let the professional poker players around him think that he was a rookie.

She said nothing. She couldn't, really—at least not overtly. The casino got a rake and they didn't allow her to do anything except deal the game. She had no stake in it anyway. She hadn't lied to him that first night. She loved watching people, the way they played their hands, the way the money flowed.

It was like being an accountant, only in real time. She got to see the furrowed brows as the decisions were made, hear the curses as someone pushed back a chair and tossed in that last hand of cards, watch the desperation that often led to the exact wrong play. Only as a poker dealer, she wasn't required to clean up the mess. She didn't have to offer advice or refuse it; she didn't have to worry about tax consequences, about sitting across from someone else's auditor, justifying choices she had no part in

making.

When she got off, she changed into her tightest jeans and a summer sweater and went to her favorite bar.

Casino bars were always busy after midnight, even on a Monday. The crowd wasn't there to have a good time but to wind down from one—or to prepare itself for another. She sat at the bar, as she had since she started this routine, and she'd been about to leave when he sat next to her.

“Lose your stake?” she asked.

“I'm up \$400.”

She looked at him sideways. He didn't seem pleased with the way the night had gone—not the way a casual player would have been. Her gut instinct was right. He was someone who was used to gambling—and winning.

“Buy you another?” he asked.

She shook her head. “One's enough.”

He smiled. It made him look less fierce and gave him a rugged sort of appeal. “Everything in moderation?”

“Not always,” she said. “At least, not any more.”

* * * *

Somehow they ended up in bed—her bed—and he was better than she imagined his kind of man could be. He had knowledgeable fingers and endless patience. He didn't seem to mind the scar on her breast. Instead he lingered over it, focussing on it as if it were an erogenous zone. His pleasure at the result enhanced hers and when she finally fell asleep, somewhere around dawn, she was more sated than she had ever been.

She awoke to the smell of frying bacon and fresh coffee. Her eyes were filled with sand, but her body had a healthy lethargy.

At least, she thought, he hadn't left before she awoke.

At least he hadn't stolen everything in sight.

She still didn't know his name, and wasn't sure she cared. She slipped on a robe and combed her hair with her fingers and walked into her kitchen—the kitchen no one had cooked in but her.

He had on his denims and his hair was tied back with a leather thong. He had found not only her cast iron skillet but the grease cover that she always used when making bacon. A bowl of scrambled eggs steamed on the counter, and a plate of heavily buttered toast sat beside it.

“Sit down, darlin’,” he said. “Let me bring it all to you.”

She flushed. That was what it felt like he had done the night before, but she said nothing. Her juice glasses were out, and so was her everyday ware, and yet somehow the table looked like it had been set for a Gourmet photo spread.

“I certainly didn't expect this,” she said.

“It's the least I can do.” He put the eggs and toast on the table, then poured her a cup of coffee. Cream and sugar were already out, and in their special containers.

She was slightly uncomfortable that he had figured out her kitchen that quickly and well.

He put the bacon on a paper-towel covered plate, then set that on the table. She hadn't moved, so he beckoned with his hand.

“Go ahead,” he said. “It's getting cold.”

He sat across from her and helped himself to bacon while she served herself eggs. They were fluffy and light, just like they would have been in a restaurant. She had no idea how he got that consistency. Her home-scrambled eggs were always runny and undercooked.

The morning light bathed the table, giving everything a bright glow. His hair seemed even blonder in the sunlight and his skin darker. He had laugh lines around his mouth, and a bit of blond stubble on his chin.

She watched him eat, those nimble fingers scooping up the remaining egg with a slice of toast, and found herself remembering how those fingers had felt on her skin.

Then she felt his gaze on her, and looked up. His eyes were dead flat for just an instant, and she felt herself grow cold.

“Awful nice house,” he said slowly, “for a woman who makes a living dealing cards.”

Her first reaction was defense—she wanted to tell him she had other income, and what did he care about a woman who dealt cards, anyway?—but instead, she smiled. “Thank you.”

He measured her, as if he expected a different response, then he said, “You're awfully calm considering that you don't even know my name. You don't strike me as the kind of woman who does this often.”

His words startled her, but she made sure that the surprise didn't show. She had learned a lot about her own tells while dealing poker, and the experience was coming in handy now.

“You flatter yourself,” she said softly.

“Well,” he said, reaching into his back pocket, “if there's one thing my job's taught me, it's that people hide information they don't want anyone else to know.”

He pulled out his wallet, opened it, and with two fingers removed a business card. He dropped it on the table.

She didn't want to pick the card up. She knew things had already changed between them in a way she didn't entirely understand, but she had a sense from the fleeting expression she had seen on his face that once she picked up the card she could never go back.

She set down her coffee cup and used two fingers to slide the card toward her. It identified him as Travis Delamore, a skip tracer and bail bondsman. Below his name was a phone number with a 414 exchange.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin and the surrounding areas. Precisely the place someone from Racine might call if they wanted to hire a professional.

She slipped the card into the pocket of her robe. “Is sleeping around part of your job?”

“Is embezzling part of yours?” All the warmth had left his face. His expression was unreadable except for

the flatness in his eyes. What did he think he knew?

She made herself smile. "Mr. Delamore, if I stole a dime from the casino, I'd be instantly fired. There are cameras everywhere."

"I mean your former job, Ms. Mackie. A lot of money is missing from your office."

"I don't have an office." His use of her former name made her hands clammy. What had Michael done?

"Do you deny that you're Grace Mackie?"

"I don't acknowledge or deny anything. When did this become an inquisition, Mr. Delamore? I thought men liked their sex uncomplicated. You seem to be a unique member of your species."

This time he smiled. "Of course we like our sex uncomplicated. That's why we're having this discussion this morning."

"If we'd had it last night, there wouldn't be a this morning."

"That's my point." He downed the last of his orange juice. "And thank you for the acknowledgement, Ms. Mackie."

"It wasn't an acknowledgement," she said. "I don't like to sleep with men who think me guilty of something."

"Embezzlement," he said gently, using the same tone he had used in bed. This time, it made her bristle.

"I haven't stolen anything."

"New house, new name, new town, mysterious disappearance."

The chill she had felt earlier grew. She stood and wrapped her robe tightly around her waist. "I don't know what you think you know, Mr. Delamore, but I believe it's time for you to leave."

He didn't move. "We're not done."

"Oh, yes, we are."

"It would be a lot easier if you told me where the money was, Grace."

"Do you always get paid for sex, Mr. Delamore?" she asked.

He studied her for a moment. "Don't play games with me, honey."

"Why not?" she asked. "You seem to enjoy them."

He shoved his plate away as if it had offended him. Apparently this morning wasn't going the way he wanted it to either. "I'm just telling you what I know."

"And I'm just asking you to leave. It was fun, Travis. But it certainly wasn't worth this."

He stood and slipped his wallet back into his pocket. "You'll hear from me again."

"This isn't high school," she said, following him to the door. "I won't be offended if you fail to call."

"No," he said as he stepped into the dry desert air. "You probably won't be offended. But you will be

curious. This is just the beginning, Grace.”

“One person's beginning is another person's ending,” she said as she closed and locked the door behind him.

* * * *

The worst thing she could do, she knew, was panic. So she made herself clean up the kitchen as if she didn't have a care in the world, and she left the curtains open so that he could see if he wanted to. Then she went to the shower, making it a long and hot. She tried to scrub all the traces of him off of her.

For the first time in her life, she felt cheap.

Embezzlement. Something had happened, something Michael was blaming on her. It would be easy enough, she supposed. She had disappeared. That looked suspicious enough. The new name, the new car, the new town, all of that added to the suspicion.

What had Michael done? And why?

She got out of the shower and toweled herself off. She was tempted to call Michael, but she certainly couldn't do it from the house. If she used her cell, the call would be traceable too. And if she went to a pay phone, she would attract even more suspicion. She had to consider that Travis Delamore was following her, spying on her.

In fact, she had to consider that he had been doing that for some time.

She went over all of their conversation, looking for clues, mistakes she might have made. She had told him very little, but he had asked a lot. Strangely—or perhaps not so strangely any more—all of their conversations had been about money.

Carole would have been proud of her. Grace had finally let her libido get the better of her. Alex would have been disgusted, reminding her that men couldn't be trusted.

What could he do to her besides cast suspicion? He was right. Without the money, he had nothing. And she had a job, no criminal record, and no suspicious investments.

But if he continued to follow her, she could go after him. The bartender had seen them leave her favorite bar together. She had an innocent face, she'd been living here for a year, got promoted, was well-liked by her employer. Delamore had obviously flirted with her while he played poker the night before, and the casino had cameras.

They probably had records of all the times he had watched her before she noticed him.

It wouldn't take much to make a stalking charge. That would get her an injunction in the least, and it might scare him off.

Then she could find out why he was so sure he had something on her. Then she could find out what it was Michael had done.

* * * *

The newly remodeled ladies room on the third floor of the casino had twenty stalls and a lounge complete with smoking room. It had once been a small restroom, but the reconstruction had taken out the nearby men's room and replaced it with more stalls. The row of pay phones in the middle stayed, as a

convenience to the customers.

Delamore wouldn't know that she called from those pay phones. No one would know.

She started using the third floor ladies room on her break and more than once had picked up the receiver on the third phone and dialed most of her old office number. She'd always stop before she hit the last digit, though. Her intuition told her that calling Michael would be wrong.

What if Delamore had a trace on Michael's line? What if the police did?

A week after her encounter with Delamore, a week in which she used the third floor ladies room more times than she could count, she suddenly realized what was wrong. Delamore didn't have anything on her except suspicion. He had clearly found her—that hadn't been hard, since she really hadn't been hiding from anyone—and he had probably checked her bank records for the money he assumed she had embezzled from her former clients. But the money she had gotten from the sale of the business was still in that hidden numbered account—and would stay there.

Her native caution had served her well once again.

She had nothing to hide. It didn't matter what some good-looking skip trace thought. Her life in Racine was in the past. A part of her past that she couldn't avoid, any more than she could avoid the scar on her breast—the scar that Delamore had clearly used to identify her, the bastard. But past was past, and until it hurt her present, she wasn't going to worry about it.

So she stopped making pilgrimages to the third floor women's room, and gradually, her worries over Delamore faded. She didn't see him for a week, and she assumed—wrongly—that it was all over.

* * * *

He sat next to her at the bar as if he had been doing it every day for years. He ordered a whiskey neat, and another “for the lady,” just like men in her fantasies used to do. When he looked at her and smiled, she realized that the look didn't reach his eyes.

Maybe it never had.

“Miss me, darlin'?” he asked.

She picked up her purse, took out a five to cover her drink, and started to leave. He grabbed her wrist. His fingers were warm and dry, their touch no longer gentle. A shiver started in her back, but she willed the feeling away.

“Let go of me,” she said.

“Now, Gracie, I think you should listen to what I have to say.”

“Let go of me,” she said in that same measured tone, “or I will scream so loud that everyone in the place will hear.”

“Screams don't frighten me, doll.”

“Maybe the police do. Believe me, hon, I will press charges.”

His smile was slow and wide, but that flat look was in his eyes again, the one that told her he had all the cards. “I'm sure they'll be impressed,” he said, reaching into his breast pocket with his free hand. “But I do believe a warrant trumps a tight grip on the arm.”

He set a piece of paper down on the bar itself. The bartender, wiping away the remains of another customer's mess, glanced her way as if he were keeping an eye on her.

She didn't touch the paper, but she didn't shake Delamore's hand off her arm, either. She wasn't quite sure what to do.

He picked up the paper, shook it open, and she saw the strange bold-faced print of a legal document, her former name in the middle. "Tell you what, Gracie. How about we finish the talk we started the other morning in one of those dark, quiet booths over there?"

She was still staring at the paper, trying to comprehend it. It looked official enough. But then, she'd never seen a warrant for anyone's arrest before. She had only heard of them.

She had never imagined she'd see her own name on one.

She let Delamore lead her to a booth at the far end of the bar. He slid across the plastic, trying to pull her in beside him, but this time, she shook him off. She sat across from him, perched on the seat with her feet in the aisle, purse clutched on her lap. Flee position, Alex used to call it. You Might Be a Loser and I Reserve the Right to Find Someone Else, was Carole's name for it.

"If I bring you back to Wisconsin," he said, "I get a few thousand bucks. What it don't say on my card is that I'm a bounty hunter."

"What an exciting life you must lead," Grace said dryly.

He smiled. The look chilled her. She was beginning to wonder how she had ever found him attractive. "It's got its perks."

It was at that moment she decided she hated him. He would forever refer to her as a perk of the job, not as someone who had given herself to him freely, someone who had enjoyed the moment as much as he had.

All that gentleness in his fingers, all those murmured endearments. Lies.

She hated lies.

"But," he was saying, "I see a way to make a little more money here. I don't think you're a real threat to society. And you're a lot of fun, more fun than I would've expected, given how you lived before you moved here."

The bartender came over, his bar towel over his arm. "Want anything?"

He was speaking to her. He hadn't even looked at Delamore. The bartender was making sure she was all right.

"I don't know yet," she said. "Can you check back in five minutes?"

"Sure thing." This time he did look at Delamore, who grinned at him. The bartender shot him a warning glare.

"Wow," Delamore said as the bartender moved out of earshot. "You have a defender."

"You keep getting off track," Grace said.

Delamore shrugged. "I like talking to you."

“Well, I find talking with you rather dull.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You didn't think so a few days ago.”

“As I recall,” she said, “we didn't do a lot talking.”

His smile softened. “That's my memory too.”

She clutched her purse tighter. It always looked so glamorous in the movies, finding the right person, having a night of great sex. And even if he rode off into the sunset never to be seen again, everything still had a glow of perfection to it.

Not the bits of sleaze, the hardness in his expression, the sense that what he wanted from her was something she couldn't give.

“You know, the papers said that Michael Holden went into your old office, and put a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. Then the police, after finding the body, discovered that most of the money your clients had entrusted to your firm had disappeared.”

She couldn't suppress the small whimper of shock that rose in her throat.

Delamore noted it and his eyes brightened. “Now, you tell me what happened.”

She had no idea. She had none at all. But she couldn't tell Delamore that. She didn't even know if the story was true.

It sounded true. But Delamore had lied before. For all she knew he was some kind of con man, out to get her because he smelled money.

He was watching her, his eyes glittering. She could barely control her expression. She needed to get away.

She stood, still clutching her purse like a school girl.

“Planning to leave? I wouldn't do that if I were you.” His voice had turned cold. A shiver ran down her spine, but she didn't move, just stared down at him unable to turn away.

“One call,” he said softly, “and you'll get picked up by the Nevada police. You should sit down and hear what I have to say.”

Her hands were shaking. She sat, feeling trapped. He had finally hooked her, even though she hadn't said a word.

He leaned forward. “Now listen to me, darling. I know you got the money. I been working this one a long time, and I dug up the records. Michael closed all those accounts right after you disappeared. That's not a coincidence.”

Her mouth was dry. She wanted to swallow, but couldn't.

“Member our talk about money? One of those first nights, here in this bar?”

She was staring at him, her eyes wide and dry as if she'd been driving and staring at the road for hours. It felt like she had forgotten to blink.

“I told you I don't need much, and that's true. But I'm getting tired of dragging people back to their

parole officers or for their court date, or finding husbands who'd skipped out on their families and then getting paid five grand or two grand. Then people question your expenses, like you don't got a right to spend a night in a motel or eat three squares. Or they demand to know why you took so danged long to find someone who'd been hiding so good no cop could find them.”

His voice was so soft she had to strain to hear it. In spite of herself, she leaned forward.

“I'm forty-five years old, doll,” he said. “And I'm getting tired. You got one pretty little scar. Did you notice all the ones I got? On the job. Yours is the first case in a while where I didn't get a beating.” Then he grinned. “At least, not a painful one.”

She flushed, and her fingers tightened on the purse. Her hands were beginning to hurt. Part of her, a part she'd never heard from before, wanted to take that purse and club him in the face. But she didn't move. If she moved, she would lose any control she had.

“So,” he said, “here's the deal. I like you. I didn't expect to, but I do. You're a pretty little thing, and smart as a whip, and this is probably going to be the only crime you'll ever commit, because you're one of those girls who just knows better, aren't you?”

She held her head rigidly, careful so that he wouldn't take the most subtle movement for a nod.

“And I think you got a damn fine deal here. The house is nice—lots of light—and the town obviously suits you. I met those friends of yours, the ball-buster and the one who thinks she's God's Gift to Men, and I gotta say it's clear why you left.”

Her nails dug into the leather. Pain shot through the tender skin at the top of her fingers.

“I really don't wanna ruin your life. It's time I make a change in mine. You give me fifty grand, and I'll bury everything I found about you.”

“Fifty thousand dollars?” Her voice was raspy with tension. “For the first payment?”

His eyes sparkled. “One-time deal.”

She snorted. She knew better. Blackmailers never worked like that.

“And maybe I'll stick around. Get to know you a little better. I could fall in love with that house myself.”

“Could you?” she asked, amazed at the dry tone she'd managed to maintain.

“Sure.” He grinned. That had been the look that had made her go weak less than a week ago. Now it sent a chill through her. “You and me, we had something.”

“Yeah,” she said. “A one-night stand.”

He laughed. “It could be more than that, darlin'. It took you long enough, but you might've just found Mr. Right.”

“Seems to me you were the one who was searching.” She stood. He didn't protest, and she was glad. She had to leave. If she stayed any longer, she'd say something she would regret.

She tucked her purse under her arm. “I assume the drink's on you,” she said, and then she walked away.

He didn't follow her—at least not right away. And she drove in circles before going home, watching for his car behind hers, thinking about everything he had said. Thinking about her break, her freedom, the

things she had done to create a new life.

The things that now made her look guilty of a crime she hadn't committed.

* * * *

She didn't sleep, of course. She couldn't. Her mind was too full—and her bed was no longer a private place. He'd been there, and some of him remained, a shadow, a laugh. After an hour of tossing and turning, she moved to the guest room and sat on the edge of the brand new unused mattress, clutching a blanket and thinking.

It was time to find out what had happened. Delamore knew who she was. She couldn't pretend any more. But he wasn't ready to turn her in. That gave her a little time.

She took a shower, made herself a pot of coffee, and a sandwich which she ate slowly. Then she went to her office, sat down in front of her computer and hesitated. The moment she logged on was the moment that all her movements could be traced. The moment she couldn't turn back from.

But she could testify to the conversation she'd had with Delamore, and the bartender would back her up. She wouldn't be able to hide her own identity should the police come for her, and so there was no reason to lie. She would simply say that she was concerned about her former business partner. She wanted to know if any of what Delamore told her was true.

It wouldn't seem like a confession to anyone but him.

She logged on, and used a search engine to find the news.

It didn't take her long. Amazing how many newspapers were on-line. Michael's death created quite a scandal in Racine, and the pictures of her office—the bloody mess still visible inside—were enough to make the ham on rye that she'd had a few moments ago turn in her stomach.

Michael. He'd been a good accountant. Thorough, exacting. Nervous. Always so nervous, afraid of making any kind of mistake.

Embezzlement? Why would he do that?

But that was what the papers had said. She dug farther, found the follow-up pieces. He'd raised cash, using clients' accounts, to bilk the company of a small fortune.

And Delamore was right. The dates matched up. Michael had stolen from her own clients to pay her for her own business. He had bought the business with stolen money.

She bowed her head, listening to the computer hum, counting her own breaths. She had never once questioned where he had gotten the money. She had figured he'd gotten a loan, had thought that maybe he'd finally learned the value of savings.

Michael. The man who took an advance on his paycheck once every six months. Michael, who had once told her he was too scared to invest on his own.

I wouldn't trust my own judgement, he had said.

Oh, the poor man. He had been right.

The trail did lead to her. The only reason Delamore couldn't point at her exactly was because she had stashed the cash in a blind account. And she hadn't touched it.

Not yet.

She'd been living entirely off her own savings, letting the money from the sale of her business draw interest. The nest egg for the future she hadn't planned yet.

Delamore wanted fifty thousand dollars from her. To give that to him, she'd have to tap the nest egg.

How many times would he make her tap it again? And again? Until it was gone, of course. Into his pocket. And then he'd turn her in.

She wiped her hand on her jeans. It was a nervous movement, meant to calm herself down. She had to think.

If the cops could trace her, they would have. They either didn't have enough on her or hadn't made the leap that Delamore had. And then she had confirmed his leap with the conversation tonight.

She got up and walked away from the computer. She wouldn't let him intrude. He had already taken over her bedroom. She needed to have a space here, in her office, without him.

There was no mention of her in the papers, nothing that suggested she was involved. The police would have contacted the Reno police if they had known where she was. Even if they had hired Delamore to track her, they might still not have been informed about her whereabouts. Delamore wanted money more than he wanted to inform the authorities about where she was.

Grace sat down in the chair near the window. The shade was drawn, but the spot was soothing nonetheless.

The police weren't her problem. Delamore was.

She already knew that he wouldn't be satisfied with one payment. She had to find a way to get rid of him.

She bowed her head. Even though she had done nothing criminal she was thinking like one. How did a woman get rid of a man she didn't want? She could get a court order, she supposed, forcing him to stay away from her. She could refuse to pay him and let the cards fall where they might. Years of legal hassle, maybe even an arrest. She would certainly lose her job. No casino would hire her, and she couldn't fall back on her CPA skills, not after being arrested for embezzlement.

Ignoring him wasn't an option either.

Then, there was the act of desperation. She could kill him. Somehow. She had always thought that murderers weren't methodical enough. Take an intelligent person, have her kill someone in a thoughtful way, and she would be able to get away with the crime.

Everywhere but in her own mind. No matter how hard she tried, no matter how much he threatened her, she couldn't kill Delamore.

There had to be another option. She had to do something. She just wasn't sure what it was.

She went back to the computer and looked at the last article she had downloaded. Michael had stolen from people she had known for years. People who had trusted her, believed in her and her word. People who had thought she had integrity.

She frowned. What must they think of her now? That she was an embezzler too? After all those years of work, did she want that behind her name?

Then again, why should she care about people she would never see again?

But she would see them every time she closed her eyes. Elderly Mrs. Vezzetti and her poodle, trusting Grace to handle her account because her husband, God rest his soul, had convinced her that numbers were too much for her pretty little head. Mr. Heitzkey who couldn't balance a checkbook if his life depended on it. Ms. Andersen, who had taken Grace's advice on ways to legally hide money from the IRS—and who had seemed so excited when it worked.

Grace sighed.

There was only one way to make this right. Only one way to clear her conscience and to clear Delamore out of her life.

She had to turn herself in.

* * * *

She did some more surfing as she ate breakfast and found discount tickets to Chicago. She had to buy them from roundtrip Chicago to Reno (God bless the casinos for their cheap airfare deals) and fly only the Reno to Chicago leg. Later she would buy another set, and not use part of it. Both of those tickets were cheaper than buying a single round-trip ticket out of Reno to Racine.

Grace made the reservation, hoping that Delamore wasn't tracking round trips that started somewhere else, and then she went to work. She claimed a family emergency, got a leave of absence, and hoped it would be enough.

She liked the world she built here. She didn't want to lose it because she hadn't been watching her back.

Twenty-four hours later, she and the car she rented in O'Hare were in Racine. The town hadn't changed. More churches than she saw out west, a few timid billboards for Native American Casinos, a factory outlet mall, and bars everywhere. The streets were grimy with the last of the sand laid down during the winter snow and ice. The trees were just beginning to bud, and the flowers were poking through the rich black dirt.

It felt as if she had gone back in time.

She wondered if she should call Alex and Carole, and then decided against it. What would she say to them, anyway? Instead, she checked into a hotel, unpacked, ate a mediocre room service meal, and slept as if she were dead.

Maybe in this city, she was.

* * * *

The district attorney's office was smaller than Grace's bathroom. There were four chairs, not enough for her, her lawyer, the three assistant district attorneys and the DA himself. She and her lawyer were allowed to sit, but the assistant DAs hovered around the bookshelves and desk like children who were waiting for their father to finish business. The DA himself sat behind a massive oak desk that dwarfed the tiny room.

Grace's lawyer, Maxine Jones, was from Milwaukee. Grace had done her research before she arrived and found the best defense attorney in Wisconsin. Grace knew that Maxine's services would cost her a lot—but Grace was gambling that she wouldn't need Maxine for more than a few days.

Maxine was a tall, robust woman who favored bright colors. In contrast she wore debutante jewelry—a simple gold chain, tiny diamond earrings—that accented her toffee-colored skin. The entire look made her seem both flamboyant and powerful, combinations that Grace was certain helped Maxine in court.

“My client,” Maxine was saying, “came here on her own. You'll have to remember that, Mr. Lindstrom.”

Harold Lindstrom, the district attorney, was in his fifties, with thinning gray hair and a runner's thinness. His gaze held no compassion as it fell on Grace.

“Only because a bounty hunter hired by the police department found her,” Lindstrom said.

“Yes,” Maxine said. “We'll concede that the bounty hunter was the one who informed her of the charges. But that's all. This man hounded her, harassed her, and tried to extort money out of her, money she did not have.”

“Then she should have gone to the Reno police,” Lindstrom said.

An assistant DA crossed her arms as if this discussion was making her uncomfortable. It was making Grace uncomfortable. Never before had she been discussed as if she weren't there.

“It was easier to come here,” Maxine said. “My client has a hunch, which if it's true, will negate the charges you have against her and against Michael Holden.”

“Mr. Holden embezzled from his clients with the assistance of Ms. Reinhart.”

“No. Mr. Holden followed standard procedure for the accounting firm.”

“Embezzlement is standard procedure?” Lindstrom was looking directly at Grace.

Maxine put her manicured hand on Grace's knee, a reminder to remain quiet.

“No. But Mr. Holden, for reasons we don't know, decided to end his life, and since he now worked alone, no one knew where he was keeping the clients' funds. My client,” Maxine added, as if she expected Grace to speak, “would like you to drop all charges against her and to charge Mr. Delamore with extortion. In exchange, she will testify against him, and she will also show you where the money is.”

“Where she hid it, huh?” Lindstrom said. “No deal.”

Maxine leaned forward. “You don't have a crime here. If you don't bargain with us, I'll go straight to the press, and you'll look like a fool. It seems to me that there's an election coming up.”

Lindstrom's eyes narrowed. Grace held her breath. Maxine stared at him as if they were all playing a game of chicken. Maybe they were.

“Here's the deal,” he said, “if her information checks out, then we'll drop the charges. We can't file against Delamore because the alleged crimes were committed in Nevada.”

Maxine's hand left Grace's knee. Maxine templed her fingers and rested their painted tips against her chin. “Then, Harold, we'll simply have to file a suit against the city and the county for siccing him on my client. A multi-million dollar suit. We'll win, too. Because she came forward the moment she learned of a problem. She hasn't been in touch with anyone from here. Her family is dead, and her friends were never close. She had no way of knowing what was happening a thousand miles away until a man you people sent started harassing her.”

“You said he's been harassing you for a month,” Lindstrom said to Grace. “Why didn't you come

forward before now?"

Grace looked at Maxine who nodded.

"Because," Grace said, "he didn't show me any proof of his claims until the night before I flew out. You can ask the bartender at the Silver Dollar. He saw the entire thing."

Lindstrom frowned at Maxine. "We want names and dates."

"You'll get them," Maxine said.

Lindstrom sighed. "All right. Let's hear it."

Grace's heart was pounding. Here was her moment. She suddenly found herself hoping they would all believe her. She had never lied with so much at stake before.

"Go ahead, Grace," Maxine said softly.

Grace nodded. "We had run into some trouble with our escrow service. Minor stuff, mostly rudeness on the part of the company. It was all irritating Michael. Many things were irritating him at that time, but we weren't close, so I didn't attribute it to anything except work."

The entire room had become quiet. She felt slightly light-headed. She was forgetting to breathe. She forced herself to take a deep breath before continuing.

"In the week that I was leaving, Michael asked me how he could go about transferring everything from one escrow company to another. It required a lot of paperwork, and he didn't trust the company we were with. I thought he should have let them and the new company handle it, but he didn't want to."

She squeezed her hands together, reminded herself not to embellish too much. A simple lie was always best.

"We had accounts we had initially set up for clients in discreet banks. I told Michael to go to one of those banks, place the money in accounts there, and then when the new escrow accounts were established, to transfer the money to them. I warned him not to take longer than a day in the intermediate account."

"We have no record of such an account," the third district attorney said.

Grace nodded. "That's what I figured when I heard that he was being charged with embezzlement. I can give you the names of all the banks and the numbers of the accounts we were assigned. If the money's in one of them, then my name is clear."

"Depending on when the deposit was made," Lindstrom said. "And if the money's all there."

Grace's lightheadedness was growing. She hadn't realized how much effort bluffing took. But she did know she was covered on those details at least.

"You may go through my client's financial records," Maxine said. "All of her money is accounted for."

"Why wouldn't he have transferred the money to the new escrow accounts quickly, like you told him to?" Lindstrom asked.

"I don't know," Grace said.

"Depression is a confusing thing, Harold," Maxine said. "If he's like other people who've gotten very

depressed, I'm sure things slipped. I'm sure this wasn't the only thing he failed to do. And you can bet I'd argue that in court.”

“Why did you leave Racine so suddenly?” Lindstrom asked. “Your friends say you just vanished one night.”

Grace let out a small breath. On this one she could be completely honest. “I had a scare. I thought I had breast cancer. The lumpectomy results came in the day I left. You can check with my doctor. I was planning to go after that—maybe a month or more—but I felt so free, that I just couldn't go back to my work. Something like that changes you, Mr. Lindstrom.”

He grunted as if he didn't believe her. For the first time in the entire discussion, she felt herself get angry. She clenched her fingers so hard that her nails dug into her palms. She wouldn't say any more, just like Maxine had told her to.

“The banks?” Lindstrom asked.

Grace slipped a small leather-bound ledger toward him. She had spent a lot of time drawing that up by hand in different pens. She hoped it would be enough.

“The accounts are identified by numbers only. That's one of the reasons we liked the banks. If he started a new account, I won't know its number.”

“If they're in the U.S., then we can get a court order to open them,” Lindstrom said.

“Check these numbers first. Most of the accounts were inactive.” She had to clutch her fingers together to keep them from trembling.

“All right,” Lindstrom said and stood. Maxine and Grace stood as well. “If we discover that you're wrong—about anything—we'll arrest you, Ms. Reinhart. Do you understand?”

Grace nodded.

Maxine smiled. “We're sure you'll see it our way, Harold. But remember your promise. Get that creep away from Grace.”

“Right now, your client's the one we're concerned with, Maxine.” Lindstrom's cold gaze met Grace's. “I'm sure we'll be in touch.”

* * * *

Grace thought the eight o'clock knock on her hotel room door was room service. She'd ordered another meal from them, unable to face old haunts and old friends. Until she had come back, she had never even been in a hotel in Racine, so she felt as if she weren't anywhere near her old home. Now if she could only get the different local channels on the television set, her own delusion would be complete.

She undid the locks, opened the door, and stepped away so that the waiter could bring his cart/table inside.

Instead, Delamore pulled the door back. She was so surprised to see him that she didn't try to close him out. She scuttled away from him toward the nightstand, and fumbled behind her back for the phone.

His cheeks were red, and his eyes sparkling with fury. His anger was so palpable, she could feel it across the room.

“What kind of game are you playing?” he snapped, slamming the door closed.

She got the phone off the hook without turning around. “No game.”

“It is a game. You got away from me, and then you come here, telling them that I've been threatening you.”

“You have been threatening me.” Her fingers found the bottom button on the phone—which she hoped was “O” If the hotel operator heard this, she'd have to call security.

“Of course I'd been threatening you! It's my job. You didn't want to come back here and I needed to drag you back. Any criminal would see that as a threat.”

“Here's what you don't understand,” Grace said as calmly as she could. “I'm not a criminal.”

“Bullshit.” Delamore took a step toward her. She backed up farther and the end table hit her thighs. Behind her she thought she heard a tinny voice ask a muted question. The operator, she hoped.

Grace held up a hand. “Come any closer and I'll scream.”

“I haven't done anything to you. I've been trying to catch you.”

She frowned. What was he talking about? And then she knew. The police had put a wire on him. The conversation was being taped. And they—he—was hoping that she'd incriminate herself.

“You're threatening me now,” she said. “I haven't done anything. I talked to the DA today. I explained my situation and what I think Michael did. He's checking my story now.”

“Your lies.”

“No,” Grace said. “You're the one who's lying, and I have no idea why.”

“You bitch.” He lowered his voice the angrier he got. Somehow she found that even more threatening.

“Stay away from me.”

“Stop the act, Grace,” he said. “It's just you and me. And we both know you're not afraid of anything.”

Then the door burst open and two hotel security guards came in. Delamore turned and as he did, Grace said, “Oh, thank God. This man came into my room and he's threatening me.”

The guards grabbed him. Delamore struggled, but the guards held him tightly. He glared at her. “You're lying again, Grace.”

“No,” she said and stepped away from the phone. He glanced down at the receiver, on its side on the table, and cursed. Even if he hadn't been wired, she had a witness

The guards dragged him and Grace sank onto the bed, placing her head in her hands. She waited until the shaking stopped before she called Maxine.

* * * *

Grace had been right. Delamore had been wearing a wire, and her ability to stay cool while he attacked had preserved her story. That incident, plus the fact that the DA's office had found the money exactly where she had said it would be, in the exact amount that they had been looking for, went a long way

toward preserving her credibility. When detectives interviewed Michael's friends one final time, they all agreed he was agitated and depressed, but he would tell no one why. Without the embezzlement explanation, it simply sounded as if he were a miserable man driven to the brink by personal problems.

She had won, at least on that score. Her old clients would get their money back, and they would be off her conscience. And nothing, not even Delamore, would take their place.

Delamore was under arrest, charged with extortion, harassment, and attempting to tamper with a witness. Apparently, he'd faced similar complaints before, but they had never stuck. This time, it looked as if they would.

Grace would have to return to Racine to testify against him. But not for several months. And maybe, Maxine said, not even then. The hope was that Delamore would plea and save everyone the expense of a trial.

So, on her last night in Racine, perhaps forever, Grace got enough courage to call Alex and Carole. She didn't reach either of them; instead she had to leave a message on their voice mail, asking them to meet her at Oh Kaye's one final time.

Grace got there first. The place hadn't changed at all. There was still a jukebox in the corner and cocktail waitresses in short skirts and ankle boots with big heels. Tin stars and Wild West art on the walls, unstained wood and checkered tablecloths adding to the effect. High bar stools and a lot of lonely people.

Grace ignored them. She sashayed to the bar, slapped her hand on it, and ordered whiskey neat. A group of suits at a nearby table ogled her and she turned away.

She was there to diss men not to meet them.

Carole arrived first, black miniskirt, tight crop top, and cigarette in hand. She looked no different. She hugged Grace so hard that Grace thought her ribs would crack.

"Alex had me convinced you were dead."

Grace shook her head. "I was just sleeping around."

Carole grinned. "Fun, huh?"

Grace thought. The night had been fun. The aftermath hadn't been. But her life was certainly more exciting. She didn't know if the tradeoff was worth it.

Alex arrived a moment later. Her auburn hair had grown, and she was wearing boots beneath a long dress. The boots made her look even taller.

She didn't hug Grace.

"What the hell's the idea?" Alex snapped. "You vanished—kapoof! What kind of friend does that?"

In the past, Grace would have stammered something, then told Alex she was exactly right and Grace was wrong. This time, Grace set her whiskey down.

"I told you about my lumpectomy," Grace said. "You didn't care. I was scared. I told you that, and you didn't care. When I found out I didn't have cancer, I called you to celebrate, and you didn't care. Seems to me you vanished first."

Alex's cheeks were red. Carole stubbed her cigarette in an ashtray on the bar's wooden rail.

"Not fair," Alex said.

"That's what I thought," Grace said.

Carole looked from one to the other. Finally, she said, very softly, "I really missed you, Gracie."

"I thought some misogynistic asshole picked you up and killed you," Alex said.

"Could have happened," Grace said. "Maybe it nearly did."

"Here?" Carole asked. "At Oh Kaye's?"

Grace shook her head. "It's a long story. Are you both finally ready to listen to me?"

Carole tugged her miniskirt as if she could make it longer. "I want to hear it."

Alex picked up Grace's whiskey and tossed it back. Then she wiped off her mouth. "What did I tell you, Grace? Women always tolerate misogyny. You should have fought him off."

"I did," Grace said.

Alex's eyes widened. Carole laughed. "Our Gracie has grown up."

"No," Grace said. "I've always been grown-up. You're just noticing now."

"There's a story here," Alex said, slipping her arm through Grace's, "and I think I need to hear it."

"Me, too." Carole put her arm around Grace's shoulder. "Tell us about your adventures. I promise we'll listen."

Grace sighed. She'd love to tell them everything, but if she did, she'd screw up the case against Delamore. "Naw," Grace said. "Let's just have some drinks and talk about girl things."

"You gotta promise to tell us," Alex said.

"Okay," Grace said. "I promise. Now how about some whiskey?"

"Beer," Alex said.

"You see that cute guy over there?" Carole asked, pointing at the suits.

Grace grinned. Already, her adventure was forgotten. Nothing changed here at Oh Kaye's. Nothing except Cowboy Grace, who'd finally bellied up to the bar.

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