

A woman with a classic 1930s hairstyle, wearing a black dress, black gloves, and a pearl necklace. She is looking upwards and to the left. The background is a dark, patterned wallpaper.

*Paula's
Place*

Part 1:
SEDUCTION

James Wood

Paula's Place, part 1: Seduction
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Adult Content Warning

This story contains sexually explicit acts involving consenting adults. It is not intended for minors under the age of eighteen.

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Chapter 1 – Grand Falls

I write this as a testament to a time I will never forget. Little did I think, when I returned to Grand Falls, that my life would utterly change. Where once I was hollow, now I am full. Where I doubted of the existence of love, now it holds me tight in its grip. I am no longer the innocent girl; I am blissful, complete, and knowing. He has opened my eyes to the world. I am his and I have flowered.

Yet before you can hope to understand of what I speak, we must return to the beginning. Back to when I stepped from the train into the town where I grew up.

“Is that everything, Paula?”

Aunt Emily, who had looked after me always, meant no meanness by her question. She tried vainly to hide the concern she must have felt over my request to come and stay with her – in the circumstances there had been very little notice. We traded kisses on the cheek as we’d done since I was a child.

“Yes, Em. Just the suitcase. I might go back and get a few things, but this is all I need for the moment.” Just seeing her made me feel better.

Em tried not to pry on the ride home. I spared her by volunteering the story.

I had left him; that’s what happened. My life was not how it was meant to work out. We’d met at college and lived together in the city where I’d fought to start a career. The years ticked by; how does that happen? Looking back, I suppose I had been waiting for him to drop the question. I just assumed it would be that way.

“Definitely over then?” Em probed gently.

“I don’t know what I saw in him. Wasted all those years.” Em had something of a smile about her now and seemed much cheerier than she’d been since she collected me. “What? Now you’re going to tell me you never liked him from the start?”

“Sometimes things work out for the best, dear. You can stay as long as you like.”

I got my old room back. It had changed a bit since high school; Em had taken the posters down and had someone paint the walls.

“There are fresh towels in the closet. I’ll go down and start on lunch.”

Our house is on Vale Street, which isn’t so remarkable except that in Grand Falls that makes it old – our street being one of the very few to escape the town’s big fire. Our house is a fine one, too. They call it a Gothic design. I’m never sure if “gothic” needs to be capitalized, but the house is so twisty and spired it deserves one regardless. Em takes a pride in its gardens. When I was growing up all my friends loved to play in it – so many good places to hide.

There is a park outside our house, one block wide and three long. It has been there forever. The trees are old and the shade is inviting on hot sticky summer days. I guess looking at that park I knew I was right to come back here and start again. That’s what home is for. Em called me down and I went.

I don’t know what brought it on. I hadn’t had thoughts like that in years. I suppose it was seeing the park again, and it being my first night away from the city.

I had gone to bed. I had turned out the light after reading a bit, and the house was completely quiet. I had left the window open and through it could see the moon; its light fell over my sheets.

I lay back, keenly aware of the stirring in my body. I pulled my knees up so my feet lay flat and I let my knees fall open. I stretched my arms above my head and gripped the bed rail tightly. There was an awareness in my body, a growing murmur that needed satisfaction and would not go away. I didn't want it to. For the first time in a long time, I ached to be touched and held.

Sex had been one of the problems we'd had, I see that now. It was an unspoken thing at the end. It wasn't that we didn't do it, but I felt bad for wanting more. He'd always go on top. He wouldn't kiss me; I'd have liked that. One time I talked to him about things I'd like to try, but once proved one time too many. I didn't dare tell him of the dreams I had. He'd never have understood those. And so the years had passed.

There wasn't much of a breeze, but the window was open and the curtain gave a stir. I pushed the blanket off me and closed my eyes. I moved one hand onto my belly. He was coming again: The Colonel. I could feel him outside the window. I arched my back a little ways and pushed my hand between my thighs. I touched myself on top of my shorts and let out a silent moan.

The dream came in many disguises, but it always started within the park. It was back in the time of the Civil War, and I was out gathering wood for the house. We knew there was a battle looming nearby. I know I'd been told to be careful. Nevertheless, I walked on alone, hidden by trees, fearful for any noise.

In the bed, my right arm stretched high above my head. My fingers wrapped themselves around the bed rail and gripped it like in a storm. My left hand found my waistband and slipped underneath my shorts. With the material against the back of my hand I parted my woman's curls.

There was someone there. I could hear the horse whinny and the underbrush snapping. "Whoa, girl." It was a man's voice, deep and soothing, calming the nervous beast. "What's got you all stirred up?" I was frozen, not knowing whether to run or hide, fearful of discovery at any time. I'd heard stories of rough men and what they did with honest women, and it paralyzed my mind. I could just make him out through the branches: an officer on a fine chestnut mare. His coat was dusty and I couldn't make out whether it was blue or gray. He saw me. He always saw me. And that's when I turned and ran.

I gasped as my fingers spread my lips and stroked the inside of my petals. I released the bed frame to grasp my breast and give myself a squeeze. *Oh, Paula, you dirty girl,* spoke my conscience. Only one night back and then this. But my mind was away with the pursuing Colonel, whose horse would soon overtake me.

I dropped my bundle and sprinted, dashing under branch and behind tree. But my skirts were long and the brush was difficult and I had little hope of escape. I could hear him now, right behind me, the beating of hooves closing in. I fell. I always fell. I started to crawl away.

"What do we have here?" He dismounted. Spurs jangling from his heels. His sword remained in the scabbard on his saddle but a pistol was at his waist. I crawled, frantic, on hand and knee. He took a sore grip of my dark curled hair just as I'd reached a fallen tree.

“Oh, sir. Please, sir, no!” I pleaded, but he put his hand on my mouth to stop me. I bit hard on his fingers only to find he’d gagged me with a leather gauntlet. He took me then, he always took me, he pushed me down on that broken tree. He threw my petticoats over my waist and held my wrists behind my back to tame me.

“You’re going to get it, girl. You’re going to enjoy this. I’m going to fill your belly with my seed and drive you rough, like you’re needing.” Then he put his bare hand between my legs and felt me wet and swollen. He was momentarily surprised, always just for a moment. “You’re no lady! Dirty girl. You’re a filthy trollop. You want it, yes, I can feel it here, I’ve got the proof on my own fingers.” And then he unbuttoned his cavalry breeches and unburdened himself into me.

Until now I had avoided my clitoris: tense and ripe and swollen. But at this point, as the Colonel mounted me, I gave it my full attention.

“Whore, that’s what you are. Wanting a real man’s attentions. I’ll give it to you, hard as you like, that you’ll be dreaming of me with your husband.” He grabbed my hair, tight as cord, and pulled it till I was screaming. But only a muffled mew did I manage through the salty leather I bit on.

He drove me, his flared root invading my belly, over and over and over. He tore at my dress and spilled my breasts and twisted them sore, quite fiercely.

I was there now, my fingers juddering, my womb in spasm, my clitoris ripened to bursting. I lifted my back, my hips clear from the bed, with my breasts pinched by my own stealthy hand. He always came too at this point. He never failed to deliver.

“God. You. Bitch.” He thrust desperately into me then, his breath in suspension; he pressed tightly inside me and trembled. It was that way for moments. Finally, he withdrew. I could feel his semen dripping out of me, running down my thighs. It was undoubtedly collecting on my wool stocking tops, where it would stain them as evidence. He took out a knife and cut my underwear from me, leaving me naked to God. He removed his glove from between my teeth and released his hand from my wrists.

“There you go. You can tell anyone you like; they’ll know what you are. And if you have a child, you bring him up well or I’ll find you and give you a whipping.”

He wiped himself on the hem of my dress and then buttoned himself up and mounted. “What’s your name, whore?” he called down.

“Paula,” I whispered. I had gathered myself up by now.

“You’ll want it again, Paula, another time. I know you will. You know where you can find me.” Then he left me standing alone; he pushed his horse into a canter.

I lay back, flat on the bed, the sheet beneath me damp with sweat. When the trembling stopped I stayed still for a while and listened to the street noise in the darkness. I felt a secret shame, but it was better for that. My secret. It felt wrong and yet right also. I changed into a clean, dry t-shirt and locked this puzzle in my mind away, and the next thing I knew it was morning.

Chapter 2 –The Curious House

It was something like three weeks after my arrival that I was first drawn to the curious house. It was much like ours, a mirror almost, since it faced us across the park. I rarely had a need to walk that way, since the shops and town are east of us, but an anomaly in the way the streets were numbered would mean that we sometimes got their mail.

What happened that night had nothing to do with the mail. It was dark out, but too early for bed. Em and I were arguing over what to watch when there was a loud bang from outside, yet quite near. We couldn't see anything from the living room window, so I went upstairs for a better view. There was a car alarm going off too. There were some people on the street, down the block, but I couldn't make out what was happening. I had seen a pair of binoculars on the landing and went back down to fetch them. I killed the light in my bedroom to see better, but what I saw had me thinking for days.

I didn't mean to spy. I can say that honestly.

Not that first night, anyway.

When I took up the binoculars and focused them in, I caught a glimpse of the house across the street. There, like a reflection of myself, stood a woman looking out, drawn to the noise on the street. But she was naked; leastways her bra had been pulled down, and a man dressed in black stood close behind her. I felt like a peeping Tom and rather shameful of my attentions, yet here was something that I couldn't pull my eyes from. It wasn't just that they were fooling around, but something different was going on. The woman had her hair pinned up and it was clear that she wore a collar. The man held a leash that was attached to it, as if he was walking a dog. He pulled on it as I watched on, and dragged her away from the window.

I could see when she turned that her arms were tied, secured by elaborate coils of rope. Then the man who had started to pull the drapes shut paused and looked my way and squinted. I gasped and pulled back, letting the binoculars drop – their house now seemed far off and dark.

"What's going on outside, Paula?" Em was calling up.

What were they doing? What game were they playing? Why did I feel so aroused?

"Just a car I think." I made it up. "Fender bender, looks like."

"Well, they're disturbing the whole neighbourhood."

Yes, they were.

After that night I kept a vigil. I found my old telescope and its rickety tripod in the attic. Despite its advertisements, it had only ever been good for staring at the moon. This had disappointed me plenty in ninth grade. Now it found a new purpose.

"Who lives in that house opposite, Em? I don't remember there being any kids."

"Which one? In the middle? Beside that one, you mean? Oh, that's number 88. Some author figure bought it a few years back after old Mr. Singer passed on. Keeps to himself, much as I can hear. Mrs. Miller has been looking for a reason to complain about him, but he pays Dobson's boy to do his gardening. She says there are people that come and go at weekends, at weird times too, so she says. But a person's got a right to privacy if they want it, and she should keep her nose out of his business."

I knew Em didn't mean anything by her words, though she'd looked twice at me when I set up the telescope. I couldn't help feel a little guiltier then, seeing as how I'd been checking on him regularly. I was bored, you see – small towns have that way about them – and my imagination had been stirred by that first glimpse. What was the mysterious author up to? What games were being played?

While the leaves were still on the trees, I could only get a clear view of that very top room; the rest of the place was hidden. For the first few nights there was not so much as a light being turned on over there. It wasn't like I was obsessed with it, but I would check before going to bed. A strange thing had started happening to me, and I knew what the cause had been – the Colonel no longer visited me as I lay alone on my bed before sleeping. Instead there came a shadowy figure, a man who was dressed in black. He would chase me through the woods and into the house and catch me as I ran up the staircase. He would tie my arms behind my back. He would loop them together in elaborate strings that looked for all the world like spider web. Then the man in black would put a collar around my neck and lead me by a leash to his chamber. There he would chain me to his bed before he would strip me very slowly. Slowly. Taking his time. Unbuttoning my blouse. Knowing that I was helpless. Sensing a need inside of me that wouldn't let me cry out in alarm. Undoing every button. Then he would lean over me and ...

I startled from my dream. I took my hand out from my panties because I'd seen a light appear. It was the room in the curious house across the street from me. My author had come back again.

I found myself trembling, though I didn't know why; it was the first time I'd seen him clearly. He was alone. He was trim and looked fit – I wasn't complaining – he seemed to be assessing the room. I judged him perhaps five years older than me, which surprised me – I'd pictured him older. He showed strong tanned forearms with his sleeves rolled up, and his arms bulged as he dragged a piece of furniture. His white shirt was tucked into stonewashed jeans that showed a tight hard ass as he wrestled it. His hair was thick and dark and slightly wild, which I had always found very attractive.

Oh, dear, Paula. This isn't good. I admonished myself for being superficial. *He's probably a complete asshole.* But I was touching myself regardless.

Finished with doing whatever he'd come for, he was now leaving the room. The light went out and I caught his silhouette in the doorway just before it closed. The light didn't come on again until Friday.

It was Friday when I was discovered.

When the light went on, their window was blessedly open. My author had brought a woman with him, who wore a snug black dress and heels. She wasn't the same woman as before. I didn't know how that made me feel, but I was interested to know. I'd think about it later. He led her in, holding her hand, and closed the door behind them. In the darkness of my own room, I curled up in my blanket.

He pulled her to him and they embraced; the slut was all over his body. They went on like this for a minute or two, which only stirred my own need cruelly. Then, as I watched, he took over.

It was the way he held her, at first. His hands, which had roamed her sides and back, now slid up her arms and took hold of her. Slowly but firmly, with a hold of her wrists,

he moved her arms behind her back. She looked weak in his grip, like she was floating. He held her wrists with one of his hands while he stroked her now with the other. He kissed her; not upon the mouth, but on her neck and down over her shoulder. Her head fell back as she gave herself up, and his hand touched her leg at her nylons. He turned her a little, so I couldn't see all, but I sensed that his hand was moving. She moved a little to the side and I could see her skirt ride up on her. I knew he was touching her intimately.

I couldn't help but join in; my fingers were frisky, imagining his hand was on me.

By now he had moved her against the far wall, to the spot that I'd seen him clear earlier. Then, to my amazement, he tied her hands and drew them up with a rope to the ceiling. I had to adjust the telescope. I had to see what was going on. He had passed the rope through something in the ceiling that held her arms in a gesture of surrender. She'd been tied up. There was nothing she could do. She couldn't push him away now even if she wanted to.

He turned her to face the wall; it could only be inches away. Now he was saying something into her ear and I saw her spread her feet.

I was swollen. I had a small vibrator I would sometimes use, but I didn't want or need it at this moment. I wanted the longing within my body to build and last as long as possible.

Now, only now did he undress her. He took an age to do it. He stroked her arms with gentle fingers before unfastening the straps at her shoulders. Then the zipper. He traced its fall with little kisses that he planted upon her spine, and when it reached her lower back he let her dress fall down to the floor.

I almost felt sorry for the woman – lucky girl that she was – she must have been squirming in those panties. I could see she'd come prepared for an amorous evening because of the lingerie she was wearing. It was black and sheer – the dirty floozy, tempting him with her bod. She wore black stockings that had a seam down the legs, held in place by an old-fashioned garter belt.

He said something else to her and she stuck out her ass, letting the rope take the weight of her body. He reached down under her now, his hand between her legs, and he seemed to be cradling her vulva.

I didn't know what to do. I was nearly there, but I had to see the end of this. I had pushed two fingers inside of myself; my palm firmly pressed to my labia. I was grinding on my hand as I touched my nipples, and I knew I would dissolve any minute.

Then my author turned. He looked my way as if he could see me in the darkness, impossible though that could be. When his window was dark, I could barely make out a thing, and that was with the telescope. But what if I had judged it wrongly? What if, that first night, he'd caught me peeking? Was he looking out here for me? Was this a show I'd been meant to watch? Was he deliberately showing me everything? Maybe the street lamps were different on this side and threw light in enough to reveal me.

I was momentarily shocked. I took my hands off myself, as if discovered in my shame. I felt undressed and exposed.

There could be no doubt. He walked over to the window and instead of closing the drapes, he pulled them further back. *Have a good look.* Is that what he was saying? *Is this what excites you, my peeker?* Was he smiling?

He turned back to the helpless woman and slid her panties from her. He eased them past her garter belt and down over her nylons and heels. Her ass was exposed and I could

imagine her womanhood: swollen and lustful and eager. He spoke to her again, and then he held her chin as he fed her those expensive panties. He had gagged her. She was made to hold her underwear inside her pretty mouth.

I was enraptured. Was he doing this for me? I renewed my attentions to my own desires, knowing the woman in the room could do nothing.

Then he took off his belt. She didn't struggle as he coiled it around his fist, so I expect she knew what was coming. The leather was thick and wide and loose; it hung down cruelly from his hand. He spoke once more and she stuck out her ass up high as he unbuttoned and rolled up his sleeve. He then reached around and touched her pussy, as if checking whether she was wet. He seemed satisfied. My author raised his arm slowly and then brought it down hard and fast. His victim flinched and bucked with pain but did not change her pose.

I flinched too. I was physically jarred. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. When I found the viewer on the telescope again he'd already given her a few more – there were two or three red marks on her bottom, showing brightly against her skin.

He stopped for a moment and talked to her and held her pussy while he did so. Then he gave her some more, same as before, and I saw the pattern repeated. He would smack her with his leather belt, then touch her and talk close to her ear. Sometimes too he would bend down to kiss the marks that he had made. He caressed her ass, massaging his work, as if to soothe the heat of her skin. And all the while she hung from the ropes to which she was bound, immobilized. Though I could not hear the sounds they made, I empathized with her torment.

He stopped now – I had come long ago – and I watched as he unbuttoned himself. It was clear that he would now slake his desire in the woman he had bound for his pleasure. I didn't know if I could watch, I was so turned on yet burning jealous. In the end I didn't get the choice because he killed the light switch. I was left with my hand on the contours of my lips; I was tender and soaking and breathless.

The next day I saw that blinds had been fitted to the window across the street, and what's more that the drapes were now drawn. It made me tremble because it confirmed my fears that he'd known of me all along. More embarrassing still, and shameful to acknowledge, I found myself wet at the thought.

Chapter 3 – The Author of My Desires

It was my curiosity that led me to do such a risky thing, though frustration might be a better word. The house across the street once again fell silent, and the upper window remained blocked from my prying. In my own defense, I held out nearly four days before taking matters into my hands.

I was walking in the park – there was nothing wrong with that – and if I noticed that the author’s house seemed quiet, then what of it? I notice lots of things. They had an outside mailbox and the flag was up. An outrageous idea occurred to me. I took a brief glance up and down the block – there was no one around to see me. Sometimes fate comes to you. Sometimes you step out and make it.

I opened the mailbox. There were a couple of letters and a handful of useless flyers. They were addressed to the same person: Mr. Maximilian Broekner. It sounded made up. I took the most important looking one sent from Walter Mitty Publishing. It was either a cheque or a bill, hard to tell, but I figured he’d be looking for either. I stuffed the rest back in the mailbox and put the letter into my pocket. It was just neighbourly to return mis-delivered mail. I now had an excuse to drop in on him.

I rang the doorbell. I rang it again. I knew it was a lost cause before the third time. I should have put the letter into my bag and tried my ruse again the next day, but for some reason that day I didn’t. There was a little path around the side of the house that led off into the garden. I followed. It led, as I thought, to the back of the house, where a glass conservatory had been added to the building. Cacti and tropical plants all bloomed beneath its panes. There was no one home that I could see as I glanced in its many windows. I tried the door to the conservatory. It opened and let me in.

A grandfather clock made the only noise; I called out “hello” before going further. At first I hung back near the door till I was certain there weren’t any dogs. Mr. Broekner must do okay. The place must have cost a bundle. It had hardwood floors, just like Aunt Em’s, but it had to be double the size. The place was done in dark wood, the furniture Spartan but expensive-looking. The ceiling must have been twelve feet high and the whole place was open and welcoming. This surprised me. I was used to our house, Aunt Em’s house, and its little rooms. Maybe upstairs was different? I wandered further, and as I did I started to feel a mite nervous. Now a letter in my bag wouldn’t cut it; right now I was breaking and entering. Yet I felt the need to know more about this man, and I was drawn by the lure of his house. I was right about the clock – I found it standing at the bottom of the staircase. Up, up it went. I knew that at the top of those stairs there was a room where all those things I’d seen had happened. My heart was going fast. My lips were slightly parted, my breathing audible through my mouth. What if I heard someone coming in? What would I say or do?

I put my hand on the banister rail and carefully took the first step. I felt my throat tightening and a tingle of expectation. If anyone came in the front door now, I couldn’t make it out the back before them. I told myself I’d only have a look. Just one look and then I’d be gone.

I found his study. That’s what it had to be. It was the first room that I came to on the next floor of the house. There was still one more flight of stairs up. If I was going to find anything about this man, then surely it was here. A minute to have a look in his study and

then upstairs to the top of the place. In less than five minutes, I promised myself, I'd be back outside and safe.

The image of him I held in my mind was one for which I wanted some confirmation. He had appeared as a black shadow the first time, pulling on that woman's collar. Then he was tousled dark hair and strong tanned arms when he whipped that tied-up woman. I felt Mr. Broekner becoming clearer; I felt I was getting closer. I looked, but there weren't any pictures. I was a little disappointed at that.

There were books. There were shelves and shelves of books. And there was one of those fancy Apple computers. I resisted turning it on. I looked instead at the titles on the shelves for a clue to the man I had seen. There were reference books and classical fiction but one shelf in particular drew my attention. On it was the sort of heated fiction I had leafed through for excitement. Some books were very familiar: Anais Nin's *Little Birds*, *Fanny* by Erica Jong, a great number of Henry Miller. *Nine and a Half Weeks* by Elizabeth McNeill and Anne Rice's *The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty*. I'd riffled through that as a teenager in the library, hiding away at the back. The whispered words, the intimate touching, the rope and collars and leash – all of these things seemed more present and real in the library Mr. Broekner was keeping.

I turned to leave when my attention was drawn to a slim book on the desk itself. It was a paperback, thin and fanned as if recently opened and read. I picked it up. *The Doctrine of Venus* by a Dr. Edgar Haldrew. I'd never heard of it before. It felt old, and its pages browned. The book fell open on a page discussing the rules for collaring your lover. There were explicit pictures. They looked Victorian, but they made me blush all the same. I put it down. Collaring your lover. Was that what Mr. Broekner was doing up there with those women? The stripped girl with the strap around her neck and her arms tied elaborately behind her back? Was she being collared? Whatever that meant. I felt a groan from inside my womb, a desire that went unmet.

I went back to the stairs.

Slowly, slowly now. Somehow as I got closer to that place, I had to creep inch-like to the edge. I went up the stairs as I might draw near a cliff, in awe of the majestic risk. I had my bearings, there was no doubt. The room in which I'd witnessed these things was right in front of me now. I reached a hand out to the handle and started to turn the knob.

There was a noise downstairs.

A door opened and then closed heavily. The front door! There was the loud tread of confident feet. Someone was here! Someone was home. I heard footsteps on the stairs approaching.

I froze. I didn't know what to do. I was terrified and shaking. I knew I would be seen from below if I stayed where I was any longer. I turned the handle and went into the room, closing the door behind me. I had nowhere else to hide! I was trapped in the place I'd come to see. I might be discovered at any time.

It was dark. The drapes were drawn, of course, but there was muted light to see by. I didn't dare try for the light switch. I crouched down behind the door and listened with my ear.

Someone was coming. He was coming! It had to be him.

What was I going to say to him, what could I do to explain? I was so scared and it reminded me suddenly of my time when the Colonel was there. I felt the same sense of panic, the frightened mouse in my chest. I didn't want to breathe for risk of discovery,

but there was no way of escape I could see. If I didn't move, if I didn't make a sound, would the noise in the woods go away? What was I thinking? Why had I come here? Why was I there? And the noise didn't go away. The noise came closer and closer. My heart filled my throat and I thought I would faint as I heard footsteps mounting the stairs.

Paula, you fool, this is it!

The man – it was definitely a man – stopped outside the door. He waited for a second, his hand perhaps on the handle, then he turned and went into the room next to mine.

I breathed out hard, almost sobbing with relief. I had been momentarily spared my discovery. I had sunk to my knees. I reached up to steady myself on the handle of the door. My hand felt something else instead, and I flinched it away.

There was a rattle, a faint rattle. I had inadvertently knocked something that was hanging off the wall. I'd made a noise; not much of a noise, but out of place in a vacant room. I put my hands up to steady its swing, and when I did so I knew what I was touching: manacles and rope and chains; that's what I had bumped into.

They were here. It had been real. This wasn't a made-up thing. My hands closed around the bracelets that had locked that woman's arms. She had worn them, been strung up in them, while the author had taken her manfully. I must be kneeling where her feet had been as he had posed her for her thrashing. She had stood where I was, unable to get away, gagged with her own lace panties. They would have been moist from her own juices, dripping with her shame. I knew her desire, for I felt the same, the longing to be taken. My envy returned once again. He had seized her and tied her and whipped her and fucked her, all in this very room. I pressed myself, despite myself, and then found the door handle to escape.

Please don't hear. Please don't hear.

I begged the fates he had not heard the disturbance. I eased the handle, aching slowly, so as not to squeak the hinges. The coast was clear – or so I thought.

The light went on in the room. I spun around. He was standing behind me, looking at me, from a second door to an adjoining room.

"Who are you? What are you doing here? You little thief! Get the hell out my place!"

I ran, I sprinted. I took the stairs two at a time. I could hear him now, right behind me, his feet pounding like galloping hooves. I fell on the first landing. I always fall. I started to crawl away.

"What do we have here?"

I crawled, frantic, on hand and knee. He took a sore grip of my dark curled hair just as I'd reached the next set of stairs.

"Oh, sir. Please, sir, no!" I pleaded, but he put his hand on my mouth to stop me. I bit hard on his fingers only to find he'd gagged me ...

"Jesus Christ! You bit me."

There was no leather gauntlet. Somehow I thought ... He pulled his hand from his mouth. I could see his fingers were bleeding.

"No, no. Please." I fought him. He pinned me down and forced my arms behind my back.

"What are you? Some junkie thief? Breaking into houses." He was on top of me now, pinning me down, but then his hard voice suddenly changed. "Wait a minute." He

pushed my hair aside so he could see the side of my face. "I know you. I know who you are. You're that girl from across the street."

He let me go. I don't know what was worse. Being caught for a thief or recognized. He knew me!

"You care to explain yourself, young lady?" He wrapped his hand in a handkerchief and then helped me to get up. "Are you hurt? A fellow might have killed someone they found sneaking around their house."

"I'm okay." In truth, I was a little winded and my scalp was sore where he'd pulled my hair. I became weak recalling his formidable strength as he had pinned me to the floor. His body had been as hard as iron pressing against my own.

"Just you rest a second. I can fetch you a glass of water. Jeez, you bite like a crocodile. And what are you doing here?"

"I'm Paula," I said sheepishly.

I'm not normally a weak girl, but his presence and the embarrassment of being caught sneaking into his house made me want to curl up and disappear.

"I know who you are, Paula. Mrs. Miller gave away your name. But tell me why I shouldn't call the police or hand you over to your Aunt Em."

"Oh, don't do that!" I was sincerely worried. How could I explain this to her?

"No? You don't want that? Well, you're a curious thing. First peeking through windows and now breaking in."

I must have blushed.

"You've got a very pretty color to your face when you blush. Are you sure that I didn't hurt you?" He ran the back of his finger across my cheek bone, and something in me melted.

"Not for saying? Okay. Well, maybe you're shaken. I tell you what. I'll offer you a deal, but if you don't take it I'm handing you in."

"What is it?" I was so naïve.

"I'm going to take you out to dinner. I'm going to pick you up tomorrow at eight."

"Eight?"

"That's right. We'll go somewhere nice. You can tell me all about this then. But if you say no or if you stand me up, I'm setting the dogs out on you." He had an irrepressible smile.

I was almost out the door, ready to flee, when I remembered the letter. I dug in my bag for a couple of seconds then thrust the envelope into his hand. "Here," I said. My face must have been scarlet. I turned from my captor and ran.

And that's how I met Max Broekner, a pen name for many dark things. That's how I landed my first date with him, which was the start of everything else.

Chapter 4 – A Date with Destiny

I hadn't been on a date in ... I forget. High school, of course, and the first year in college – I was a busy girl then – but after my sophomore year I was pretty much going steady. Way back. Too long maybe. Obviously, I guess. My guts were turning, but it wasn't out of fear that Max would turn me in. That's not why I was nervous. If I'm honest it was something else. It wasn't even my wardrobe, though that was a problem to fix. I was going on a date that evening, somewhere nice even, and I didn't have a thing to wear. Most of my stuff was still in the city, and though I love Aunt Em, "farmer's wife" was not the look I was hoping to make. I was going to have to do my best.

I lucked out in one of those discount stores that sells the designer stuff the big stores can't shift. I tried not to think of how many women had passed on the wrap dress before it ended up in my hands. I liked it, though. In fact it was perfect. It hugged me through my chest and waist and was loose down to my knees. It was short-sleeved with a splash of cleavage and was open at the neck. Not too much, but enough. I was old enough already to know my charms and wise enough not to oversell them. With that dress I could get away without a jacket and the purse I had would match. I considered my flats, but I scored a pair of new pumps that I knew would show my legs well. They were a little high for my regular tastes, but I didn't want to look frumpy. I picked up fresh nylons; I don't often wear them, but I had a bruise come up on one knee. I bought a new lipstick, too. If there was going to be any kissing going on, it wouldn't be in Aunt Em's Avon chapstick. I came home from the stores very pleased.

"You look cheery. Going out tonight?" Aunt Em's radar was on.

"I've got a date, actually. Sorry, I won't be home for dinner. I'm being picked up at eight."

"Anyone I know?"

"That author man, actually, from across the street. I met him returning a letter."

"Reeeeeeeallllly," she drawled. Her eyebrows were up in her hair.

After I showered I put on scent. I don't normally wear perfume, but tonight I felt I was somebody different. I was turning a page. I put a dab on my wrist, then rubbed it on my neck; then, after a thought, smeared a little behind my knees and between my legs and breasts. *Paula, you slut*, I told myself. *What are you getting yourself into?* It might have been too much, it *was* too much – Aunt Em would never approve.

I picked out my silver choker necklace, a present for a birthday. It was a solid band that fit snug and tight around the middle of my neck – did it look a little bit like a collar? I remembered the book in Mr. Broekner's study. I wondered if he'd notice such things.

He was right on time. I'd been standing in the hall for ten minutes.

"Hello."

"Hi."

"You look great."

"Thanks."

"I'm glad you decided to come."

"I'm glad you asked. Beats the hell out of the police station."

He held the car door for me and closed it when I got in. I couldn't help thinking that the gesture was a little old-fashioned, but I liked it all the same. It was sort of like him: a

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