

Henrietta

By Patricia M Jackson

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To Leo, Henrietta, Genevieve and Lenora

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Prologue

The sky was a pale blue background with a bright mix of green leaves shimmering amongst tree branches whirling in a kaleidoscope of verdant hues over her head. She breathed in the sweet smell of fresh-mown grass in the dazzling light of the late afternoon spring day. She relished the breathless feeling of inhaling deeply, relaxing and losing herself in the whirling sensation of the merry-go-round when you lay back on the decking, reflecting on the world as it goes by around you. But, too, she knew if she did it for too long, she'd get that queasy feeling in her stomach and potentially lose everything she'd eaten that day. So she quickly sat up, got to her feet and climbed off the machinery, stumbling slightly to right herself to the equilibrium of the steady world, before collapsing on a nearby bench.

This was truly fun: basking in the joy of still technically being a child, not quite a teenager. Moments like this would be harder and harder to steal as she grew older. Beaumont had such a nice playground in the little square-block park kitty-corner from her grandmother's house with its white picket fence. She loved coming here when her family was visiting. But it was far more fun when there were other kids in the small-town park. And her "playmate" seemed like a nice girl, although she was a few years younger.

"Etta, the tire swing is free now! Do you wanna come and swing with me?" The younger girl in the park called out to her.

"Sure. I'm coming." She ran quickly over to the 4-foot wide tire suspended by 4 lengths of chains, which hung from an overhead pulley.

"My uncle made this tire-swing for the park. I think it's the best thing here." Peggy, her friend for the afternoon, tucked her feet up inside the rim of the tire and kicked off to start the tire spinning. Oh, no, not spinning again so soon. Maybe this wasn't the best idea.

"It's a pretty nice tire swing, Peggy, but I think I might have had too much spinning for a while. Can we maybe try something that doesn't go around? Wanna play in the sand awhile?"

"Sure. That's fine. You're not gonna puke, are you? You okay?" They both slowed the tire from revolving.

"I'm okay. Just need to get off this for a bit. Maybe later?"

Yeah, that's okay. I can come back tomorrow too. I'm staying with my aunt and uncle all week. Are you going to be at your grandma's for a while? It'd be fun to play with you." The girls stepped over to the nearby sandbox.

"Nope. We're headed back to Minnesota after dinner. My dad has to work tomorrow and it's a long drive."

"Oh, I know what you mean. We come here all the time to see my grandma too. But she lives on a farm where there's nothing to do. I like it when I stay at my uncle's in town where there's at least a playground in the park." Hmm, this girl certainly was a chatter-box.

Etta nodded, totally understanding. Seemingly out of nowhere Peggy asked, "Hey, wanna be pen pals, Etta? My mom is your grandma's cousin. I'm sure she has your address. We can write to each other. Wouldn't it be fun to get a letter in the mail that comes to you and not some dumb old bill?"

Etta laughed heartily. "Yeah, that would be a lot of fun. I'm in if you are." The two girls, one age nine and one age twelve, sat quietly in the sand, making castles and tearing them down again in a kind of building war. When they grew tired of that game, they imagined sticks as Hollywood actresses walking down elaborate staircases in dazzling ball gowns and similar childhood fantasies for almost an hour.

Peggy looked up from the sandbox to peer across the park. "Uh-oh. I see my mom and your grandma coming out of the house and my mom's waving. You know what that means."

"Yeah, time to break up the fun." Etta let out a deep-sigh, dreading the 4-hours of monotonous boredom on the ride from Northern Iowa until she, sleepily, would walk up the sidewalk of their suburban Minneapolis home. "So much for more time to play, Peggy." Etta had a heavy heart. "I wish you lived closer to me so we could hang out all the time. You're a nice kid."

"Yeah, me too. But we can be pen pals. You will write to me, if I write back, won't you?"

"Yeah, I suppose so. I know I'm a little older than you, but its okay. I won't use cursive so you can read it, okay?"

Genevieve, Etta's grandmother, and Martha, Peggy's mother, leisurely walked across the quiet, home-town street to the now almost dusky garden-like park to stand at the edge of the playground area. "It's time for you to clean-up for dinner now, Etta, and get your things ready to head home." Genevieve spoke in a peaceful, loving tone.

"We've got to get going, too, Peggy. It was nice of Etta to play with you, wasn't it? Did you two girls get along okay and have fun?" Peggy's mother tousled her daughter's hair.

"Oh yeah, Mom. Etta is swell! We're going to be pen pals! Is that okay?" The little girl was all smiles, clearly quite happy.

"Hey, that's a good idea. You two girls can be life-long pals like that, just like Gen and I." Martha leaned over and gave her cousin, Genevieve, a heartfelt, tender hug and kiss on her cheek. "I'll write you next week with that recipe for Mildred's microwave cinnamon rolls, Gen. You won't believe how easy they are. We'll talk again soon. Love you." The little girl and her mother walked away from the other duo. Peggy skipped nonchalantly beside her mother. "I'll write you," she shouted back. They strolled to the opposite kitty-corner of the park and disappeared down the street.

Genevieve called out, "Goodbye. Drive careful." She took Etta's hand and patted it. "Looks like you two girls are going to be good friends for a long time, huh?"

"I suppose. She's really nice and a lot of fun for a little girl. She seems really smart. I like her. And she lives in Minnesota. I never knew there were other relatives in Minnesota. Is her mom really your cousin? She's so much younger than you."

As Etta stepped up into the back porch of Gen's house, her grandmother held the screen-door open. "I am quite a bit older than Martha. Our daddies were brothers in a big Irish family." She took out a clean washcloth from a drawer, ran it under water and wrung it in the sink and handed it over to her granddaughter. "Clean off all that sand now. Martha's my dearest, sweetest friend out of a big, big bundle of cousins, Etta. One day you'll learn that friendship and family go together." She caressed her granddaughter's cheek with her palm. "I hope you two girls do become pen pals. I'm sure she'd be a good one. Now run along and get things ready for your trip home."

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Etta had been home for six days before the first letter from Peggy arrived in the mail. She stopped at the end of the driveway to grab the mail from the mailbox when her neighbor dropped her off after swimming lessons. It was a peculiar feeling, but it was, indeed, exciting to flip through the envelopes to find one in a young girls' printed letters with her name as the addressee. Peggy had spoken of the thrill of getting mail and darn it, if it wasn't true. Now she couldn't wait to sit down to read what her new-found pen pal had sent.

She dropped the rest of the mail on the dining room table, walked into the kitchen of the middle-class rambler, opened the fridge and grabbed a Fresca. She popped the top and drank deeply. Swimming always made her thirsty. She took her pop can and letter and ran up the stairs to her bedroom.

Etta's room was decorated much like any other pre-teen girl her age: the walls a dusky shade of pink, a poster of David Cassidy adorning the back of her door, a poster of wild horses running along a sunset-colored sky somewhere in the western U.S. above her dresser and above her bed, a trio of young women, sexily holding guns and staring a sultry glare at the camera, as the rough-and-tumble Charlie's Angels were likely to do. Strong, sexy and independent. That's how Etta wanted to be someday. Well, maybe not so much of the sex part. Not yet anyway. Maybe when she got older that would be something she'd care about, but not so much right now.

Etta picked up her favorite 8-track and popped it into her portable 8-track player and listened to the mellow sounds of Linda Ronstadt singing "Desperado". The silky, smooth voice instantly relaxed her. Sometimes that's what she felt like. A loner, riding through the world alone. Not that her father didn't care about her. She knew he loved her, but she usually kept people, even those closest to her, at arms' length. Her mother's death in a car accident almost two years earlier had a strong effect, still leaving her a bit shell-shocked. But, as in the song, it probably wouldn't work to walk through the rest of her life lonesome forever. She wasn't sure just why she felt some kind of kinship with this little girl, Peggy, but she did. And it wouldn't hurt to write her letters once in a while. It might even be somewhat fun.

She hopped up on her wire-frame twin bed, crossed her legs, leaned back against her big, fluffy pillows and took her letter opener to the pretty envelope with a lily-of-the-valley design. The stationary was really nice anyway. The letter opened with:

Dear Etta,

This is my first letter to you as a pen pal. I asked my mom for some help on how to have a pen pal - you know, what to write about and stuff. She said because we're pen pals, we really can write about anything we want and even share secrets and things. Nobody will read your letters except me when they come to my house and, if everybody in your house agrees, then nobody but you will read the letters you get from me.

I live on a farm in a big, old farmhouse. I have a room all to myself because I'm the only girl in my family. I have two big brothers. Someday, when I'm a little older, mom says she'll decorate my room all "girly" for my birthday. We've lived in this house for almost 3 years, which is an all-time record for us. We've moved 8 times since I was born, so we don't stay for very long before we have to move again. I guess we move so much because my dad has to get a job. I'm not really sure. The last time was because my brothers broke a window in the barn. We're renters and that's just not allowed. I don't know what really happened. All I know was there was a lot of yelling and then we had to move.

My real name is Margaret. I don't like the name Margaret much. It's too long and sounds really stuffy. But nobody calls me that except my mom when she's angry. Then she uses both my first and middle name and I know I'm in serious trouble. Haha!

So why did your mom choose Etta for your name? Is that your nickname too? What is it short for? What kind of things do you like? Are you into horses? My best friend, Lisa, is nuts about horses and during recess we play "horse" all the time. I get sick of it. I like horses too, but not nearly as much as the other girls. They need to get over it I think. Most horses on a real farm are just big and poopy and smelly.

I know you're older than me, so maybe you have a boyfriend and stuff. You can write me back and tell me all about the boys in your class. My mom says as girls get older they start to like boys. My friend, Lisa, is always talking about boys. She's just horse and boy-crazy! Ha-ha! Hmmm Maybe you're boy crazy too, 'cause you're older. Don't worry. You can tell me all about boys. I won't mind.

Well, write me back and tell me what you think of being pen pals. I don't have a lot of secrets. I just live on a farm and mainly do chores (I have chickens) and play piano all day, when I'm not going to school. What do you do living in the city? I'd love to live in a city and ride the bus to the library and stuff.

Okay. I gotta go do my chores. I'll write you back when I get your letter. I hope you send one soon. If you don't have time, I can wait for a while too.

SWAK

Peggy

The letter had a lip-shaped lipstick mark on the bottom, so apparently she really had sealed it with a kiss. How cute! She really is a cute, little kid. But for a little girl this was a pretty good letter. And Etta found herself smiling at so much of what Peggy had said, both in the park and in this letter. She was a straight-shooter, to borrow the cowboy analogy again. She called 'em like she saw 'em and that was a good thing in a friend. "Okay. I'll write back," Etta mumbled to herself.

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Tommy stood at the top of the ten foot wall made of pressure-treated lumber and scraped the piles of mud off of the bottom of his shoe as he waited for his friends to make their way through the obstacle course. This was a beautiful day to be outside, even with the mud. He was truly enjoying the wilderness survival camp the scouts were doing for this week, even if they did have to drive to the lost land of Iowa to get there. It would help him make Eagle Scout, hopefully before he graduated. It is important to have goals and stick to them.

He looked down to see his buddy, Brian Donovan, struggle to make his way over the log abutment just past the water hole. "You can do it, Donovan! Give it some oomph!" Brian looked up at Tommy, breathing hard, his

white Irish skin all pinked from the excursion and flipped his buddy a single finger salute. Tommy chuckled and smiled. Then he looked back towards the start of the course, towards the bend that had been more mud than dirt and saw the guys from Edina mish-mashing their way through the muck. Yeah, they were seriously behind, but making up ground fast. "Come on guys, haul ass! We can beat them. I know we can!"

One by one the four scouts from Duluth made their way to the wall, Tommy reached his arm as far down as he could to help haul them each to the top. In this one barrier, Donovan excelled because he had such a long arm span. He didn't even need Tommy's help. Then Tom saw the "city kids" coming up fast. "I'll stay to help them up too, I guess. At least we know we beat them."

Donovan said, "Okay. It's your funeral, you know that Randall guy hates you." He slapped Tommy on the back as he jumped to the ground.

"Yeah, that's just 'cause I outskated him at the state tourney last year and got that game-winning goal. If he wants to make Eagle, he'll get over it." He shrugged his shoulders. The Edina guys started coming up to the wall, and one at a time, Tommy reached down to help them to the top, as he'd done for his friends. Then Owen Randall, shorter in stature, with well-defined pecs and an arrogant attitude came up to the wall as well. Tommy reached down his hand. "Come on. I'll help you up," he said, trying to seem nonchalant. Owen defiantly shook his head. "Aww, come on. I helped them," tilting his head in the direction of Owen's friends.

"That's 'cause they're pansy-asses. I don't need any help from you, ya monkey from the sticks!"

"Looks like you're the pansy ass. Okay. Have it your way." Tommy stood up, wiped his palms against each other. "My job here is done." He jumped down off the wall and strolled over to catch up to his friends. From around the corner of the wall, Owen marched with a red face. "You arrogant fucking prick! Who the hell are you, you low-life wanna-be, to call me a God-damned name!?" Owen ran and jumped on Tommy from behind, pulling his forearm against Tommy's throat.

Tommy spun around quickly, knocking Owen off of his back, as Owen struggled to remain upright. The boys both from Duluth and Edina now were forming a circle around the two fighting boys, urging them on, each for their own schoolmate. Tommy leaned down, ran towards Owen and shoved his head into Owen's mid-section, knocking the wind out of him, ending up laying on top of him. Fists from both boys started flying. Tommy took a jab to the right eye, then grabbed for Owen's earlobe, dragging him by the appendage one or two feet to the center of the circle. Tommy then leaned down, using the difference in his height as leverage, to get his knee on top of Owen's shoulder and shoved Owen's face into a muddy hole in the ground. He put his palm on Owen's head. "Next time pick on someone your own size and don't punch like a girl." With that comment, he gave Owen's face an extra shove and wiggle, rose up and walked quickly away, solitary towards the campsite filled with tents of scouts from all over Minnesota.

Donovan rushed to catch up with his friend. "You'll lose your magic de-coder ring for that."

Tom shrugged. "I'll walk ten more old ladies across the street to make it up. Get off my ass."

"Listen, he's a punk, for sure. But he's a rich punk, so try to play nice, Gracie. Did you have to shove his face in the dirt?"

"Yes, I really did. And I'd do it again. All the money in the world won't buy him the state title when we kick their asses this year. And who knows? Maybe I'll get Mr. Hockey and make his brain bleed." Tom chuckled. "God knows he'll never make Eagle Scout. Come on, us country bumpkins need to find us a fiddle and chaw some tobacco." Tommy grabbed Brian's head in the crook of his elbow and gave him a noogie.

Chapter One

“That’s the last of it, dad,” Etta she limped into the bedroom carrying one last heavy box of books. She pushed the strands of hair that had escaped her ponytail from her face with the back of her hand, slick with the sweat from her head. What a sweltering day she’d picked to move. Although it was certainly cooler in August in Marquette than in Minneapolis, the dew point made the 85 degrees with a strong southerly wind feel like 95. No matter where you were, hot humid heat and moving day were not a good combination.

She looked across the room at her father, Glen Staley, his polo shirt covered in sweat stains, weary eyes with obvious dark circles of worry. She hadn’t really noticed until just now, but he was starting to look old. She knew that some of the things she’d put him through in the past few months were a part of what had made him lose the look of vibrancy and youthfulness he’d always had. Her life was a mess, so much so it forced her to make this move from Minneapolis to Marquette.

“Well, I suppose when your daughter’s into writing and English lit, you can assume you’ll be lifting and toting boxes of books everywhere she goes for life. I hope it’s all worth it.” He smiled. And she returned his with a wide smile.

“Oh, dad, I’ll make it worthwhile. I promise. I won’t let you down.” She started unpacking a box of books onto the sturdy shelf in the corner. “You know, you don’t have to babysit me. You must be anxious to get home and get back to work, with your new job and everything. I know you have a ton of work and it really is all right.” She glanced over in his direction. “Do you want another beer? I can go get some more and put ice in it.”

“No. What I have right here will do me fine. And ice ruins beer, honey. Don’t you know that?” He rubbed the cold bottle against his forehead to let some of the condensation sooth his hot head. Why didn’t any of these towns on Lake Superior ever have air conditioning? Granted, they didn’t need it much of the year, but would it be a crime if they went all out and put in air conditioning? “And what if I just want to spend a little more time with you to make sure you’re okay, huh? Is that so bad?”

“No, its fine, dad. I just don’t want to put you out more than I already have.” Since I’ve almost completely ruined your career in the past few months, she thought to herself. “Really, why don’t you go back to the hotel and get some nice cool, air conditioned rest time? I’d feel better if I knew I sent you on your way at least somewhat rested.”

“I’ll take off first thing tomorrow morning so I should make that fundraiser by tomorrow night. I’ll have plenty of time to rest when I’m home in that empty house without you.” He was somewhat choked up. “You know, it won’t be the same there without you. It’ll be way too quiet.”

“Aw man, dad, don’t go getting all warm and fuzzy on me now. Since when were we ever drippy with each other?” She cast a cynical smile at him from across the room.

“Well, since some rich asshole decided to use my little girl for a personal play-toy, that’s when.” Etta’s father paced around the room, beer bottle in hand. “Are you sure this house is safe enough? Do these girls seem like the kind that will lock the doors all the time? I don’t want you somewhere I don’t know you’ll be safe.”

“Yes, dad, things will be fine. The girls know to lock the doors. Their brother just graduated school for Environment Sciences, works at a local casino and lives just a couple blocks over with some hockey buddies. And he’s a hockey player, dad. He’d beat the shit out of anybody who’d dare hurt his sisters, I’m sure. I haven’t met him yet, but he’s pretty well-known. People probably walk a mile around this house to not lay a finger on the Donato girls, Dad. I can live vicariously off of their personal safety.” She smiled at him. All through her years growing up her personal safety had never seemed her father’s concern. Much to the contrary, he often trusted her to be mature and self-sufficient when other parents were protective. But that’s how things were with her single dad. He’d dated only occasionally, probably because no woman could ever measure up to her mother.

Etta had practically raised herself. Her dad loved her, of course, but following her mother’s death he had poured himself into his work as the Chief Financial Officer of a large financial institution in downtown Minneapolis. He was off to board meetings before 6 am and often didn’t return home until nearly 9 at night. So Etta had a very solitary life as a teenager. She knew she was on her own and that nobody was there to bail her out, so the thought of “causing trouble” had never even occurred to her. No way, no how.

Etta Staley was taller than the average girl at five feet eight inches tall, somewhat lanky and gangly. She was a girl of unique beauty. She wasn't overtly lovely from a quick glance, but it became more evident the more you studied her: her face, her creamy skin, shoulder-length, naturally wavy brownish-blond hair, the classic styling of her features. The elegance of the way she carried herself made her seem somewhat unapproachable, yet mysterious. Her best feature was her stunning blue eyes with a distinct darker-blue outer ring. It all gave her an interesting and definitive allure, which she downplayed as much as possible.

She had lived at home while attending college for English Literature and writing at Minnesota University. Most of the time she'd ridden the bus to her classes, until this past year when life had gotten complicated. Then she'd bought herself a car, an expensive parking permit that only upper-classmen were able to appropriate and driven herself to her classes and meetings on campus.

She had gone to high school in Hopkins, a middle-class Minneapolis suburb. It was a high-school with a somewhat small town feel and yet large enough for many activities, some true academic and non-academic accomplishments, rivalries and competitiveness. She had excelled at many activities, including swimming and track. She loved these team, and yet individual, sports. She could excel at her own individual accomplishments and yet, to some degree, still feel she were part of team achievements. She'd even been the lead on the relay teams, both swimming and track.

In general, however, Etta was what she'd feared as a 12-year-old: a loner, a solitary girl, yet with a beauty and grace many other girls wished they could attain and young men wished they could possess. And that's how Owen Randall had apparently always felt about her. Like everything else in his world, he had wished to possess her.

Owen was the eldest son of the CEO of her father's company, two years older than Etta, and a young man who didn't take no for an answer to anything. While he'd been brought up in private prep schools, taught to have proper manners and present himself with an air to the aristocratic nature of his family, he still had a touch of the "bad boy" in him. That always came out when he played hockey for the cultured and elite team at Fletcher Academy, the private school he had attended for most of his teenage years. Hockey had allowed him to brow-beat and bring out that aggressive side without penalties, well, at least not for more than five minutes at a time.

When Owen was seventeen and Etta was yet fifteen, he had asked her to attend prom with him. Of course, Etta was surprised that he'd asked her, as she had a mouth full of braces and was still "filling out" as her grandma put it. Her father had agreed for her to be Owen's escort and had taken her to her grandmother to get an appropriate gown for the event. God knew her father didn't know the first thing about shopping for a gown for an elite school's prom.

Owen had been very sweet to her at prom, bringing flowers and posing for pictures with all of his friends. Afterwards, even though some of his hockey friends were behaving rowdy with their dates, Owen had been kind and attentive. Then when he brought her home for the evening and they were in his car in front of her house, something in him changed. He didn't want to take no for an answer when he'd begun kissing and groping her. She fought her way out of it, but she wasn't sure how much longer she could've held him off, if she hadn't had the muscles from weight lifting for swimming to give her some extra leverage. She was just too young for that stuff and she knew it.

She hadn't wanted to date Owen after that prom night. He seemed like a nice enough guy, who, like most teenage guys, really just wanted one thing. Some would say there was nothing wrong with that and by saying she'd go with him, she'd been a tease. But a few years later, when she was a junior in college and Owen a fifth year senior, she met him again, at some corporate picnic she'd reluctantly felt obliged to attend with her dad. Owen was now waiting to see if he could either get signed to the NHL after graduation or if his dad was going to be able to work magic to get him into a local law school. He asked her, again, to go out with him. At first she was hesitant, but he admitted he'd come on too strong back when he'd taken her to prom. After all, couldn't they let bygones be bygones and try things out again? He had learned his lesson and was older and wiser now. And now he was on the hockey team at the Minnesota U. In a way he was a "star", if playing hockey could make you a star. So she reluctantly agreed.

Again, things started out great. They went on several dates and he'd been sweet, kind and attentive. He'd taken her to nice restaurants, would have her over to his parents' home to watch movies and snuggle. They did

their fair share of kissing and started to get more serious and intimate. But he hadn't gotten to be groping and pushy about it. It seemed he was willing to only go as far as she was wanted until she was more comfortable. It seemed like a refreshing change of pace with Owen and he'd grown up. And her father was pleased. He'd told her more than once how this would really help solidify things for him at work, with his CEO. The partnership between them could really blossom for him from a corporate perspective now that their children were "dating". Owen's dad had taken her dad on several golf outings, which had never happened before.

Then the rumors started flying around campus. At first she'd only noticed people snickering behind her back. She'd been to several frat parties with Owen and there were strange looks exchanged between the young men at the parties, between Owen and the guys and herself. It was as if there was some strange conversation going on behind her back she didn't know anything about. And it felt weird, really weird.

Of course, there was drinking at these parties and lots of drinking at that. They were mostly parties of tremendously good-looking, wealthy "connected" young men at these frats and the young ladies who were trying to impress them. Except for her father's sake, Etta wasn't trying to impress anyone. After all, Owen had come looking for her. He was the one doing the chasing and up until now, she wasn't really "getting caught", but it was as if everyone treated her as if she were already Owen's possession.

Then there were the memory lapses, confusion and anxiety attacks. She'd be writing and suddenly her mind would go blank. She literally couldn't remember what she was thinking about moments before. At one point, she was walking through the grocery store and had the inexplicable need to leave, feeling as though the walls and ceiling were closing in on her. She'd dropped everything and run screaming from the store, only to stop outside, hyperventilating and gasping for air.

She'd seen a doctor about her concerns, which was when the bruises got noticed. She hadn't really paid much attention or noticed them herself. She was always running, ran her four miles every day, and she was always bumping into things. The doctor had said there were what looked to be mild ligature marks on her wrists. And that she couldn't understand. What did he mean by ligature marks? He'd even asked if she was participating in "rough sex". "Of course not," she'd said.

"Well, perhaps you were unaware of having rough sex."

"What do you mean by 'unaware'? I would know!"

So her doctor had done some tests for something called GHB and she'd tested positive! She'd been drugged using a designer drug that renders a person unconscious in addition to a substance like Valium, to reduce any anxiety and apprehension. These designer drugs were only available to the very wealthy. She had all the tell-tale signs of having been raped, but couldn't remember anything from the experience: unexplained bruising, vaginal tearing, unexplained losses of consciousness and increasingly distressing anxiety attacks. And the kicker to all had been that she'd contracted chlamydia, for which she was given antibiotics. The doctor had run a pregnancy test, a full rape kit, and tests for every STD, including an AIDS test. Thankfully the other STD tests came back negative. The doctor gave her a card, encouraging her to seek counseling, and stated that he'd be happy to testify if she wanted to proceed with official rape charges with the police.

That was when she had the most difficult conversation she'd ever had with her father. She'd sat him down, told him everything the doctor had said and honestly thought he would ask her to forget all about it. She was sure that his career would mean more to him than what had apparently been happening to her. She was sure he would say she was just imagining things. But she was wrong. She was dead wrong about her dad, and now she knew him much better.

He had remained quiet and calm throughout all she'd told him, but there was a change in the look in his eyes that she'd never seen before and she hoped to never see again. It was as if someone had thrown meat in with a caged lion. His eyes were seething with fury. "I'll kill him!" He got up from the couch, took hold of the crystal candy dish on the coffee table and threw it with a crash into the fireplace.

"God, no, dad! You can't! Stop!"

"The hell I can't! No rich bastard is going to use my daughter like that and get away with it!" He was shouting and his face was red, the knuckles on his fists turning white.

"Dad, we can't do anything about it. I don't have any proof except for the test results and the doctor's word. What can I do? The police will say I took the drugs willingly and that I was leading him on. I didn't ever go into the

ER and say he'd raped me because I didn't know. I don't really even know if it was Owen." Etta sat on the couch with her head in her hands. "Oh, God, what the hell did I do? I'm so ashamed. Please don't hurt him. I don't know what I'd do without you." Tears were flowing down her cheeks.

Her father paced the floor of their living room, then at her words, sat down and cradled her to his chest. "Shh, quiet now, baby. You didn't do anything to be ashamed of. He did. And I'm sorry I scared you, honey. It's going to be okay. Everything will be fine." She didn't need his anger now, especially not turned in her direction. His girl needed him to sooth her. This was a trauma, like none he could imagine. And his little girl needed him like she never had before.

He had taken care of things as best he could. He couldn't make things fine, but he could handle them. He turned in his resignation the next day and took a position with another financial institution in the city, with a month's vacation between jobs. He stayed home and took care of her, arranged for counseling. He attended some sessions with her, building on their relationship and let her know he stood beside her regardless of her actions or anyone else's. He held her hand as they talked, not just to the police, but also to the University's campus security, who took her allegations very seriously. Of course, most of the incidents, unfortunately, had occurred at off-campus locales, but they brought the issue to the attention of the NCAA and WCHA, both of whom put Owen on temporary suspension for the remainder of the hockey season, pending the outcome of the police investigation.

Unfortunately, this action is what destroyed Owen's as well as Etta's life, or at least damaged it temporarily. Once Owen was suspended, the phone calls started coming. The press started hounding her. They'd show up when she'd least expect it and even a few camped out on their front lawn. Owen was angry and let her know it. Sports reporters wanted interviews, so he would go on TV and claim he was innocent of all charges. He'd insinuated that Etta's father was a former disgruntled employee lashing out at his family. He stated that Etta was jealous of other women he'd spent time with, more beautiful, prosperous women. His chances at the NHL were over and he was obviously angry.

Etta stopped taking the bus, got a car to make it more difficult for the press to find her. Slowly, eventually, the fanfare started to die down. When the county attorney failed to get an arraignment on the filed charges for lack of sufficient evidence, the NCAA re-instated Owen's eligibility and put out a press release that the charges could not be substantiated. Although the county attorney called to apologize, the use of these designer drugs in the commission of the rape was just too new of an issue for the judge to "destroy a young man's life". The issue was dropped.

That was a low day for Etta and she returned to her home frustrated and ashamed. She and her father decided it was time for her to think about getting away from the media circus. Many of the old friends she'd had together with Owen were now siding with him, as he was the wrongly-accused golden boy and she was seen by many as a societal pariah. Etta made up her mind to finish her degree and go to graduate school out of state, away from everything and start a new life.

And now, here was her dad, in Michigan, all sweaty, worried and stubborn. He'd backed her all the way. He really did love her and had shown her in so many ways in the past few months. He'd literally given up his job, a chance at the top spot and all the prestige and money that would've gone with it. And he'd done that for her. So if she had to make some concessions to assure him of her safety, she'd do what she had to do, this time for him.

"So have you found a local karate studio or something yet? I want to hear that you're going to self-defense classes and know the guys' name who's teaching you how to kick ass."

"Yeah, I'll get on that first thing tomorrow morning, okay? Now, can you help me put this bed together? I'd like to get out of here, grab some dinner and A/C so I can cool off a bit before I sleep up here tonight." Although they were both hot and sticky, as her father joined her at her mattress, she hauled him into a hug. "Thanks, Dad. I love you."

Her father ran his hand down her ponytail as they hugged, whispering quietly in her ear, "I love you, too, baby."

Chapter Two

Etta watched her father pull away from the curb after one last, long hug. He'd dropped her off after an early dinner, to head back to his hotel and pack up for an early start on his drive back to Minnesota. She was going to miss her father's encouragement and the stability he provided, but she wouldn't miss the distressed look he sometimes had when he glanced her way unnoticed. Although he tried to hide it, he saw her as walking wounded, and maybe she was, but she didn't need the constant reminder if she was going to heal. As she waved to him as he drove down the street, she thought that she was now, once and for all, free. She was free of her past. Her father had been the last person who would know anything of what had happened to her. Unless she went around blabbing things to people, she was free to start her life over fresh and clean of any stain of controversy or anyone's disdain. Nobody would know and nobody would need to know.

Etta thought of all her father had given up for her. She stood out on the edge of the curb, hands on her hips, looking up at the sky with the puffy white clouds rolling by. She was determined to make the new life he'd given up his career for into a bright and shiny thing. And she was going to start living life to its fullest, right here in Marquette. And what a beautiful town to do it in. She loved that the house she'd moved into was walking distance to the Lake and all that entailed. Oh sure, she had friends who had gone to Duluth for college and had "frozen their hinnies off", as they put it, but she wasn't afraid of a little cold. And she couldn't wait to start doing her daily four-mile run along Lakeshore Drive.

She'd gone out from the hotel this morning along the lakeshore and had run past a little night-spot, CoCo's. Or was it a day-spot? She wasn't sure. It was certainly a hopping place on a hot and humid Sunday morning and it looked interesting. She decided she'd walk over the three or four blocks to Coco's and see what kind of nightlife it held there on a hot, summer evening. Who knew? Maybe they'd even have air conditioning, although the night air was starting to cool a little. Of course, now that she was done moving, it would cool off. She went upstairs, washed her face, put on some nice-looking shoes, a little lipstick, fixed her ponytail and headed off for CoCo's.

She walked into the building not really knowing what to expect and was pleasantly surprised. It was air conditioned, thank God. It was really just a giant, open room, with a high, white, painted ceiling, rafters going from the bottom of the walls to the tip of the ceiling. Along one wall was a small stage against a wide picture window, which overlooked the expansive view of Lake Superior. Hmmm, perhaps this had been a wealthy family's living room in its hay-day? Interesting.

Along another side of the large, open room with a hardwood floor, which had obviously seen much dancing, was a doorway which led into the kitchen and at the back of the room was a small stand-to-drink bar. All across the dance floor were small round tables and the typical stackable chairs common to many a bar room. The most impressive thing about the room were the bright and vibrant colors someone had chosen as the décor. One wall was the color of muskmelon, another the color of cantaloupe, another the color of watermelon, obviously a "melon-themed" painting scheme, which would've been tacky in a smaller space.

There were little knick-knacks of African-themes all over the place, by the cash register, a little hostess stand when you walked in, a few tribal masks on the walls. And neon. Neon signs were everywhere, including florescent lights around a chalkboard that held a listing of each day and what the theme was for each day. Etta was especially happy to see that Thursdays were apparently "Ladies Night. Perhaps she and her roommates could have fun here together some evening. Yes, she was probably going to really like this place. She just hoped she liked the atmosphere and the food, too.

From the board, she saw that the big act for tonight was a live show called "JohnnyK's Mind Power". And that was enough to suck her in. Her curiosity wanted to know what Johnny had for an act and what all that entailed. But it certainly sounded intriguing. And the best thing was there was no cover. Bonus!

Etta found a small table toward the outside edge of the room, about two rows of tables back from the stage and sat down. A friendly, young, college-aged waiter almost immediately came up to her. "What can I get for you, honey?"

"Do you have any pineapple?"

“Sure, do. Look at this place! And you ask if we have pineapple. What would you like made with pineapple?”

“How about a pineapple daiquiri, light on the rum, heavy on the pineapple.”

“You got it. Be right back.” Almost two minutes later, the server returned with a giant drink with fresh pineapple and slushy ice. “That’ll be \$4.” Etta turned to grab some money from the small purse that was strapped around her, when a tall man with dark features, fairly long sleek black hair sat down at her table, handed money to the waiter. “Put that purse away. Here’s payment in full, Kevin. I’ll pay for the lady’s drinks tonight, k?”

Etta was dumbfounded. “Well, thank you, but you really don’t need to. I can pay my own way Uh I didn’t catch your name,” gesturing towards the chair next to her. “And please, have a seat. Don’t be so shy,” she said, with a glib look on her face.

“Tom, and it’s nice to meet you UhI didn’t catch your...” He held out his hand to shake.

Etta met his firm handshake with one of her own. “Let’s say, for tonight, it’s Jane, shall we, Tom?” She glanced down to her drink and took a giant sip from the refreshing drink. Looking back up, she leaned back in her chair, in a very, just-one-the-guys type of stance. “So, hot enough for ya?”

“Yeah, you could say that, but it’s cooling down pretty nice tonight. This will probably be the last steamer like this yet this summer, so we gotta enjoy it all while it lasts, ya know? So I haven’t seen you around these parts before. And I would’ve noticed you.” He gave her a little wink, as he took a swig of his beer. “So where have you been hiding?” He was unashamedly flirting with her, as he took another draw from his bottle of Corona.

“A new arrival. Fresh meat, I suppose. Are the waters safe?” Etta said, with her eyebrows raised and a giant grin on her face.

He grinned right back. Oh a smart one! I like the smart ones. “Not in here. Coco’s is called The Market of Marquette for a reason. Haven’t you heard? Or are you too new to be wary yet?”

Her eyes got wide. “No, I hadn’t heard that, but I’ve been here less than 24 hours, so I’m a little behind, I suppose.”

The lights in the room went down suddenly, the spotlight snapped onto the stage and a young man in a black T-shirt, black jeans, dress shoes and sleek sunglasses stood the stage. Dramatic music played with a final drumroll and the young man spoke into the microphone, “Ladies and Gentlemen, please give me your attention and you shall be amazed at the spectacle and power that the mind and body behold.”

Tom leaned over, whispering. “Oh, this is gonna be good.” She returned his smile and just laughed. The young man removed the microphone, took off the sunglasses, placed them on a table off to the side of the stage and went on. “I’m JohnnyK and I’m going to be your host for this evening’s entertainment. My specialty is harnessing the mind and body connection through the use of hypnosis. And my goal tonight is to educate and surprise. Many of you have amazing abilities, right here in this audience that you’re not even aware you possess.”

Etta’s eyes widened as she looked at her table companion. “Oh, no. This is NOT gonna be good. Audience participation.” And at that, Tom started laughing, just from the deer-in-the-headlights look on her face. She slapped his arm lightly. “Stop laughing!” She smiled, shyly.

JohnnyK went on with his speech. “Now many of you probably don’t believe in the power of hypnosis and believe that it’s just a figment of one’s imagination. Am I correct? Could I have a show of hands of those that don’t believe they can be hypnotized?”

Several people surrounding their table raised their hands. Etta turned to Tom. “They’re all suckers. One born every minute.” He chuckled slightly then raised a fist to his mouth to keep himself from laughing out loud.

JohnnyK went on, asking six or seven of the people who had their hands raised to join him on stage, where, behind him, there were several chairs neatly lined up in a row. He asked them to sit. He stood to the side, with his microphone, and went on with a speech about how they didn’t think they could be hypnotized. He asked them all to stare at the spinning disco ball on the ceiling for two seconds, then at the count of three, they would all fall asleep, then counted “One, two, three” and all of the people sitting in the chairs instantly fell asleep, leaning on each other with their heads lolled back or to the side, and the crowd roared with laughter.

Then JohnnyK turned to the audience. “Shall we have some fun now?” The audience roared in laughter and shouted out a unanimous “Yes!” in return.

Then on the count of three, Johnny had all the participants awaken. After he explained to all the participants that clearly they were far too brilliant to have been hypnotized by such a snake-oil salesman, he asked a group of

three young girls to tell him what they thought of the experience so far. They explained to him that they didn't think he'd hypnotized them. "Oh, because, if I had hypnotized you that would mean that I have total control over you like some sadistic freak, right? I could make you do whatever I wanted at the drop of" Then he snapped his fingers and all three girls instantaneously fell asleep. He turned to the audience. "Nope, they can't be hypnotized." The crowd, again, roared with laughter.

JohnnyK awoke all of the participants and explained to them that just the young men of the group, would, at the count of three, all feel that their chairs were stinging their butts. And on the count of three, all of the young men in the group jumped from their chairs and turned around to check their butts for some stinging insect.

The act continued on in this fashion for quite some time. At one point participants were convinced that their belts were snakes. Another time they were ballet dancers. With that the people on stage twirled and did leaps that were, really quite hilarious, mainly because they were so bad. He had some people convinced that their bellybuttons had disappeared, all to tumults of laughter. As his final conclusion, JohnnyK said he could even make people fall in love while under hypnosis. This time he didn't ask for volunteers, but instead wandered through the audience looking for unwilling participants that would be his final victims for the evening. At last, he strolled over to the table where Tom and Etta were sitting and asked Etta, into the microphone, "How long have you known this young man at the table with you?"

"About ten minutes. His name's Tom."

"Okay. Tom, you don't really know this woman you're sitting with, is that correct? You just met, is that right?"

"Yes, about ten minutes. Her name's Jane."

"Isn't that cute? Tom and Jane, how quaintly American. Does anyone think Tom and Jane will fall in love under hypnosis after ten minutes of knowing each other? Can that really be done? Does anyone want to see that?" JohnnyK was really working at revving up the audience to hound them into participating. And it was working.

The crowd began to chant now, "Tom and Jane! Tom and Jane!"

Etta looked at him pleadingly. "Oh, great, I get a local hero."

He leaned over. "Sorry, I didn't know." She just shrugged her shoulders. It was clear there wasn't going to be a way to get out this without some embarrassment. The only redeeming quality to this whole thing was that nobody in the entire place knew her at all, so she was free, the way she'd thought of herself earlier, to do anything she wanted. And although she didn't really want to be embarrassed by JohnnyK, she was having a good time. His act was funny and she had been having fun.

The crowd kept chanting "Tom and Jane" over and over until Etta finally relented. "Oh, what the hell!" And the crowd cheered.

Etta took her purse off her shoulder and set it on the table. Tommy took her hand and led her around the surrounding tables until they stood on stage with JohnnyK. He held her hand as they stood together on stage.

JohnnyK went on with his act. "Okay, Tom. Jane. Wow, I can't believe you have such boring names!" He leaned the microphone toward Etta. "Gee, thanks!" Johnny patted her on the shoulder. "It's okay. You can't help it if you're boring. Now, I'd like you two perfect strangers to stand facing each other, holding each other's hands, okay?"

"Awwww, don't they make a nice-looking couple?" he asked the audience.

At this question, the crowd replied with a loud "Awwwww" of their own. Johnny commented, "I think they like you. So, I want you to stare into each other's eyes. You've never kissed, am I right about that?" he asked Tom.

"No, we just met."

JohnnyK turned to Etta and asked, "And if I asked you to kiss this man right now in front of this audience, what would your response be?"

"Ummm... No way in hell." Tommy said, "Gee, thanks," which made the crowd roar with laughter. JohnnyK just smiled.

Continuing on, Johnny said, "Because you don't know him, you've never kissed. You don't know him, you've barely even talked, and you certainly would not go crazy for this man and try to get his clothes off, especially not in front of others, right?"

"Right. No way, no how."

"Okay." There was a pause. "So look deeply into each other's eyes. And keep looking into each other's eyes until I tell you to stop. So on the count of three, when I snap my fingers, I want you to stand where you are, but

close your eyes and fall into a deep, deep sleep.” He began counting, “One – Two – Three”, snapped his fingers. Now, under hypnosis, Etta and Tommy stood on stage, totally asleep with their eyes closed.

“Tom and Jane. You are in a deep, deep sleep. Now, when I count to three, on the count of three, I want you to open your eyes, look deeply into each other’s eyes. All you will see will be each other. You will not notice anyone else in the room and will believe you are totally alone with each other. You will feel a deep passionate love for each other that drives your sexual needs to their peak. You will want those needs to be satisfied with the other person, kiss the other person, caress, hold each other close and express the love you have in your heart toward each other in a way that gives great pleasure to the other person, even if that means removing each other’s clothes. And you’ll continue this way until I utter the word STOP. When I say stop, you will, again, fall into a deep, deep sleep. One, Two, Three.”

Upon the word three, Etta and Tom opened their eyes, looked in each other’s eyes and immediately grabbed for each other. They desperately sought out each other’s mouths, kissing and caressing each other, Etta’s hands going to Tom’s hair and dragging him down to her mouth. Tom’s hands were all over Etta, caressing her breasts, massaging her bottom, as she wrapped her legs around Tommy’s legs. Etta was literally trying to scale Tommy’s body to get closer to him, wrapping her arms and legs around him as though he were a tree she desperately needed to climb. Tom’s hands began to move up Etta’s T-shirt and he began to work at detaching the clasp of her bra, which was noticeable to the entire audience. Etta’s hands were now going between their bodies and she was beginning to work the button apart on Tommy’s jeans when JohnnyK abruptly said “Stop”. At this word, Etta’s left leg returned to the ground, her head lolled against Tommy’s chest and Tommy’s head lolled to Etta’s shoulder. Both of their arms now hung at their sides.

“Now at my count of three, you will awaken, return to your true selves, the people who had just met for ten minutes earlier this evening and you will remember none of what occurred on stage here tonight. You will now notice the rest of the audience and will not recall ever having touched or kissed one another. One, Two, Three”. And on the count of three, Etta raised her head, looked around questioningly and returned to her normal poised self. Tom raised his head as well, similarly questioning his surroundings.

JohnnyK then asked Etta, “So Jane, are you sure you haven’t ever met this man until this evening? You’ve never kissed him?”

“Of course not. I just met him. And my name’s Etta, not Jane.” With that response, Etta went back to her table, picked up her purse and walked out the back entrance and the audience roared with laughter.

As Tom heard her response, the name she’d told the performer seemed to ring in his mind as familiar in some way, but his mind was still a little groggy. Then suddenly, it hit him where he’d heard that name before. His sister, Izzy, had said that was her new roommate’s name, which was such an unusual name, it had stuck in his mind. JohnnyK asked him a question, “And you’ve still never kissed this woman? Is that right?”

“No, I didn’t do a thing.” The crowd roared with laughter. “Hey man, I gotta go.” He stepped off the stage and ran after Etta out the back entrance.

Chapter Three

Tom had been minding his own business, hanging with his buddies around the bar at Coco's. He'd worked a long, hot day at the casino installing solar panels and just needed to cool down. He'd just picked up the tab on the latest round in the hopes of snagging one more of his friends, Chad, as a fifth member of a work crew to tear-down and replace the roof of his parents' "dorm house" in the morning.

"Many hands make light work, Murph! The more the merrier. You know what they say. And there'll be free beer flowing."

"Yeah, yeah, not a damn thing about tearing down and shingling a roof is light work, Donato, and you know it. Although the mental picture of Izzy Donato holding ice-cold beer in a tank-top and short shorts is, indeed, appealing."

"Okay, okay, but I seem to remember that dragging that huge-ass couch up to the third floor wasn't exactly light work either. So payback is a ..." Tommy reminded his friend, letting the phrased end out empty. He slapped him on the back. "And leave the sisters out of this. No touchy-feely crap. Just free beer. That's it."

"Damn, you've got a long memory. All right, I'll be there. What time?"

"Eight a.m. sharp. And don't come dragging your sorry ass around at ten and expect a full share of the free beer. Get your twerpy nerd butts to bed tonight so you've got something in the tank for tomorrow." He shook his finger around to point at each one as he took a swig of his beer.

Another of Tommy's friends, who was serving as the bartender at CoCo's for the evening said, "Whew! Get a load of what just walked in! Damn, I really wish I wasn't working tonight or I'd be all over that," said Brian.

Tom Donato turned around to see what his friend was talking about. What he saw took his breath away, literally and figuratively. A tall, gorgeous brown-haired blonde with legs that went on forever in three-inch high wedges, snug shorts, camisole-type T-shirt that hugged just the right curves and a ponytail that hung down her back with a gentle swish stood in the entryway of CoCo's. Now she'd sat down at a table near the wall. Tommy raised his hand with one finger in the air, looked back at his buddies and shouted, "Dibs! You snooze, you lose, boys." He backed away from his friends, carrying his bottle of beer. "The advantages of a big family ... lack of hesitation for what you want. Tomorrow morning, eight sharp." He turned and walked over to listen in to the conversation this vision of loveliness was having with Kevin, the waiter.

Tom's buddy, Brian turned to Chad. "Why do hockey players always get the girls?"

"Because we've got the moves and lightning fast reflexes. That was smooth, but maybe she'll be smoother, eh?" They both turned, with frowns on their faces that their friend had beat them to the punch, yet again. "We've still got a shot."

"Oh, yeah, sure. We've got a shot." Chad just shook his head.

And when he got her talking a bit, she was sharp-witted too. This girl had it all going on. What did she say her name was again? Jan? Jane? Why was he so bad with names? He had to learn some trick to remember names. But this hypnotist guy was hilarious! And that smile she flashed was a heartbreaker. Oh yeah, he could really fall for this girl hard. And to think he'd remember the hypnotist show the night they met. Oh man, what was he thinking? How about a kiss first. Or maybe, here's a thought, a date.

Then the guy came over and the chanting began and that's it. She was going to hate him forever for putting her in this spot. And he'd had no intention of this kind of thing happening. But, oh yeah, she was easy-going, too, and was going to go along? Oh man, was this girl perfect or what? The total package. She probably knew box scores too. What else could a man want?

He really had no idea what had happened when they'd been on stage, not really. Just a vague sense of embarrassment and nervousness. But he definitely remembered holding her hands and thinking she had the softest skin he'd ever felt. How did she do that? Was she made of butter? And those eyes were the color of the sky on a cloudless day that just seemed to go on forever. He'd really liked waking up to find himself standing so close to her. Oh, and that certain part of his anatomy clearly was still in a dream-like state and the strange sensation of knowing that he was that way in front of a crowd of people. Okay, yeah, that was major-league embarrassing.

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