

The Lofts

David C. Velasco

©2012

-1-

A droning silence from the living room and bedroom beyond mocked her, reminding Megan of what awaited her return. Pausing at the front door, she turned back, knowing another lonely night lay ahead. The memory of each seeped into her chest and pile up upon her heart. Such girth may soon bring everything down. But the evening was young. A puckish feeling gave hope the astute furniture would accommodate more than one later on. Even if briefly. If everything went her way. That dalliance before she closed the bedroom door behind them. Or should she leave it open?

With a hand on the doorknob, another hint of doubt flashed before her. Trotting back to the bedroom, she gave her simple outfit one last glance in the full-length mirror adjacent the door. A close fitting blouse and snug low-rise jeans stared back. Eyeing her waist, the shirt did little to cover the pound or two she tried purging with each visit to the gym. Twisting, the denim amplified her curves below. That should attenuate any unsightly bulge above. A smirk of anticipation glared at her from the mirror. It would make an ample impression.

Pleased, she sauntered back to the front door, back through the loft, passing by the simple furnishings within: a futon, two cushioned chairs for company, spartan multimedia center, coffee table, scanty desk, table for two in the meager kitchen. With her salary, she couldn't afford much more yet live close to work. Located upon the second floor of an eighty-year-old building, it faced a typical downtown street. Similar buildings stood across the way. They too housed lofts set above various stores, offices, coffee shops, restaurants, art galleries dotting the downtown. Only the hardwood floors and original brick walls remained of the small title and loan office

once there decades ago. The appliances, lights, phone, cable, internet and central air shoehorned therein gave the octogenarian building modern comforts.

#

Across the street, in his own second story loft, Russell all but tore off his company-mandated polo, replacing it with a plain blue tee shirt. The jeans donned in the morning stayed on. No reason to change those. Just like any working stiff, or in his case assistant manager of a small multi-use building a few blocks away, he looked forward to weekends too. And Friday happy hour was the kick off. Not that the day of the week prevented a sojourn to his fave or other nearby saloon. No particular reason needed.

In the bathroom, he ran a comb through the short dark hair atop his square face. A splash of inexpensive cologne slapped onto each cheek ended the grooming session. The effort took two minutes. Three tops. Knowing tonight he'd spend extra time with the object of his desire the morning shave was extremely close. It cut down the evening prep time.

With a determined stride, he jaunted to the plain sofa amid the loft that was actually a glorified studio apartment with two rooms: the mid-sized bathroom and everything else. The vaulted ceiling gave it a cavernous feel. A corner loft within the old building, large windows on both walls faced the streets. His full size bed sat next to a small closet shoehorned into the apartment. A waist-high wall and breakfast bar separated the kitchen from the rest of the room. A small flat screen television and coffee table used more as an ottoman and dinner table than anything else sat near the sofa. He had no other furnishing. When needed he plopped his laptop onto the breakfast bar and stood. So roomy was the place he let a friend host a dinner party here because their own would have been too small for such a gathering.

Donning the light maroon jacket draped over the sofa, he moved to the front door. The fact the emptiness of the loft awaited his return didn't bother him. A few drinks drowned out coming event. He had a plan. He'd just hang in there and bide his time.

#

The drab, cramped storeroom in back doubled as a makeshift locker room. Renee had no purse to sit next to those piled already onto the small table, awaiting more. An ID and the little cash she managed to have on hand fit into her back jean pocket. Her much needed cell found a safe home next to the register once she went on the clock. Between two stacks of unopened boxes hung a mirror erected by the employees. The unadorned cartons held pint-sized glasses, waiting to replace those stolen or broken by patrons, bartenders and wait staff. Drunk or sober. Before the pale reflection, she double-checked the simple make up gracing her face. That and her straight, shoulder length hair. She should use the restroom. But even this early, the only sink and mirror therein would find a girl or two or three ensconced in front, touching up their already enhanced looks.

A step back and she eyed the shirt exposing her midsection and tight jeans encasing her legs. Glancing them over for perfection was a useless gesture. They worked and were comfortable. And it didn't matter. She'd get ogled and hit on no matter what. The phone numbers passed to her or pathetic notes found their way into the trash, not the faded pockets.

Heading to the door, she eyed Tammy's oversized, frayed, faux leather purse, holding god knows what, next to another. A great gal. She'd end up asking about Jason and her. Despite attempts to keep her hormones focused elsewhere, oft times she got the impression Tammy lived vicariously through her.

Speaking of her life, rent came to mind. Due in a couple of weeks and the other roommate moved out last month. The cost of the three-bedroom loft required one job paying a lot or three or more each paying a little. Most of the time, students attending the nearby university would get together and lease such a place for their time in college. Chloe and she avoided that environment, but economics might cause both to bend. So the tips best be good tonight. Then again, Jason was planning on stopping by. Maybe Bill might let her go early tonight. A night with Jason or rent. Tough call.

With a jaunting if not reluctant gait she headed out and to the server station. So begins her shift.

#

Megan was street level in no time. Downtown wasn't busy so far. The Friday night happy hour and dinner crowd yet roamed the streets. A mass of humanity would soon fill the many clubs, bars and restaurants helping revitalize the once moribund area from decades of decline. They included the young and the old. Singles and couples. Groups large and small. All wanting to forget their workweek before the next one started, to set aside the rigors of life or to enjoy the vigor of youth.

Heading for the nearest crosswalk, she scanned the area. What constituted rush hour traffic built up upon the streets. Not a great deal, but people trying to get home from work made jaywalking a risky affair. Pushing the crosswalk button, a voice sprang from across the street.

“Megan!”

She turned as the echo of her name died between the buildings, mingling with that of engines in need of a tune up and tires rolling along the pavement. Standing just outside his building, Russell waved his hand.

“Hey, Russ! Where ya going?” Megan squawked the rhetorical question over the sounds of the two-way traffic, waving back.

Russell crossed. He didn't wait for the light to change, or for slow-moving vehicle to pass safely. Once over, he shook his head and vented. “Jeez! Some people are too cautious. That car moved any slower, I would a been an old man before I got to cross. How've you been?”

“Not bad. The week was way busier than the norm, so the bosses closed us up early. And it's Friday!”

“Good combo.” Russell pushed the crosswalk signal again to hasten the red light.

“And yours?” She looked over her friend and his focused eyes. They appeared intent on seeing what lay ahead.

“Good, actually. All in all... not a bad week.”

“And now it's over!” she said with glee.

Traffic stopped, they crossed. One perk of living in the renewed urban environment was the proximity of watering holes. Their destination sat close by.

“Sounds like a long week?” Russell asked once across.

“Don't I know it. Had this one account that I swear involved nearly everyone in the office.” The two strolled along the sidewalk, weaving around others coming to and fro. “Helped Rick with some statistical analysis and projections.”

“I see. One on one time at work.”

Turning the corner, Megan noted his thin, accusatory smile. She let out a chuckle. “No. Not hardly.” Her voice grew bubbly. “But he did tell me 'bout how all this number crunching reminded him of college. You know, the simpler days of university life.”

“Well, you can make up for lost time this evening.”

Lost time. The words sent an ironic quiver through her. Still young, she pondered whether she'd have much more to lose and keep her wits.

Approaching the front door, he leaned over. "And if you find a table, make sure it's in Renee's section."

She needed no female intuition as to the reason behind the request. Holding back her sarcasm, she answered. "Looks like we both got a make up for lost time."

The Pub wasn't a spectacular place and made no attempt to be one. No hip, multi-colored lights or large dance floor. No scantily dressed wait staff or bikini clad women, dancing in easily escapable cages, gawked at by men who acted as if they had never seen a woman before. The simple decor attracted all kinds: businesspersons in dress suits, bohemians in faded jeans and knit caps, college fraternity and sorority types, the assorted passerby. Listed in various colors on the chalkboard behind the bar were beers from all over the country and world, accompanied by the current price per glass. The nozzles atop each tap ranged from the simple to the ornate. Mundane to the bombastic. The chairs were made of wood. So too the tables, these bearing scars of bored or drunk patrons who, possessing any sharp object, etched various words, phrases and symbols into them. Although the owners didn't frown upon such actions, it added to the ambiance, the staff remaining vigilant lest legitimate phone numbers or any unsavory opinions appeared. Like many renovated buildings in the area, the original brick and mortar made up the walls. The Pub possessed a charm all on its own. The simplicity of the décor gave it an unpretentious atmosphere that was its greatest strength.

#

The crowd waxed and waned as early evening wore on, but never died down. Megan's coworkers Olivia and Martin joined them later on, sharing in well-deserved relaxation. As drinks

filled the table, so too conversation about the past week. Their laughter and voices added to the din within the room. Megan looked on as Russell relayed the idiot of the week story. He rocked back, arm and foot on the chair adjacent, positioned so no one could sit, or commandeer the chair, just in case his jacket slung there proved an ineffective deterrent.

“So this guy is sitting in his car, right, probably staring at the ticket spitter.” Russell said. Megan shot a glance at the front door as he went on. In this instance, an individual attempted access to the underground parking garage of the building. She watched a group of college kids amble in. The heavy wooden door then closed behind their blazé appearance. Back to Russell. “...finally, he pushes the call button. He said ‘There’s no ticket coming out.’ I said back ‘Did you press the green button?’ He says no. Then I could hear him press it and the *chi-clunk* of ticket come out. What I wanted to say was ‘Did you press the green button for a ticket, dumbass? The one with the words ‘Press Button for a Ticket’ above it?”

Everyone laughed. People lacking common sense were always a source of amusement.

“Was he drunk already?” Olivia asked.

“I hope not... it was only ten am!” Martin spat out.

“Downtown here... you never know!” Russell added. Another round of laughs.

Megan spat out a mocking giggle when the main doors swung open once again. Her eyes darted over and zeroed in on the figure emerging from the daylight. She froze dead still, drawing a quick sip of air. Just enough to keep her heart going. Richard walked in. Straight hair perched atop his face moved with subtlety as his head scanned boisterous room. A five-o’clock shadow clenched his square jaw. She glanced down, unable to stop her mentally removing the two-piece work suit still hugging his trim frame. His amorous pose and the fact he’d soon be sitting next to her drowned out the fact Doreen stood next him.

“Hey guys!” Megan shouted, reaching high with a waving hand.

She stood, watching the duo approach. Doreen moved with a catwalk meander, one foot set with perfection in front the other. She stood out. At work or here. On the street or dark alley if she chose to walk through one. Business attire of a one-button jacket, short matching skirt and heels amplified her slender build. All topped off with green eyes and short wavy hair requiring no long hours of labor to make up. Dark-rimmed glasses gave her a sophisticated look. A billboard advertising the fact she was smart and good looking.

Now Russell stood. Once there, the men exchanged handshakes. One step behind, Doreen gave Megan a smile. “Hey there!”

“Hey,” she said in return, then lunged at Richard and a hug from him.

“If you guys were any later, we might a forgotten about you,” Olivia joked, drawing a small laugh from Doreen.

Hearing neither, Megan savored the embrace with Richard. A warm sensation this produced in her chest met the cold beer sitting in her stomach. The mesh sent a tingling vibe down into her hips she indented to prolong without the appearance of desperation. Done, she stepped back, but kept an arm around his waist. Doreen only got a passing glance. “How did your week end up?”

The question not directed at her, Doreen let out a sigh anyway. Her eyes rolled. “I’ll let Rick fill you in.”

“The Jamison account,” he chimed. Megan hung onto every word, drinking up his face set above broad shoulders with eyes still full of life after a long day.

They all worked at the same business firm, one of the many relocated establishments taking advantage of the new developments and tax incentives in the downtown area. Richard was

an up and coming money manager and a few years older. She herself an entry-level accountant at her first full time job after college.

“Hey, I need to talk some shop of my own with some others,” Russell said, leaning over the table, retrieving his drink. “You guys can have my seat. I’ll be gone a while.”

“You sure?” Doreen asked.

“Yeah, yeah, go ahead.”

“Thanks, Russ,” Richard said. He and Doreen situated themselves, exchanging salutations with others at the table. Russell grabbed his coat. Megan cast him a smile. He shot back a wink.

Russell gravitated towards the bar. The voices of those left behind catching up on workplace revelations faded, drowned by all the other conversations radiating around him. He had little interest in such financial dealings, even if he intended staying there.

Glancing up and down the bar, there lay an empty seat during happy hour. Better yet, one next to the server station. Regulars normally filled these seats. An undeclared caste system existed among those frequenting The Pub. When there, they sat near the end where the servers and bartenders came and went with their orders, or the kitchen staff came out to escape if briefly their duties. The more of a regular one was, or perceived to be, the more often one found them in such a position. If a patron of less stature took these seats, regulars waited until the commoner left, then claimed their place of honor. An honor gained through the copious consumption of beer and alcohol and time spent at The Pub.

He focused on the young woman standing adjacent, her back towards him. It was Renee. Her full, straight, light brown hair stopped a couple of inches above her shoulders. A short, tight beige tee shirt revealed her lower back. Faded low-rise jeans showed off every sublime contour

nature gave her. His eyes stopped on her rear. For a few blissful moments, he took in the sight, one unspoiled by unflattering lines. The iota of shame this produced within didn't stop him from admiring what he saw. Exhibiting some semblance of self-control, he made no immediate dash towards her or the empty seat. The two drinks already in him was enough to keep his heart in check.

He ambled up as she positioned her serving tray for a drink order. "Hey, Renee."

Turning, she greeted by him with a mile wide grin. "Hey you," she spouted. "Megan sent you for refills."

"Ah... no." He took in her radiant smile and perfect teeth, enjoying that most about her, in addition to her other traits. She wore little makeup, which suited him just fine. Too much lipstick and too much blush weren't to his liking on any woman. Once, by chance, he came to The Pub and saw her there just hanging around on her day off. Wearing what appeared to be no makeup on at all, she looked even better. "Wanted to belly up here for a while." He swiveled away. "This taken?"

A middle-aged man sat next to the empty barstool, a good amount of girth protruding from his paunch. He lifted his arm and waved towards the front door. "Nah. He had a take off."

"Thanks." Russell took the seat. Again, the coat marked his territory.

"You still good on that drink, Russ?" the bartender asked.

"I'll take another, Bill. This one is getting low."

William and his wife owned The Pub. Although older, he possessed a full head of salt and pepper hair. A stocky frame gave the impression he was a bit overweight. But as a few unruly customers discovered, plenty of muscle existed there.

Back to Renee, staring her straight in the eye. “Let me guess?” he said. “You’re busier than a one legged waitress during Oktoberfest.”

She let out a sigh, letting her lips and shoulders collapse along with her lips. “Hell yeah. But...” Her face tilted back to life. “Glad to see you’re being funny, instead of asking an obvious, dumbass question like ‘Busy night?’” She went behind him, placed both hands on his shoulders, putting all but her full weight onto them. “Least *you* realize we get busy here. Mind if I lean on you and rest my feet for a bit?”

Objecting never crossed his mind. His soft, gentle voice answered. “Of course you can.”

Her warm breath hit the back of his neck with each nose full of air. The essence of some unknown body spray or perfume soaked his senses as the warmth of her hands sent an ever so pleasing sensation throughout his body. Placing a hand upon her own, he gave it a delicate pat, about as intimate he could get with her at work. A few blissful moments ticked by.

“Got some strong shoulders myself.”

Russell and she glanced over at the man adjacent. His broad smile a sign he had nothing better to do but eyeball them the whole time. Renee didn’t loosen her grip. She grinned and leaned in. She then spouted a gentle whisper into his ear. “Excuse me a moment.” She moved towards the man and put her arms around him from behind. “For you I have a great big *hug!*”

A gruff laugh and pat on her clasped hands. “You know how to make a fella feel good!”

Annoyed, Russell said nothing. Tempering his displeasure was the fact Renee was friendly towards everyone. Yet another endearing trait, if not one evoking jealousy. The embrace didn’t last long.

“Hey, Renee.” Another male voice boomed from behind. Appearing at the bar, Russell recognized the thin man, but didn’t know his name.

“What’s up?” she responded, leaning an arm upon the shoulder of the older man, propping herself up.

“You talked to Jason?”

“No. But hoping to see him here tonight. Why?”

“Wanted me to call him. Now the prick won’t return my calls. His last text said somethin’ bout an after–hours party. And on top of that, said he’d help me fix up my bike this weekend.”

Russell stayed silent. He didn’t really know this guy, and wanted to keep it that way.

“You guys still haven’t got that piece of shit up and running yet?” Renee asked.

“Perfection takes time, and it’s not that shitty,” the man answered. He gave Russell a look and mouthed a simple ‘Hey.’ Russell nodded and let out a slight ‘Hey’ as well. The typical guy greeting between two men who didn’t know each other.

The young man went back to Renee. “Well, if I don’t see him tonight, tell him I better see him tomorrow and be like... ready to work.”

“I’ll be sure not to wear him out tonight.” Russell noticed the seductive wink Renee gave as he drifted away. A sullen knife into his chest followed. Hoisting a refilled drink, the alcohol would keep his mind off her planned activities with Jason later on.

“Renee,” Bill bellowed from behind the bar. “Tray’s ready.”

She trudged towards the station, running her hand along Russell’s back, giving his shoulder a pat. He looked back at the man next to him, a wide grin still visible below eyes fixed on Renee. A crusty voice held his opinion. “She’s quite a gal. I’ll ‘member that hug all night!”

With a cocked smile Russell went back to his drink, not saying a word in response. It might result in a conversation. The thought he’d be thinking of ‘that hug’ while bathing unnerved him.

#

Back at the table, the group enjoyed their second, and for some, third round of drinks. Megan worked on the second pint of her favorite beer: an amber colored ale brewed right in the downtown area. One of the many microbreweries popping up in the area nearer their customers. Rick went on about the Jamison saga consuming so many at the office. Done, he turned to her, placing his arm over the back of her chair. She leaned back, resting upon his limb.

“And I want to thank you too, Megan,” he said. “Those analysis you worked on really helped us out.”

The words of gratitude punctuated the brilliant expression radiating from his face. Megan soaked it up, along with the warmth pouring from his arm. She smiled back, staring deep into his eyes. “I’m... always there to help!”

“I’m glad you are. Aren’t we, honey?” Rick spun around and leaned back so both women saw the other.

“Yes. You’re such a great little helper,” Doreen said.

Megan stared at her. Her cocked smile kept other thoughts at bay. “Thanks,” she muttered. Little helper sounded demeaning. Maybe she didn’t really mean it to sound so insulting. Besides, the compliment from Richard more than compensated for any unintended slight.

Doreen went on, addressing everyone. “You all’ve been a great help. Wish you all could come to Florida with me and Rick next week.”

Megan froze. Words of surprise sprang from Olivia and Martin, he adding a ‘Can I come too?’ comment. She straightened up, hand tightened its grip around her glass. A small, lead

weight formed in her stomach. Growing as the revelation set in, the only word she could muster stumbled out from behind a fractured smile. “What?”

Doreen placed her hand on Rick’s leg and continued. “The firm’s graciously allowed us some time off, and Rick here told me he’s never been. *Soooo....* I thought it best make the upcoming three day weekend into a four day vacation.”

“Yes ma’am!” Richard said, turning from Megan, putting his other arm around Doreen. “A six hour layover in Orlando doesn’t count as a Florida vacation. And she’s told me so much about it...”

Megan sat without a word, mired in restless quite, listening as they talked about sandy beaches, clear skies and looking forward to sipping highly alcoholic strawberry daiquiris next to a sun-warmed pool. She took in an extra long drink of her beer, watching Doreen’s hand caressing Richard’s leg. His hand crept towards hers, clasping as they met.

“Oh... and I am like, so unprepared. We must get to the mall this weekend. There are about a dozen things we’ll need,” Doreen concluded.

“Okay, honey.” Richard leaned back towards Megan. “Why don’t you join us? Then we all can have lunch at that one place there. What’s it called—”

“Great idea, Rick. And Megan can help me pick out a new bikini.”

The sincere, unexpected request sent a shock through Megan. More so than the news about the trip. Another long drink. The beer and request went begrudgingly down her throat. Done, the unanticipated reflex gave her time to think of an answer.

“Well? I...” She paused, catching her breath. “Would have to check to see if I am free.” A lie, but it would buy time. An exalted form of female bonding, shopping for beachwear with Doreen was not high on her list.

“Come on Megs,” Richard pleaded, using his pet name for her. “I need help too. Besides Doreen here, you’re the only other person whose fashion judgment I trust.”

“So you didn’t like the tie the office got for you last Christmas?” Olivia asked.

“Have you seen me wear it?”

Everyone laughed, Megan more for show than to join the levity of the moment. “You know,” she then cut in. “There are a lot of things to do around town. Maybe a day trip?”

“Wouldn’t beat a beach!” Martin shouted out.

Richard let out a laugh. “Oh Megs. I’m sure you and this city will survive without me—”

“Without us!” Doreen added. Richard tightened his arm around her, delivering a peck on her cheek. Megan sat numb, fumbling for an appropriate response, or additional excuse. Looking away, Renee appeared.

“Hey, can I get you guys anyth—”

“Yes!” Megan spouted, thankful for the distraction. “I’ll take one more.”

“A... honey,” Doreen quipped in a low tone, glancing at her watch then at Richard.

“Oh. Yes.” To Renee. “No more for us. Thanks. Just the check.”

Megan said nothing. Maybe they’ll leave without a response to his request.

“So, are we on for shopping?” Richard asked.

No such luck. Megan opened her mouth and paused, thinking fast. “Well?” She summoned enough courage to lie. “Tell you what. Ah... call me when you know when you are going and I’ll let you know. I just remembered Russell said something about the Farmers Market this weekend, and ... ah.... just can’t remember if I told him I would tag along!” Maybe her painted smile would cap off the ruse.

“Okay.” Richard grinned, unaware of her politely phrased deception.

#

Russell felt pretty damn good. The man sitting next to him left without attempting conversation. Renee, in her brief moments of rest, would either say something nice, give him a smile or a gentle pat on the shoulder as she passed by. Other than that, he remained quiet, mindful of the fact while he was enjoying happy hour she was at work. Their brief words and interactions made it a great evening. Sipping on his fourth bourbon and cola, he glanced around people watching.

“Hey Russ.” Megan sat herself next to him.

“Megan...” Startled, he turned. Their once crowded table now occupied with strangers before the seats got cold. He swiveled back. “Early night for the group?”

“Not early enough.” Megan took down the last from her glass in one gulp.

Her tone and demeanor answered the question. He asked anyway. “We okay?”

Megan wiped her mouth. “Yeah. But I might have overdone it a bit. This is my third.” She just sat there, holding a glass and smile. Both empty.

Russell drew a breath, but Megan spoke first, staring into the glass. “They’re going to Florida next week.”

“Rick and Doreen.” A statement than a question.

Megan nodded. He saw no sadness in her face, only a grim, twisted mouth. Her heavy eyes focused on nothing.

“Going on vacation... together... a big step for Rick. He’s never done with the other’s he dated... you know,” she added.

Not that you’re keeping track. Russell kept the observation to himself.

She glanced at him. "I'm sure they'll have a good time. I mean... I'm sure." A chuckle, then stare off into the distance. "Doreen asked for help picking out a bikini for the trip. Bet she's quite the sight strutting down the beach..."

She lurched into silence with sullen eyes. Megan wasn't unattractive and, from time to time, had a fair share of men desiring her attention, among other things. Her full cheeks and brown eyes gave her oval face a simple charm. Maybe, like so many other young women, she felt overwhelmed and outgunned in a world where the standard of female attractiveness appeared to be size zero or less. Whatever the hell size zero means.

"I'm sure too." Time to go. He waved his hand just enough to catch Bill's attention. "Hey. Gonna tab out."

Bill nodded. "How 'bout you Megan?"

Megan shuffled in the seat, staring into the empty glass. Renee strode up, empty serving tray in hand, eyeing them both. "You guys aren't leaving me are you? Who'll keep me company?"

Russell tuned, taking in the angelic glow he so loved radiating from her face. Her warm touch and conversation that evening drowned out her planned activities with Jason. The urge for more reared up. Looking at Megan, he relented. "Long week. And there's always the rest of the weekend!"

"No Russ. Stay. Someone has to keep this girl out of trouble."

Renee and he let out a small laugh. Russell figured Megan had put two and two together. She might be buzzed but not stupid. "Nah," he said. "Renee's a big girl. She can handle herself."

"You bet Russ. You and Meg take it easy 'til we see you again, okay?" Renee gave him a pat on the shoulder and returned to her section.

#

Neither spoke as they drifted out and away from The Pub. Meandering down the sidewalk, Megan tussled through the haze brought on by the more than usual amount of beer that evening. Through the alcoholic fog, she saw Richard and Doreen strolling down a beach at sunset, hand in hand.

“Can I ask you something?” She looked up at Russell.

“You may,” he answered with a thin smile.

Hesitant, the extra beer pushed the question out. “Are you in... you crushing on Renee?”

The unexpected inquiry brought him to a dead stop. Megan did the same. For a moment, his smile grew bigger. He then let out a short laugh, staring back as though he awaited one from her as well. None came. “Me?” He looked away. “Nah. I mean... why’d you ask?”

A shrug. “Just... you know... dealing with... you seem to want her attention.”

An evasive answer whirled around her. “Doesn’t mean I’m... well, she’s a really nice person to talk to... like you! And I’m sure a lot of guys got a crush on her. I mean... look at her.” Turning back towards The Pub, he stared at the building and spoke as though Renee were in plain sight through the solid walls. “It’s not hard to see why they would. I mean... you know... she has that just so smile. Always nice. Friendly with everyone. Perfect face. And great...”

“Body!” Megan finished, punctuated with a slight chuckle.

Russell turned back. “Wasn’t gonna say *that!*” Shamefaced, he looked away.

“She does.” Looking back too, as if also possessing a supernatural ability to see through solid objects, Renee had everything she herself didn’t. The comparison rambled through her mind’s eye: She didn’t have to deal with a petite five foot four figure. Flat, nearly straight hair requiring countless products, time and effort to make fuller. Hips that were a bit big. That slight

bulge on her stomach. Bit of extra flesh below her chin. Not like Doreen, walking down the beach in a two-piece swimsuit with Richard hand in hand—

“I’d show of my mid section more too if I looked like that...” her voice faded off into the night. She shook off such thoughts. Enough self-criticism for one night. Her empty loft awaited.

No words passed between them and silent contemplation. Pressing the issue was pointless. The right words to describe what she felt defied her. Most likely him as well.

“You know,” she broke the silence. “Don’t know if I ever thanked you for what you do for me and... well... when it comes to Rick.”

They shared a comforting glance. Megan turned and began the journey to her loft. Russell followed and began his own.

Walking, he whispered. “You don’t have to.”

Megan put her hands in her pockets. “I could... you know... help you the same way. I could put in a few good words for you with Renee, you know, girl to girl—”

“No!” Russell spat out as if the thought mortified him. “I mean, I appreciate the offer but... I’m not really looking right now, you know. I want to enjoy myself, you know. Play the field. And... you do know she’s seeing someone right now.”

Better leave it at that. His own beguiling logic spoke for him. He wasn’t dating, seeing or doing anything with another woman, save her, on or off any type of field. With her love life being no better, what good was she.

“And could you do me a favor?” he asked as they neared the end of the block.

“Sure.”

“Could you keep this between us? I mean... I know you’re not gonna post it on the internet, but...”

She said nothing. However, a bit of friendly banter was in order with her best male friend, to ease the awkwardness of their nearly intimate conversation. “Okay. But if you *ever* need me to, I’ll find out what her favorite color is so... you know... you can buy her some underwear for her birthday or Christmas—”

“Megan,” Russell bellowed, figuring she was joking.

“You’re right. Probably doesn’t wear any.”

“*Megan!*”