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Opening extract from
**Setting the
Record Straight**

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Prologue

August 1988

Two distinct thunderstorms were visible in the massive sky over the plains of south central Texas, one to the northwest, and the other due south. The distance between them was over twenty miles but at this point, almost equidistant from either storm, the sun was beating down relentlessly, the air was as still as stagnant water, and only the occasional distant rumble could be heard. As the temperature nudged one hundred degrees and the wind picked up slightly from the north, three individuals were converging on a house set back off US-183 a few miles north of Leander. It was a Friday afternoon.

The first to arrive at the property was Danny Stanley, who had just slowed to make a left turn onto the unmarked dirt road in his battered old pickup truck. He was 46 years old, he ran a small building company in nearby Georgetown, the place where he was born and raised, and he had not long left his team of three labourers working on a farm a few miles north of here saying he was going to see his accountant and would be back within the hour. His mouth was dry with nervous anticipation as he weaved his truck slowly past a series of deep potholes towards the house, which was set back nearly a quarter of a mile from the main road among a small cluster of trees that provided much needed shade from the blistering summer sun. The house had seen better days, the paint on the window frames was cracked and peeling, and the clapboard frontage was desperately in need of a coat of weatherproofing varnish. The owners were Frank and Lizzie Dealer. Frank was a rival builder, but Frank and Danny were long time friends and had come to a gentleman's agreement about not poaching work from each other. Danny sighed as he pulled to a halt next to Lizzie's car. How could

Frank have let his house go to rack and ruin so quickly? It was only rebuilt seven years ago after the roof was ripped off by the high winds skirting a tornado that passed a few hundred yards away. But it always seemed to be the way with builders' houses ... the maintenance of them had to come second to jobs that earned money and paid the bills. Danny put his hat on the passenger seat, checked his teeth in the rear view mirror, cut the engine, and got out.

Also approaching the house from a different direction was JJ, a 12 year old boy cantering gently on horseback from a nearby creek, where he had been swimming with his friend Jed. He'd last seen his mother, Lizzie Dealer, at 9am this morning and had told her he would be out all day, but then disaster had struck a little while ago when Jed gashed his foot badly on some broken glass under the water and had to gallop off back home. Then there was nothing much left to do but come home. Progress on the tree house they were planning would have to wait until tomorrow ... there was no rush ... the summer vacation still had weeks and weeks to run. At his current rate of canter he would be back at the stables in around five minutes.

The third person approaching the house was Frank Dealer, also 46, and also born and raised in Georgetown. Frank and Danny literally grew up together, they went to the same kindergarten, they both left the same high school without graduating, and since then neither had travelled much further than a hundred miles from this part of Texas. Frank was currently driving south on US-183, around ten minutes away from his home. He had finished work for the day but stopped in a bar on the way and had a couple of beers to celebrate the early completion of a job. He left after thirty minutes, slightly drunk, and looking forward to getting home for a shower and a nap. It was nearly 2pm.

Lizzie Dealer looked up from a pile of damp washing that needed to go into the dryer when she heard the sound of a vehicle approaching. She was 45 years old, but looked much younger, and was born and raised on this very plot of the land, in the previous house that occupied this space. She was surprised to see Danny pulling up, surprised but excited. She dried her hands, quickly

straightened her hair with her fingers, and applied some fresh lipstick from her purse in a nearby mirror. Then she walked through the kitchen to the front door and stepped from the relative cool of the house into the scorching heat outside.

Danny ambled over, the heels of his construction boots kicking up small puffs of dust from the hard baked ground.

“Hey soldier boy, you can’t just turn up any time you know? You ever hear of making an appointment?”

He ignored this. “Hey Lizzie, anyone at home today? I saw your man Frank first thing picking up some timber at the yard.”

“Yep, he’s out doing some windows at Grafton’s warehouse.”

She looked up at the gathering clouds. “I sure hope he’s got it nailed cos that looks like a big old storm over there.”

Danny didn’t look up; he was now only a few feet away from her. “Uh-huh, and the boss man at Grafton’s can be a nasty old son of a bitch sometimes. Hey!”

He grabbed Lizzie around the waist and lifted her clear off the ground. She playfully wrestled herself free but then he nudged his face into her neck and the sandpaper stubble rubbed abrasively on her soft skin.

“Youch,” she squealed playfully, “you got a face rougher than a...”

“You want to get it on with old Danny boy then?” He breathed directly into her face and she could faintly smell onions. “Frank will be up to his ass in plate glass until that job’s finished.”

She pouted. “Oh I don’t know. I got a whole bunch of laundry that needs to go in the dryer. Houses don’t run themselves you know.”

He looked around. “So where’s JJ?”

“Swimming at the creek with Jed; they’re building a tree house. Well, planning to anyway.”

Danny bundled her in through the front door after taking a last glimpse over his shoulder. He would be able to see the dust cloud if anyone was on the approach road. Lizzie broke free again and ran through to the kitchen, taking the phone off the hook as she passed it. Then she stopped at the work surface and quickly reached down to her short skirt.

“Hey, don’t you go taking anything off now,” he scolded, “that’s my job. And how about putting up a bit of a fight for Danny boy this time, huh?”

“You are one sick bastard, you know that?” She smiled provocatively. “I like it ... maybe you can give my Frankie some lessons.”

He grabbed her shoulders and they kissed passionately, fumbling and pawing at each others’ clothes.

Meanwhile JJ had just tethered his horse in the stable and was walking towards the house. As he approached he saw dust rising out front so he knew someone had arrived in the last few minutes. He paused by the back door, but something told him not to shout as he normally did when he came home. He couldn’t see whose car it was ... perhaps his dad had come home early. He sighed. Whenever this happened on a Friday afternoon his dad was usually drunk. From within he could hear muffled sounds. His mum was laughing ... or was it laughing? He could also hear the low voice of a man, but it didn’t sound like his dad. He quietened his step and approached the kitchen door from within the outer utility room. He saw the pile of washing by the dryer and he heard his mother’s voice again.

As Frank Dealer turned off onto the familiar dirt road that led to his house the walkie talkie under the dashboard crackled into life and he pulled over to answer it.

“Hey Frank, I’m sorry man.” The voice was distorted. “You know about the deal earlier. It was a breakdown in the supply chain, what can I tell ya? My man at the warehouse fucked up. It won’t happen again.”

“Josh, I sure hope you’re right. Now I got my windows elsewhere today so it all worked out ok but *no* thanks to you and your man at the *fucking* warehouse! My reputation round here can, *and will*, be permanently screwed if stuff like that happens. Please make sure it never fucking happens again. You want to pay the school fees for my kid? You want to buy my wife the facelift she’s planning when she hits fifty? There ain’t no room for bad builders round here, ok?”

“Ok, ok, definitely. Look, will I see you down at The Spoke tonight?”

“I don’t know. I’ve had couple of beers already today, not sure I need any more.”

“Well I’ll be down there at 7pm. Try and make it, I’ll buy.”

“I’ll see what Lizzie says.” Frank replied. “Who knows, if I’m back early she might want to hit the mall tonight. Jesus!”

The radio clicked off. His truck was still idling at the entrance to the dirt track road and he reached over to the glove compartment to get his bottle of whisky. He took a long slug ... screwing up his face as the clear brown liquid burned the back of his throat.

“Fuck it, fuck it all.” He shouted out loud. “I got booze here and it’s already paid for.”

He drank again, emptying the last quarter of the bottle, and his head swam momentarily as the alcohol hit the spot. A cool shower and an afternoon nap were only a matter of moments away.

Back inside the house JJ had crept silently across to the kitchen door and peered nervously through the gap. He could see the back of a man, his jeans were down and part of his backside was on show under the flap of his shirt. He gulped as the man struggled with the person in front of him. He couldn’t properly see who it was from here but then the man’s head moved to one side and he saw his mum’s face! Her mouth was open and she looked hurt. Then he saw the man rip at her clothes. She gasped and cried out. It sounded like she was in pain. For a moment JJ stood rooted to the spot, trying to understand what he was seeing. Were they kissing? If so why was she shouting like that? But then there was another yelp of pain and something clicked in his mind; suddenly things became clear. His mum was in danger and he knew what he had to do. His dad’s hunting rifle was in the cupboard about three feet away. The cupboard was never locked and the gun was always loaded; it was fired only two days ago when a pair of foxes tried to break into the henhouse. His mum’s voice cried out again and he heard the man tell her to shut up. He needed to protect her. What if this guy was a murderer? He moved quickly, opening the cupboard door with only the slightest creak of the hinge. He had fired the gun quite a few times before, even though it was heavy and the recoil knocked him sideways. Guns were just a way of life around here and he suddenly

remembered what his dad told him the first time he was given it to hold.

“Son, I hope you never need to use this, but if something or somebody is threatening you then you use it! And use it good. Don’t give second chances.”

He released the safety catch and slowly lifted the gun into position. His young mind was racing but his aim was steady. He heard his dad’s voice again.

“Don’t give second chances! Use it and use it good!”

This was it. The heavy barrel wavered slightly but otherwise was pointing straight at the man’s back. He squeezed gently at the trigger, closing his eyes in anticipation of the noise to come. But he couldn’t do it, he just *couldn’t*. In his mind he could see the dead fox that his dad recently shot; its head was unrecognizable; a mess of blood and gore. He felt his throat closing up as the saliva drained away. His fingers felt numb on the trigger. His feet were stuck to the floor. He tried to shout out but that didn’t seem to work either.

Lizzie threw her head back as Danny pushed her towards a work surface and reached down under her skirt.

“Pull my hair!” She whispered harshly. “Pull my fucking hair, pull it hard!”

Danny obliged and roughly grabbed a handful of her shoulder length hair with his free hand, yanking her head back sharply. Then he roughly pulled off her skirt and underwear in one go and she screamed loudly.

“*Stop it!*” A small voice yelled through the crack in the door. “*Stop it!*”

JJ couldn’t hear his own voice as he yelled. The whole scene crashed into slow motion as Danny turned around and suddenly he could see his mum in front of him. She was completely undressed and he could see her bare skin glistening in the afternoon sun. He could see her ... he could see...

“*JJ no!*” she yelled, but the gun went off, spinning Danny around as blood and bone fragments exploded from his shoulder.

JJ recovered from the recoil and ran forward as Danny slumped noiselessly to the floor and lay face down, his shoulders rising in large gasps. There was a haze of smoke in the air and it felt as if the

echo of the blast was still reverberating around the room.

“JJ!” she wailed hysterically but he couldn’t hear her. His ears were buzzing from the explosion of the gunshot, which seemed excruciatingly loud in the confined space of the kitchen, and he started to retch as the hot smoke burned at his throat. Lizzie’s face and neck were spattered with blood and she grabbed her discarded shirt to try and cover herself as Danny groaned in agony on the floor; a low grunting moaning sound that came from deep within his chest. Lizzie pushed her son aside and ran to the phone. She pulled the shirt on, dialled 911, and screamed into the receiver.

“Help, help, someone’s been shot ... I’m at Frank Dealer’s place ... it’s Lizzie Dealer ... Oh come on, stop with the questions you all know us! Just get an ambulance here quick!”

She slammed the phone down and ran back over to Danny. “JJ, put the gun down and get out of here. Go wait for the ambulance. It’s going to be alright, you’ll see.”

But JJ was rooted to the spot, his face taut with anger and shock. The blood – he had never seen so much of it! Soaking wet and spreading out onto the stone tiled floor. The gun now felt like a dead weight in his hands and he could feel cramp setting into his fingers.

Suddenly Danny summoned up some strength and heaved himself onto his back, clamping his left hand around Lizzie’s ankle, and causing her to stumble and grab the table.

“Lizzie, you gotta help me...” He pleaded, his face contorted in pain.

And then another shot rang out, as JJ aimed for Danny’s arm again but hit him in the neck instead. Dark frothy blood gushed and gurgled from the massive wound as Danny’s face was fixed with a startled expression. His body convulsed briefly, but he was dead within seconds. This time there were no screams as Lizzie crouched dumbstruck by Danny’s body, stroking his hair. She didn’t look up as JJ ran from the room.

Frank heard the first shot as he emptied the whisky bottle and tossed it thoughtlessly from the window of his truck. But he ignored it. Gunshots were not unusual round here; it was probably that old bastard at the farm on the other side of the road shooting at

the birds again. He started driving slowly along the potholed track, ignoring the larger craters with precise automatic flicks of the steering wheel, but then the second shot pierced the stillness, sending a small flock of birds flapping into the air from a nearby tree. A surge of adrenaline coursed through his chest as he realized it was coming from his house and he floored the accelerator to drive the last hundred yards. Within seconds he had to hit the brakes and the truck skidded to a stop a few yards from the front door in a cloud of dust and stones. He rushed inside, passing Danny's truck as he went.

"Lizzie!" he shouted as he burst into the hallway. "Lizzie, JJ! Is anyone here?"

There was no response until he got to the kitchen and saw the horrific tableau.

"Lizzie, what the hell..." He was aghast.

She turned to look at him, her face dissolved in an expression of utter bewilderment.

"Frankie ... I love you." She wept quietly. "Please believe me, I love you."

Her head dropped, but Frank couldn't take anything in. Through the haze of the whisky he tried to assess what had happened. He hadn't even recognized who was lying on the floor. Lizzie's mind was racing too. She needed an explanation fast. Frank walked slowly across the room and stood above the body.

"Jesus Christ. *Danny!*" His mouth hung open.

Lizzie stood up silently and walked past him to retrieve the rest of her clothes. Then she methodically got dressed and tried to straighten her hair with her hands. During the last few minutes JJ had retreated to the utility room, still clutching the gun. He watched his mum through the partially open door as she put her clothes on. He couldn't feel anything. His pulse was still racing but he felt totally empty. He could not comprehend the enormity of what he had done.

Frank turned to Lizzie as she wiped some blood off her face with a dishcloth.

His head was shaking slowly in disbelief. "Lizzie, for God's sake tell me what has happened."

He wanted to feel rage as his mind started to piece together a possible scenario but he couldn't seem to summon any up.

Lizzie swallowed hard. Her voice was trembling but her story was clear. "Now Frank, sweetie, you've got to listen me. Please will you listen to me?"

Frank nodded blankly.

"He attacked me, sugar. He tried to rape me. He made me take my clothes off and stand in front of him. And I did it because I was scared. But then when he took his jeans down and grabbed me I..." her voice cracked, "I managed to break free and get past him. I got the gun from the cupboard and I pointed it at him. I didn't want to shoot him but..."

The sound of sirens was heard in the distance and her voice took on a sudden urgency.

"But he came at me again so I pulled the trigger and he went down."

She put her hands to her face. "And then he moved on the ground ... he tried to get up so I shot him again. I remembered what you told JJ and me. Don't give second chances. I thought he was going to kill me."

Frank was still in a daze. "Where is JJ?"

The sirens closed in outside. "He saw it all Frank, well most of it, he came back early too. He's out back I think. He grabbed the gun off me and I think he's still got it."

Frank closed his eyes. "Jesus, I can't believe my little boy saw all this."

"JJ," he shouted, "are you out there? Get in here and do it now!"

There was no response.

"JJ, come on in here, baby." She tried to sound reassuring. "You're not in trouble, do as your daddy says now."

Voices were heard outside, along with the sound of another siren approaching. Frank went out into the utility room and saw JJ crouching in the corner. His eyes were shut tight.

"Gimme the gun, JJ. Everything's going to be fine. You're mom's fine and I'm fine, just give me the gun."

Still JJ didn't move. Then a car door slammed outside and Frank couldn't wait any longer. He snatched the gun from his son's

rigid fingers and sent him sliding across the floor, just as the front door burst open and the ambulance crew arrived. The other siren belonged to a police car that was trying to negotiate the dirt road without grounding its exhaust pipes.

Frank returned to the kitchen holding the gun and the young man and woman from the ambulance immediately froze in terror.

“It’s ok, fellas.” He put the gun down. “The situations under control, no one else is gonna get hurt.”

Then two police officers came ambling in, both knew Frank and Lizzie ... and Danny ... very well.

Frank held his hands up. “Guys, everything’s under control, I just need to...”

But the younger of the two officers stopped him. “Frank, can we establish right away who committed this crime?”

Lizzie opened her mouth to speak but Frank got in first. “It was me officer. I came back early and he...”

“Frank Dealer, I’m arresting you for the murder of Danny Stanley. You don’t have to say anything, but anything you do say...”

A huge clap of thunder shattered the calm of the afternoon, and the other officer intervened.

“Let’s get everyone out of here; you can finish reading him his rights on the way to the car. I’ll call for backup to bring Lizzie in.”

Outside huge drops of rain were starting to fall, causing tiny explosions of dust as they hit the ground. The storm was gathering overhead.

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July 2008
Saturday

A text message arrived on a mobile phone in a cramped apartment on the upper west side of Manhattan, causing a harsh buzz on the glass table top where it was sitting. Christine Hudson was cleansing her face in the bedroom next door when she heard the noise and immediately went through and picked it up, trying hard to avoid getting any lotion on the buttons. This number was not widely known, so unless it was yet another call offering free network time she could probably guess who it was from.

The message read, *"Please can you finish things soon? Mid next wk if possible. Thank you."*

She took a deep breath, walked across to the window, and stared out aimlessly at the street beneath. It was nearly 7pm and after the early evening lull the pavements were now buzzing with tourists and partygoers. For a moment or two she wondered where the day had gone.

Fundamentally Christine was unhappy, and had been so in varying degrees for nearly two years, since making the decision to relocate here from Dallas; the place where she was born and raised. Looking back, the move was impulsive and ill thought out. New York City still seemed drab and hostile, and although her job with the *Garden State Sentinel* Sunday lifestyle magazine over in New Jersey was pretty exciting her personal life was bereft of any real enjoyment. She had tried and tried to make friends, but it wasn't happening. She rarely saw anyone on the landings and stairwells of her apartment building, and most of her work colleagues fled for the suburbs at 5:30 every evening and spent their precious weekends taking the kids to ballet or basketball practice. There were other

means of course, but the prospect of joining some club or society to be forced into other people's company definitely didn't appeal. Somehow it was difficult to mix here, unlike back home in Dallas. Finding even a sightseeing partner, let alone any other type, had proved virtually impossible and it wasn't long before she began to despair.

Also the emotional scar of her first Christmas here in New York still burned deeply. That New Year's Eve was a night she wouldn't easily forget. Never before or since had she truly felt in mortal danger, and the fact that the perpetrator was never brought to justice still caused her moments of real anger and fear.

She picked up the phone on the worktop by the microwave and dialled. The answer came on the second ring.

"Hey, honey bunch, where are you taking me tonight?" Her voice was playful but masked an underlying nervousness. "It's Saturday night in New York City, are we going to party or what?"

The voice at the other end of the line tried to match her level of enthusiasm, but fell some way short.

"Hey Chris, how's it going?"

"It's going great," she replied. "Now do I need my ball gown or are we slumming in the East Village again?"

There was a brief silence. "I ... I don't know yet, babe. I've been kinda busy today. All sorts of stuff's been happening. Maybe we could..."

"Stuff, what stuff?" She retorted. "Hey it's me you're talking to remember? I'm beautiful and I'll kick you in the balls if you're standing me up."

She laughed but the voice at the other end of the line didn't sound in the mood for humour.

"Hey, I'm kidding, I'm kidding. We could stay in if you like. You could come over here; we could get Chinese food and watch old movies. My sofa's real cozy."

There was silence again. Suddenly Christine was concerned that she had overstepped the mark.

"Hey Don, I'm joking with you, right? You know if you're too busy then we can just talk on the phone a little bit and then we can both get an early night. Maybe that'd be better if you've been busy?"

How does that sound? I can tell you about my sexy dream last night, it was...”

The voice resumed. “What I was going to say was ... maybe we could have a quiet dinner at Casamiro’s first? I’ll book my usual table, then we can decide which block of the town we’re going to paint red, ok?”

Christine bit her lip and smiled. “Great, sounds good to me.”

“I’ll pick you up at eight on the dot,” he replied.

“Ok, you’re the boss. I’ll put a nice dress on for you. I know you like me in dresses.”

“You bet I do. I’ll see you in little while.”

They hung up and Christine returned to her bedroom mirror with a definite sick feeling developing in the pit of her stomach. She had nearly an hour to think this one through. Ending the whole thing tonight would be too abrupt, but she needed to put out some definite vibes of dissatisfaction. She applied some foundation and a little blusher to her cheekbones with a well practiced hand. Tonight would be an understated look she thought ... no mascara, and just a little eyeliner. She applied it quickly and finished off with a touch of lipstick, choosing a shade only slightly different from her natural lip colour.

She quickly found a brown knee length skirt with matching top, and pulled off her tee shirt and sweat pants to try them on. Then she turned and checked back and front in the full length mirror, scrutinizing her reflection. Pretty damn good by anyone’s standards, and some pale brown high boots would finish things off perfectly.

Then suddenly it was 7:45. She knew that Don was always on time for any meeting; he even set out early for the shortest of journeys just in case he hit traffic, and would sit around the corner with the engine running in order to arrive at the precise time specified. She picked up her phone and switched it off. Now all she needed was a plausible reason to dump him. Not that it had to be plausible of course, it would just make her feel better if it was.

At 7:55 Christine was sitting on the floor in the hallway staring at the front door. From her windows she couldn’t easily see the

entrance to this building eight floors beneath, so she usually waited here, counting the seconds on her watch and trying to predict when the buzzer would sound to shatter the calm. She could hear the faint sound of a TV upstairs and occasional footfalls, but otherwise this was a very quiet apartment block, particularly at weekends when most of the inhabitants seemed to flee the city for destinations unknown. She contemplated her immediate situation while Don's car was stuck in traffic a couple of streets away. She closed her eyes to think. How was she going to do this? What excuse could she contrive?

With Paul this whole thing had been easy; like taking candy from a baby. She really had wiped the floor with him and hung him out to dry. But Don had turned out to be a completely different proposition. On the face of it he was the perfect gent; very polite, very gallant, and extremely charming. But there was also an edge to him, a hint of nastiness that had shown itself through the veneer a couple of times. Not to her directly so far, but occasionally his phone would ring when they were together and he would always excuse himself and leave the room. Then she often heard the muffled sound of him barking orders; like the person at the other end of the line was being threatened. And then he would come back into the room smiling and saying, 'Forget about it, it's only business'. Just like nothing had happened. It gave her the creeps. She would definitely have to tread much more carefully this time.

And for a few brief moments her thoughts turned to Geoff Dealer and their last meeting in Austin two years ago. This was all down to him; her current situation, every aspect, facet, and detail of it, even her move here from Dallas, was entirely down to him and his crazy idea. Although she alone had been responsible for making it happen. There was no way she would be seeing a guy like Don under normal circumstances; he just wasn't her type. Why, oh why had she listened to anything Geoff had said that day? Right now she wished she'd never even wasted her time going back to meet him.

When this situation with Don had been finished up satisfactorily she would have to give some serious thought to cutting her losses and getting out of here. Maybe she wouldn't move back home to

Dallas, but now she'd worked for a big circulation newspaper she could probably relocate to any major city. It would have to be somewhere south this time though; somewhere with plenty of sun and a proper party scene; maybe Miami or New Orleans? After two freezing winters it was becoming more and more apparent that she just wasn't designed for cold weather.

Suddenly the buzzer sounded sharply, causing Christine to almost jump out of her skin. She got up, straightened her skirt, and pressed the button causing a loud crackle of static that almost masked Don's disembodied voice.

"Hey Chris, it's me."

She looked up at the wall clock and saw it was nearly five minutes past. "Hey you're late, that's not like you. I'll come right down."

"No, I'm coming up, I got something for you."

He hung up and walked briskly into the lobby, brandishing a huge bouquet of flowers. Within a matter of moments he was at her door and knocked loudly.

He stood in the doorway as she opened it. "Hey baby I got these for you."

She gasped.

"You still wanna kick me in the balls, huh? You still wanna kick Donny in the balls?" He had a huge beaming smile on his face as he stood with his legs slightly apart pointing at his groin.

Christine pouted. "I'm sorry, I can't believe I said that. I would never do anything to hurt you! You know that don't you?"

"Here they are," he continued, "kick 'em if you want to." He was still smiling, but there was an edge to his voice.

"Those flowers are gorgeous." She looked sheepishly down to the ground. "Are they for me?"

"Neah, they're for my wife, I was wondering if you could put them in water 'til later when I can take them home."

He laughed again. "Hey Chris, you look gorgeous tonight. And you know what? I deserve a good kick in the balls for not paying you all the attention you deserve."

They hugged and she took the flowers from him. "I'll just put some water in the kitchen sink for now then I can put them in a vase later."

“Great idea, then let’s get out of here,” he said. “Our table at Casamiro’s is booked for 8:15.”

They arrived fifteen minutes late but a reserved parking space and a warm welcome awaited them at the intimate family run restaurant on a back street in the Little Italy district of Manhattan. He collected the car keys from his driver and told him to take the rest of the evening off, stuffing a twenty dollar bill into his hand for a cab.

Don hugged the proprietor as they made their entrance. “Carlo, I’m sorry we’re late; the traffic midtown was a bitch. You know me ... am I ever this late? Me! Am I ever late?”

Carlo beamed at them. “Hey, forget about it, your table’s ready, the wine’s at room temperature, you have a pleasant evening now.”

They sat.

“You having your usual?” he asked.

Christine’s stomach was turning cartwheels. The thought of eating anything right now made her feel like heaving.

She sighed. “Yep, the usual is fine.”

He looked concerned. “You ok?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Perhaps it’s the pollen from the flowers. They’re gorgeous but...”

“You never said you were allergic to flowers.”

“It’s ok, it’s only sometimes. It must just be certain types. C’mon let’s eat, I’m starving.”

He called out to a waiter who was nearby attending to a party of diners. “Our usual, when you’ve got a minute.”

The waiter nodded and carried on taking the other order.

“I love it here they do the best pasta.” He announced. “You go anywhere in this town and you won’t get pasta like they do here.”

Christine smiled. This was one of their regular dining haunts and the food was excellent, but one night she would like to dine in style. This was like sitting in someone’s front room.

The meal arrived quickly and they started to eat. Christine picked at her food but Don dived in, shovelling huge forkfuls of pasta into his mouth.

“Man this is good stuff.”

He called out to Carlo, who was doing the rounds of the tables.

“Hey, give your head chef a kiss on the forehead from me. This linguine is excellent. Excellent.”

Carlo beamed a ‘thank you’ in return but all Christine could think about was the message on her phone. Things need to be finished up by the middle of next week. What could she say? On the face of it her and Don were getting on great ... she couldn’t just dump him out of the blue! Five more mouthfuls she’d give it. Five more mouthfuls, and if Don hadn’t started a new topic of conversation she would say something.

“Man this food is good tonight. How’s your Carbonara? It looks great.” Don asked through a mouthful of side salad.

She smiled. “It’s good, really good, my compliments to Luigi and his team out there.”

He nodded and carried on eating.

Four mouthfuls, five mouthfuls; the last one took an age to pass down into her gullet. Oh well, here goes.

“Don I’ve been thinking.”

He carried on eating without looking up. “What? What’ve you been thinking?”

“This thing between us ... I mean it’s great but...”

“It’s great but what?”

“It’s great but, but I’m not sure if you’re really into the whole thing. I mean, like properly, you know...”

He paused in mid chew. “What do you mean by that?”

His eyes suddenly took on a glint of menace and Christine’s heart started to pound.

She stumbled over her words. “Well I ... I wonder what goes on most of the week when I never see you. I wonder where you are when your phone is switched off and there’s no one at your office. It worries me ... I wonder if there’s something else going on.”

Don leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Look, things between us are going just fine. Ok? My business is my business. During the week I have to run my company, do my work, run around like a fucking lunatic keeping everyone happy. I don’t need anyone interfering with that. Ok? *Is that ok?*”

Christine looked down submissively as he sat back and carried on eating. Just what was this business he ran? All she knew was that

it was based over in New Jersey and that he had some sort of office not far from here. She only ever saw him at weekends and then he was always ‘too tired’ to talk about it when she occasionally asked. She was suspicious, and occasionally her mind headed off in some unpleasant directions. What if he was doing something criminal? It was an appalling stereotype, but he had a hint of an Italian look about him, even though he said his family name was Murphy. And as much as she tried to ignore it, she couldn’t help feeling like she was stepping into a scene from a *Godfather* movie whenever they dined here.

“Man this food is good,” he said, returning to his meal.

But Christine decided to bite the bullet. “Have you got someone else? Have you got a wife and kids in New Jersey or something? I mean...”

Don put his knife and fork down and got up slowly.

“*Out the back, now!*” he hissed.

“Out the back ... what do you mean?”

He grabbed her arm tightly and gently lifted her out of her seat. “*Now!*”

Her knife and fork dropped onto to the table with a clatter and the other patrons looked round alarmed.

“Don’t worry about it,” Don announced to the room, “some food went down the wrong way. Everything’s ok.”

He patted her noisily on the back and she quickly grabbed her bag while it was still within reach.

Everyone returned cautiously to their meals. For some reason surprises were not well tolerated in this quiet little dining establishment.

Christine struggled slightly as she was whisked along. “Hey, you’re hurting me! Where are we going?”

They pushed through the double swing doors into the hot and noisy kitchen, where everyone was too busy stirring vats of pasta sauce to take any notice.

One of the waiters looked up. “Hey Don, how’s it...”

But Don stopped him. “We’re going out the back, ok? Some food went down the wrong way, everything’s fine.”

“Get a drink of water.” Someone shouted but Don ignored it.

Christine's eyes widened in panic as they hurried past pans of steaming food and dangerously unguarded grills with sizzling hunks of meat on them that heated the surrounding air. Part of her was wondering how anyone could produce meals in a sauna like this? But another part was thinking that whatever happened now she had her excuse. No one had ever treated her like this in a public place. Their relationship was over.

Then they pushed through a nearby door and suddenly were out on the fire escape. Christine felt the chill of the evening air on her face, and she forcibly removed his hands from her arms.

"Now look!" he hissed angrily, moving in close, "You wanna ask me about my life, that's fine. You think I got something going on that I'm not telling you about, that's fine too. But you *don't* ask me when we're out together, ok? Those are my friends in there, and not all of them are good ones. There's business associates in there, rivals, people who are envious of the company I've built up. People who'd love to see me take a fall. You don't ever discuss our personal life when there're other people around. You got that?"

Christine rubbed at her forearm, trying to numb the pain from the vice like grip he had exerted. Her mind was swimming.

He forced a smile. "Now I'm sorry if I hurt you, but I needed to make it look like you were choking on your food. Now let's go back and enjoy..."

But Christine retaliated. "*Hey fuck off* I'm not having anyone manhandle me in public! You embarrassed me in there in front of those people and I don't care who they fucking well are!"

"Hey c'mon..."

"And how come you can just barge your way through the kitchen like that? Do you own this place or something?"

For once Don appeared flustered. "I know Carlo; we go back a long way. Hey, be careful."

He stepped forward as Christine edged towards the top of the nearby metal staircase, gently feeling the contours of her soft leather handbag, trying to locate her personal alarm.

"You leave me alone. I'm going home and I think after this we're finished. All you need to do is call me a cab."

“No Chris, we don’t have to finish it. I didn’t mean to upset you, it’s just that...”

He reached out for her arm but she stepped back again and her heel went over the edge of the metal walkway. She screamed as she toppled backward and tried in vain to grab the handrail.

“*Jesus Christ, no!*” Don yelled as he reached out to try and save her but he was too late and she fell down the flight of metal steps with a noisy clatter, plunging into a pile of garbage bags that had been left on the floor of the concrete yard beneath.

“*Oh, fucking Jesus Christ, no!*” He jumped down the stairs three at a time to get to her, lying dishevelled like a rag doll in a pile of discarded food bags, one of which had burst open. Her left cheekbone was cut and a trickle of blood was visible from behind her ear.

“*Oh, fuck me, no!*” he gasped again in a strangled whisper.

He reached down to her, then stopped abruptly. She was totally still. He delicately pulled her skirt back into place to protect her modesty and then stepped around the corner, retrieving his phone from his jacket pocket. He called 911.

“Yeah, emergency ... I need an ambulance ... round the back of Casamiro’s ... yeah the East Village. It’s a woman ... looks like she’s fallen down some stairs or something. She’s unconscious. No, I just walked round the corner to take a piss and I saw her. No, I don’t want to get involved, I don’t know her. No, I don’t want to give my name, just get here quick. I think she’s hurt bad.”

He rang off.

As he walked around the corner to his car a voice shouted out from across the street.

“Hey Don, hey, how’s it going this evening?”

Don Borello’s heart sank because he had seen this guy before. He was a local reporter. This was bad.

“Hey, any news you can give me? Anything going down tonight? You got the latest Yankees score?”

Don ignored the questions but his heart was pounding and his mouth was dry. It would have taken some amount of good will to clear what just happened with Carlo, but now he was potentially in big trouble. Still, he walked calmly to the car and got in.

“Ok, you have a good evening now.” The reporter shouted, quickly noting something down on the back of the newspaper he was carrying.

As Don started the engine his phone rang and when he checked the display he saw his wife’s number. He ignored this too and drove off, heading east for Brooklyn, where he could get some advice on how to proceed.

Around five minutes later the reporter heard the sound of sirens and was close enough to follow them to their destination on foot. He stopped on the opposite corner when he saw the red and blue lights flashing outside Casamiro’s, and then as he waited another siren started whooping a few blocks away. Within a minute a police squad car had arrived and two officers climbed nonchalantly out and wandered into the darkness of the alleyway. The reporter hopped anxiously from one foot to the other because he was absolutely bursting to take a leak. But he was excited too. Maybe, just maybe, this was a mob hit and he had seen Don Borello walking away from the crime scene. This could be the big one! Within another minute a stretcher was dispatched from the back of the ambulance and returned quickly with a body on board and a saline drip being held aloft by a paramedic.

“Taxi!” he yelled, stepping out into the street and virtually forcing one to stop. He needed to find out who the victim was to have any chance of making a story out of this.

“Can you follow that ambulance, home boy?” he asked through the reinforced grill, “That’s my buddy in there.”

“Sure thing,” was the muffled reply.

As the ambulance drove away, Brodie Murnaghan flipped through the numbers on his phone and called Rick, a detective for whom he was an occasional informant. He had a positive ID on Donal Severo Borello; there was no mistaking it.

The phone only rang a few times before the answering service cut in. “Rick, hey it’s Brodie ... it’s around 8:45pm and I’ve just seen some of you guys stretchering someone from round the back of Casamiro’s in the East Village. I didn’t see anything, except a few minutes before, Donny boy Borello came out from the same alleyway. I shouted to him but he ignored me. I know it was him so

I think you guys need to check this one out. Ok, later.”

The cab bounced across the uneven streets of Lower Manhattan and it was soon apparent that the ambulance was heading for the Brindley hospital on the lower East side.

“Hey buddy,” the reporter shouted through to the driver, “you can drop me off at the next intersection.”

“But what about your friend?” The driver seemed disappointed that the chase was being called off.

“You know what?” the reporter replied, “I never liked him that much.”

The cab drew to a halt and the reporter climbed out. Quickly he reached for his phone again and scrolled through his list of contacts. He dialled.

“Hey Rodriguez; Brodie ... hey listen ... there’s an admission coming your way in a couple of minutes ... well get *off* your tea break for God’s sake! I need to know who it is ... yeah, yeah ... usual game rules and procedures apply ... yeah, I know I owe you from before, just make triple sure you get this one, ok ... I’ll tell you why when you get me the name, ok ... ok, ok ... just get to it man, you’ve only got a couple of minutes! Ciao.”

Brodie ended the call and disappeared quickly around a darkened corner to empty his bladder.