

# *Caviar Dreams*



**Judy Nichols**

*He raised the glass to his lips and took a drink.*

It was a terrible wine, but it had served its purpose well. That remark about not having the taste for such a fine wine had been sheer genius on his part. It had gotten that backwoods hick bastard to drink the whole glass right down.

He set the wine down on the coffee table. Good God, this was tacky furniture. He couldn't wait to get out of this place. He just needed to pack up his briefcase and be on his way. Might be a good idea to take the wineglass with him. His fingerprints were all over it.

No. It was better to wash it off and put it back in the cupboard.

That done, he took one last look around the room. Everything he'd touched was wiped clean. Everything he'd brought with him he'd locked in his briefcase except for the syringe, still lodged in Derek's arm despite the convulsions. He picked up his raincoat and umbrella and headed for the door, congratulating himself on a job well done.

At that moment, he heard the scritch sound of a key in the lock and saw the doorknob move. He froze on the spot in horror.





# *Caviar Dreams*

BY

*Judy Nichols*



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CAVIAR DREAMS

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*DEDICATION*

**FOR STEVIE TEE, WHO ALWAYS BELIEVED**



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# 1.

## *LIFE'S A BITCH AND THEN YOU DIE*

On the freeway of life, Lisa Watson was stuck at the entrance ramp, trapped behind a cautious old lady in a Buick. Other people whizzed past her, heading toward success and happiness, while she remained at a dead stop. Nothing to do but sit there and stare at the incessant blinking of the Buick's right turn signal.

At least that's how it all seemed this particular moment at the end of a day that could not have sucked more if it tried.

Lisa was thirty-two years old, had a Master of Fine Arts degree from Miami University (the one in Ohio, not Florida) and was valiantly struggling to make a living as a freelance photographer in Cincinnati. She was as yet undiscovered and supported herself with temporary office work, along with ad agency photography jobs now and again.

Most of the time she did all right. She managed to pay the rent on her large two-room apartment/studio, located in a beautiful but somewhat decrepit old building on north Main Street. It was the other essentials that gave her trouble—food, electricity, her various student loans and the minimum payments on several maxxed-out credit cards.

This morning, she woke up thinking she was on solid financial ground—at least as solid as it ever got for her. But as soon as she arrived at her temp job, the economic earthquakes began.

Her supervisor promptly informed her she'd done such a great job with data entry that now there was no more data left to enter. She was sent home early, with the company's sincere thanks and the promise they would definitely keep her in mind if something else came up.

Knowing she had done "just super-fantastic" did not make losing the job any easier. There were still bills due, and she'd been counting on a

full week's pay. The small amount she'd made in three-and-a-half days was not enough.

When she got home, there was a message on the machine from Dennis, one of the lower-downs at the Campbell-Meyers Advertising Agency. *Good*, she thought as she dialed his extension. *Maybe they're finally getting around to paying me for that tampon shoot.*

"Yes, Lisa, good to hear from you," he said cheerfully when he came on the line. "Thanks for getting back to me so quickly. Look, I need to talk to you about your photos for Ariel Tampons. You've done a great job, but we feel your work lacks that ethereal quality, that essence of femininity we're trying to capture. We want to appeal to the caring, nurturing side of our customers. You know—the universality of women, the cycles that are part of the rhythm of life, the very fabric of existence, that whole female thing. Your pictures don't get that, Lisa."

"Um...I'd be willing to reshoot. I can do ethereal," she said unsteadily. She was trying hard not to sound as desperate as she felt.

*How do you make a box of tampons look ethereal, anyway?*

Lisa had been menstruating for the better part of twenty years, and she'd always found it to be messy and uncomfortable. Not even remotely close to ethereal, no matter what brand of tampons she used.

"Sorry, Lisa, we all agreed that it's just not there. But, hey, we'll keep you in mind if something else comes up," he said and hung up hastily.

*Where the hell are all these "somethings" and why can't they come up now?*

She hung up the phone and headed over to the little alcove off the main room of her apartment that served as her kitchen. She opened the ancient white Westinghouse refrigerator and looked for something to eat besides yogurt.

Damn, she was going to have to go grocery shopping soon and there was barely twelve dollars in her checking account. Wait, didn't the Visa card have thirty or forty bucks available on it? Or did she cancel that one in some futile attempt to slow down her ever-increasing credit card debt?

The phone rang again. *Please*, she prayed, *let this be good news. Let it be another job, anything, just get me some money.*

It was Elana, the curator of the Main Street gallery where Lisa finally had scheduled a show of her photographs.

"I'm so sorry, Lisa," she said in her cigarette-clogged voice. "We're going to have to postpone your show. Cameron Jericho from Columbus just became available, and of course, you know I had to jump at the chance to have him here."

“Cameron Jericho? Who’s he?” Lisa asked curtly. She was still reeling from the disappointing blow of losing her show.

“My God, don’t you know? He does the most gorgeous art glass you ever saw. Absolutely fabulous. You really should come by tomorrow night and take a look.”

“Art glass? You bumped my show for a bunch of glorified paperweights? Elana, how could you?”

“Money, Lisa. The root of all evil and what makes my world go round,” she replied bluntly, not in the least offended. “People buy art glass, especially this guy’s art glass. There’s a big demand for it, and I intend to cash in on it when I can. You do beautiful work, but the photographs in your show are just too damned depressing. People see them and want to throw themselves in front of trucks. But don’t worry, I’ll set you up on my very next open date.”

“Which is when, exactly?”

“Well, I would have to check the calendar, but I believe the next opening is fairly soon, probably some time in June.”

“Some time in June? That’s two months from now!”

“And the time will just fly by, I’m sure. Tell you what, Lisa. I’ve still got all your photos from the show right here. I’ll set a few out on display whenever there’s a space. Fair enough?”

“No, it’s not fair at all, but I’ll take what I can get.”

“That’s the spirit, Lisa. Listen, I gotta go. Talk to you later.”

“Yeah, keep me in mind if anything comes up,” she said dismally.

*That does it. I’m not answering the phone anymore,* she told herself as she yanked the cord out of the wall and threw the phone across the living room. Then she flopped on the ratty couch and buried her face in the pillows, tears of frustration streaming down her face.

Elana was right about one thing. Lisa’s photographs *were* depressing, although Lisa preferred to think of them as gritty and realistic. Her portfolio consisted of stark black-and-white studies of winter landscapes with bare trees against gray skies; discarded shoes on the sidewalks and the worn, desperate faces of the homeless people outside her building. Even the nude shots of her ex-boyfriend were on the somber side.

Lisa did not trust color. It was too flashy and made promises it couldn’t keep. For this reason, she preferred the cold, gray Ohio winters over its garish springtime. Her apartment reflected the style of her photographs—everything was in black, white and, of course, varying shades of gray. The grubby white walls of her large main room were covered with matted photographs (mostly her own), along with a few posters and a white-on-black wall hanging of an Aztec calendar. In the smaller bed-

room, she had more photographs and a double bed covered by a black comforter. Even the cat was black.

The only exceptions to her black-and-white rule were the purple-flowered couch she'd rescued from a dumpster in an upscale apartment complex and a red-and-gold lava lamp on a sideboard by the bedroom door.

Deciding that two minutes of crying was enough, Lisa got up from the couch and pulled a tissue from the box on her coffee table. Blowing her nose, she looked around the room and observed her life's work around her. She wondered if any of these pictures would find an audience outside of her apartment.

Her survey fell on the nude self-portrait tucked behind the lava lamp, and she walked over to take a closer look, even though it was so familiar she'd memorized every square centimeter. Her appearance had scarcely changed at all since she'd done that photo ten years ago. In it, she stared defiantly at the camera, her long blond hair framing her oval face, her large breasts hidden by her crossed arms. The printing technique she'd used made her fair skin appear an eerie shade of white against the black background, and she cringed whenever she looked at it. She could always see the small layer of fat around her belly, and she thought her lips were too full.

She only kept it out because her Advanced Photography professor had told her it was the best work she'd ever done. Personally, she thought her studies of old shoes on the street were more aesthetically pleasing.

She set the photo down then moved the lamp so it completely obscured the print. She was too depressed to look at it. Might as well cover up my best work, she thought, since no one wants to see it anyway.

Junk food and a good movie—that's what she needed. And her long-time friend Debbie could supply both. Deb had a Real Job, making good money. She was always willing to spring for a video; and she was sure to have some kind of high-sugar, high-carbohydrate, completely-lacking-in-nutritional-value food available for consumption in mass quantities.

Debbie was the also the one person willing to listen to Lisa bitch and moan about how hard it was to make it in the arts, which was another definite plus, as she intended to do a whole lot of bitching and moaning to-night.

Yes, an evening with Debbie would be just the ticket out of the doldrums. Debbie was so damn cheerful; some of it would have to rub off.

Lisa got up from the couch, wiped her tear-stained face with a paper towel then looked around for her phone. She spotted it in the bathroom doorway. Quickly, she scooped it up, inserted the phone into its little jack in the wall and hit the speed dial marked "Debbie Pratt."

“You have reached five-five-five-one-three-seven-four...” Debbie’s recorded voice came on the line, followed by Debbie’s idea of a cute message. Lisa cringed and hoped Deb would change it soon.

“Debbie, it’s Lisa. Give me a call while the phone’s still connected—it’s been a terrible day. Hell, it’s been many terrible days. Anyway, if you’re so inclined, maybe tonight we could get a video and some junk food and forget about how cruel the world can be to artists.”

She hung up the phone, feeling a little bit better thinking about suffocating her troubles with a large bag of Doritos. But not much.

Twenty minutes later, the phone rang. Hoping it wasn’t any more bad news, she picked it up and tentatively said, “Hello?”

“Hello,” Debbie said. “So sorry to hear of your misfortunes. A video sounds simply grand.”

“Yeah, I figured it was better than sitting in the dark waiting for the repo men to come take my studio.”

“Ohhh, it’s not that bad. Let’s put on a happy face.”

“Let’s not. Do you think I could get a cash advance on the Shell card? Maybe I could buy a few hundred gallons of gas and sell it.”

“Lisa, you should’ve gotten rid of that Shell card a long time ago. You don’t have a car anymore! Oh, I know you still use it to buy beer and chips when you’re out of money, and I wish you could see how fiscally irresponsible that is.”

“Call me fisc’lly irresponsible...” Lisa sang, trying not to laugh.

“It’s not funny, Lisa. It’s costing you a lot of money.”

“Yeah, I know—buy now, pay forever. I plan on leaving astronomical debts behind for my little nephew to deal with. Right now, I’d give anything for a two-thousand-dollar line. Oh, hell, why not five thousand? Where are those pre-approved applications when you need them?”

“Those pre-approved credit cards are a rip-off. Don’t you ever read the fine print? The finance charges are outrageous, like, twenty percent. They can ruin your credit rating.”

“Worse than it already is?”

“All I can say is that when I get those things I rip them into tiny bits and throw them away.”

“Why go to the trouble of ripping them to bits? I would think the people who sent them don’t care what you do with their paper.”

“So someone else doesn’t send it in and charge up a fortune. Even though you don’t have to pay the bills, it still can take years to straighten out your credit.”

“Now that’s an idea. Let’s get someone else’s credit card and charge up a fortune. Why should I be the only one with lousy credit?”

“That’s called fraud, and you can go to jail.”

“Deb, I know you never go near the edge, but just once, wouldn’t you like to get within spitting distance? Just once wouldn’t you like to try something that might get you into some trouble?”

“You get into enough trouble for both of us.”

“I’m tired of getting into trouble for both of us. Why don’t you take on your share of the burden?”

“So, you’ll be here when? Half an hour?”

“Or thereabouts. Depends on if the bus is running on time.”

“Do you have enough change for the bus? Because I can come down and pick you up. It’s no trouble.”

Feeling like she’d imposed too much already, Lisa prayed there’d be enough change in her errant coin stash to cover a one-way bus ride to Oakley where Deb lived. She took the lid off the coffee can sitting on the shelf by the phone and heaved a sigh of relief. It held seven quarters, five nickels and a couple of dimes.

“The gods are smiling on me tonight. I’ve got enough for bus fare plus a candy bar and a newspaper. I’m rolling in it.”

“Good, see you soon.”

“Yep, I’m looking forward to it.”

Scary as it seemed, Lisa actually was looking forward to the evening with Debbie. One of these days, she told herself, she would have to get a life.



## 2.

### *FUN WITH LISA AND DEBBIE*

The gods continued to smile on Lisa that night. The Oakley/Hyde Park bus was slowing down a block away on Main just as she came out the door of her building. She carefully scanned the street to make sure there were no cops around then bolted across. She had been cited once for jaywalking, and once was enough. The officer who'd ticketed her had delivered a stern lecture about the dangers of crossing in the middle of the street and acted like she'd committed the crime of the century.

She hated dealing with the Cincinnati police. They could be such hard-asses.

The bus groaned to a halt in front of her. Lisa got on and took a window seat near the rear door. The bus was nearly empty, since it was long past rush hour. Watching the rows of buildings go by, she began to relax after all her trials and tribulations. She found the sound of the diesel engine comforting.

God bless public transportation.

It had been a year since she realized having a car downtown was a luxury she could not afford. At that time, her twelve-year-old Tempo, always ready to take her wherever she wanted to go, suddenly started gobbling up money and could no longer be counted upon to start when she needed it to. It wanted money for insurance, money for gas and lots of money for repairs—the guys at Bob's Auto World loved to tell her Ford stood for "Fix or Repair Daily."

The last straw came when a new, more conscientious meter reader was assigned to upper Main Street. The old one had never shown up until after ten, giving Lisa enough time to move her car up a few blocks where there was free parking. The new one arrived at seven a.m. on the dot and ticketed her three days in a row.



Standing in line at the twenty-four-hour parking fine window at the Justice Center, Lisa had her epiphany. There just weren't that many places she needed to go, and every one of those places was on the bus line or within walking distance. So, she paid off her parking tickets, sold the car and embraced a full and happy life free of the internal combustion engine.

Of course, she found herself bumming rides off Debbie a lot more, but like the song said, that's what friends are for.

Tonight, the bus was making pretty good time; they were already heading up Madison Road to Oakley. Debbie had chosen this working-class neighborhood because she saw it as the ideal location—safe, affordable and close to shopping, the library and fast food. Instead of the tenements and walkups of the downtown neighborhood where Lisa lived, there were lots of lovely two-family houses with porches and bay windows, and old brick apartment buildings. Debbie lived in a first-floor apartment in one of these brick buildings on a quiet street off Madison Road.

Lisa pulled the cord for her stop, relishing the power of bringing this gigantic hulk of machinery to a grinding halt at her command. Walking out into the warm spring evening, she grudgingly acknowledged to herself that she was glad it wasn't winter anymore.

A block down the tree-lined street, and she was heading up the steps of Deb's building. It was a boxy, dark brick affair that reminded Lisa of some dreadful Victorian institution like an insane asylum or an orphanage. The inside was just as gloomy. One of the ceiling lights in the hallway was out again, making for a dim, foreboding atmosphere. There were twelve apartments in the building, six on each of the two floors. The doors to each apartment still maintained their original dark finish. The whole place had tons of woodwork, and it was all dark. Lisa appreciated it, but often wondered why Debbie had lived so long in such a cheerless place.

Little sunlight found its way into Debbie's apartment. It was shaded by other buildings and looked out onto a small alley that had been a delivery entrance in the days when things like milk and groceries were delivered.

Lisa knocked on the door and listened to Debbie scurrying about inside. She knew there would be a ten-second delay while Debbie nervously peeked through the peephole, making sure that it was, indeed, her visitor and not some serial killer hoping to catch her unaware. Then there was the sound of the three locks releasing, and the door opened.

Debbie stood in the doorway smiling, her brown eyes twinkling behind the huge round lenses of her glasses. They were so thick her face was distorted by the refraction of light. Lisa was grateful she had given up her own spectacles for contacts—the extended-wear kind were the greatest thing since sliced bread.

“Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly,” Debbie said, trying to sound like Bela Lugosi as she motioned Lisa into the living room.

She was wearing her usual working wardrobe of beige dress pants and a large white blouse. Always on the heavy side, Debbie favored dull, baggy clothes, which only made her look fat and dowdy. Lisa had long ago given up trying to persuade her to lose weight and dress with a little more style. As if she were one to give out fashion advice—with her blue jeans and turtleneck sweaters, she was no snazzy dresser herself.

“Have a seat. I was just getting my things ready so we can go to Blockbuster,” Debbie said.

Lisa sat down on Deb’s brand-new sofa, across from its matching loveseat. It was a peach-and-pastel print, and it was quite comfortable. Debbie had proudly recounted how she’d acquired the pieces on sale and had even had enough left over to buy the contemporary wood-and-glass coffee table. Lisa was amazed that someone she knew had purchased brand-new furniture. Everyone else in her circle of friends was still making do with their parents’ castoffs, Salvation Army specials or, in her case, dumpster freebies.

Unlike Lisa’s place, which was a mass of clutter, Deb’s apartment was neat as a pin and full of knickknacks. The walls were lined with shelves displaying ceramic horses, blown-glass carnival animals and at least a decade’s worth of toys from McDonald’s Happy Meals. Debbie had also decorated the walls with dozens of photographs of her family and friends, as well as small, framed posters with cute sayings like *Hang In There* and *A Stranger Is a Friend You Haven’t Met Yet*.

To compensate for the lack of light at this end of the building, Debbie had bought a large high-wattage floor lamp that was burning brightly. Combined with the overhead fixture and the table lamp, there was enough light in the apartment for Lisa to use her camera without a flash.

From the living room, she could see Deb loading up her purse to venture out in the wide, wide world. Debbie’s bedroom was done in the same peach-and-pastel colors as the living room, but the furniture was all white wicker. There was a white wicker desk, a white wicker chest at the foot of the double bed, white wicker nightstands on either side of it, a huge, heart-shaped white wicker headboard and, of course, white wicker shelves containing even more knickknacks.

Lisa wondered how she kept it all so clean. It was still as white as the day she bought it three years ago.

“Let’s go to Ray’s. I’ve got a coupon for a free video,” she called out.

“Oh, Lisa, that place is sooo creepy,” Debbie moaned as she re-entered the living room. “I just hate going there,”

“Just this one last time, please? I’m just not in the mood for Blockbuster sensory overload. And I always find something I haven’t seen in ages at Ray’s. Besides, I think he’s going out of business soon.”

“Not soon enough,” Debbie said. “Oh, all right, we’ll go to Wretched Ray’s one last time. But never again, okay?”

“Never again,” Lisa agreed as they left the apartment together.

Out in the hallway, Debbie paused to secure her door, once again locking all three locks.

“Wait, I need to check on Mrs. Bauer,” she said then went over to knock on the door of the apartment across the hall. “Mrs. Bauer! Mrs. Bauer! It’s Debbie!”

They both listened for sounds of movement within. Mrs. Bauer was past eighty and a bit frail. It took her a good three minutes to get to the door.

Lisa fidgeted, not at all in the mood for Debbie’s systematic acts of kindness. Still, she had to admit that checking in on an elderly neighbor was a Good Thing To Do, and she sometimes wished she were as altruistic in thought and deed as Debbie was.

Finally, the door opened, and Mrs. Bauer stood in the hallway wearing a flowered pink housedress on her tiny, withered body. She stretched out a bony arthritic hand to Debbie, who took it gently.

“Good to see you, sweetheart,” she rasped. “I’m still alive and kickin’. Bless you, dear, for comin’ by to see me. Can you come in for a bit?”

“Sorry, not tonight, we’re just on our way out,” Debbie said with kindness, obviously hating to disappoint the old woman. “But right after work tomorrow I’ll stop by and bring you some of those pastries you like so much, and that’s a promise. Okay?”

“I’ll be here, and we’ll have some girl talk, just you and me,” she said. “You two girls be careful when you go out. These days, the world ain’t safe for a couple of young ladies like yourselves.”

“You’ve been watching too many of those awful daytime talk shows, Mrs. Bauer,” Debbie said with a laugh. “There are lots of nice people still left in the world.”

“And you’re one of them, angel. I’d be lost without you, darlin’.” Mrs. Bauer looked at Debbie with such gratitude it was almost painful.

How lonely it must be to sit day after day in that apartment with no company save the television.

“Well, I’ll let you young people be on your way.” Smiling sadly, Mrs. Bauer closed and locked the door. Debbie and Lisa listened to make sure she didn’t fall on her long walk back to the couch.

“That poor woman,” Lisa said as they walked down the hall. “I wonder if she’d let me photograph her.”

“I’m sure she would. She loves visitors, no matter what the reason,” Debbie replied. “I try to see her as much as I can. She has no family in town and her husband’s dead. She has a daughter somewhere, but she’s lost track of her. Can you imagine that? No family, no friends? She told me her brother’s body was found in his apartment after he’d been dead for three days. She’s so worried that will happen to her. That’s why I make a point of checking in on her every morning and every night.”

She pushed open the door of the building, and they walked to her car. Holding up her keychain, she pointed to a house key.

“See, I’ve even got a key to her apartment so if I don’t get an answer when I knock on the door, I can go in and find out if she needs help. Thank God, I’ve never had to use it.”

Debbie unlocked the door of her nearly new Toyota Camry, and they both got in. Neither said a word as they buckled their seatbelts. Then Debbie started the engine, turning right to head north on Madison Road.

“You know, we both live alone,” Lisa said, breaking the brief silence. “Do you think something like that could happen to one of us? Women in their thirties have accidents. There are days at a stretch when my phone doesn’t ring, and I can’t remember the last time someone dropped by unannounced. I don’t have a regular job, so if I should be suffocated by my own backdrop or poisoned by carbon monoxide fumes, who would know?”

“Would you like me to start checking on you, too?” Debbie asked. “I could, although, like my dad says, ‘Why borrow trouble when you already have enough?’”

More of the wit and wisdom of Debbie’s dad. Lisa had never met him, but she imagined it would be like being stuck in a room with someone spouting back issues of *Reader’s Digest*.

“He’s right on that. Anyway, once I’m dead, I expect I won’t much care what happens to me.”

“That’s enough of that kind of talk. We’re both going to live as long as Mrs. Bauer, if not longer.”

“You mean we’re doomed to be old maids together forever.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” Debbie said. “Friends forever.”

“Hey, there’s the turn, off to the right.” Lisa pointed out the window.

“I know where we’re going. We’ve been there enough times.” Debbie put on the brakes, flipped her signal and turned the car to the right to pull into the parking lot of a dilapidated strip mall.

Ray’s Hollywood Videos was the last of the Mom-and-Pop video stores around. In Ray’s case, the “Mom” in Mom-and-Pop had given up on the business—and Ray—years ago, making the establishment that much shabbier.

As a struggling freelancer, Lisa felt an affinity for anyone trying to stay afloat in a world of big-business chains, so she made a point of patronizing Ray’s, despite the lack of selection. She felt it made up for that in atmosphere.

Last year, she had devoted an entire show to photographs of the place. She had lovingly produced every dreary detail of the shop—the rows of dusty videos, Ray’s haggard face as he sat behind his desk surrounded by past-due notices and the vacant expressions of the transient clerks. There had been five that summer—Ray had a hard time finding good help. If it weren’t for the clandestine adult films in the room at the back, the business would have folded decades ago.

Ray was in the habit of giving her coupons for free videos. He had so few customers for the front room he wanted to encourage her repeat business. There had been talk of a vice squad raid—Cincinnati had a bug up its collective butt about pornography—and Ray knew he had to keep up the appearance of a family video store, even though the average family wouldn’t go near his establishment.

“It’s not too late to go to Blockbuster,” Deb said. “This place is so strange. It’s like picking up a rock and looking under it.”

“I know. That’s what I like about it,” Lisa said.

Deb meticulously set the alarm on her car and made sure all the doors were locked. Then she started rummaging through her purse.

“What are you looking for? I’m buying this time.”

“My pepper spray. I’m not getting out of this car without it.”

“Oh, give it a rest, Deb. Ray’s customers are pathetic degenerates and social outcasts, but they’re completely harmless. They like to watch. Hey, maybe we could get *Body Double*. I love that movie.”

Nevertheless, Debbie spent another five minutes in the car retrieving her can of pepper spray, rereading the directions several times then firmly grasping it the way she’d been taught in the self-defense class she’d taken. She believed you couldn’t be too careful.

“Don’t worry, Deb. You’re perfectly safe. They know me here.”

“That’s what worries me.”

A small bell rang feebly as they opened the door. Lisa noticed there was another new clerk at the register. This one obviously had a lot less mileage than the typical clerk at Ray's. Better looking, too. He reminded her of a male model she once had to photograph for a yogurt ad—tall, blond, well-built and stuck on himself. Those guys were always long on looks and short on brains. His nametag read DEREK.

*Must be a story on how this guy came to be here.*

Then again, there was always a story on how everyone came to be at Ray's. And they were all depressing.

The young man looked up from his paperwork and gave a welcoming smile.

"Can I help you two ladies find something?"

This one was polite, too, Lisa noted.

"No, thanks," she said. She headed toward the thriller/sci-fi section, expecting Debbie to follow her. A few minutes later, she looked up to see her friend gazing at the clerk with a dopey look on her face. All Deb's fears of bodily harm had apparently vanished, along with the pepper spray.

Just for a second, the look on the clerk's face reminded Lisa of her cat the time he'd cornered a mouse.

Ready for the kill.

"You know, it looks as if we don't have much of a selection here, but we make up for it in those hard-to-find classic videos."

Her friend was hanging on the clerk's every word. Debbie had been here before and knew very well that all the "hard-to-find classic" videos were there because Ray was operating with a fifteen-year-old inventory.

"In fact, I have something here I'm sure you'll enjoy. I have to confess it's one of my favorites—*Charade*. It's got everything. Romance, intrigue, Audrey Hepburn, Cary Grant and a gorgeous Mancini score."

"I love that movie!" Debbie gushed.

Lisa could see Derek was definitely not short on brains. Having worked so long with advertising types, she recognized the marketing tactics—he was selling something.

Although Deb was extremely cautious and held on to her money with both hands, Lisa had always suspected she would be easy prey for a handsome predator. And this guy had found her weakness. Romance. Debbie couldn't get enough of it. She had a closet full of drugstore romance novels and adored any boy-meets-girl film.

As far as Debbie was concerned, her long-held belief about to be vindicated. The handsome young man was seeing beyond her looks to the goodhearted, faithful woman she was.

“Like to make it a double feature tonight? I’ve got *Jane Eyre* with Joan Fontaine and a very young Elizabeth Taylor.”

Not *Jane Eyre*, Lisa thought. *That’s the grandmother of all Mousy-Heroine-Gets-The-Handsome-Hero-In-The-End romances. This guy will have Deb dancing on a string.* In fact, it looked like she already was.

Grabbing a copy of *Repo Man*, Lisa hurried over to the counter. Too late—Deb was already giving Derek her phone number.

“I have an answering machine, so you can always leave a message if I’m not there.”

“Maybe we can have coffee some time.”

Lisa was ready to tell him that caffeine gave Debbie massive headaches, but it was apparent she’d down a gallon of espresso for Derek of the Classic Videos.

“And here’s my membership form, signed, sealed and delivered.” Deb giggled as she handed it over to him.

“Welcome to Ray’s Hollywood Videos family.”

*Get me out of here before I choke on my own vomit*, Lisa thought. *Maybe that’s his angle, getting new members for the front room. Prove to the Hamilton County Sheriff’s Department that the place is legit.*

“You didn’t need to open up a membership. I’m already a member here,” she reminded Deb.

“Oh, but Derek says you get a free video if you sign up. We’re saving money, see?”

Lisa was about to point out that she had a coupon for a free video so they wouldn’t have spent any money instead of the dollar ninety-nine plus tax Deb was paying to get *Jane Eyre* along with *Charade*.

“Can I help you, ma’am?” Derek asked her.

Looking him in the eye, Lisa sensed a coldness about him and that, despite his youthful good looks, inside he was as withered and decayed as the winos who shuffled back and forth just outside the door.

“Nah, I think I’ll save this for another night. We’ve got enough to watch already.”

On the drive back, Deb couldn’t stop talking about her miraculous encounter with Derek.

“Did you see his eyes? Aren’t they the most incredible shade of blue? And he’s so sincere. He wants to go for coffee. Can you believe that? He wants to have coffee with *me!* When do you think he’ll call? Tonight? Tomorrow?”

It took all her energy, but Lisa managed to stifle the urge to tell Debbie that Derek was not the knight in shining armor she’d been waiting for all her life and it would be a good idea to avoid him like the plague. This

was the first time any male had ever shown an interest in Debbie. Right now she was ecstatic, so Lisa decided not to rain on her friend's parade.

Maybe she was jumping to conclusions about this guy. Maybe he was genuine after all. And she was certainly the last person in a position to make judgments on anyone's character. Debbie was a grown-up, which gave her the right to screw up her own life.

Most likely the jerk wouldn't call and that would be the end of it. Lord knows, all the jerks Lisa had known in her life never called back.





### 3.

## *DEREK*

The jerk had every intention of calling Debbie.

The young man at the counter was twenty-three years old and, for the moment, called himself Derek Grayson. He'd been in Cincinnati for exactly ten days and was living at a fleabag hotel up the street. He was not at all used to working for his money or paying for the roof over his head, but that was all about to change.

His given name was Donnie Joe Grimes, the fourth of six children born to a career welfare mother. He grew up in a trailer park in a small town in the hills of West Virginia. That part of the state was beautiful country, but aside from the whitewater rafting outfits and the souvenir stores for the tourists, there was no work.

Little Donnie Joe never noticed the majestic hills around him. He was too busy trying to survive his childhood. He was an adorable child, once you cleaned him up. Old ladies said he looked like a little angel, but he was far from it. Lying, cheating and stealing came easily to him. Of course, it didn't take long for the good people of the small rural town where he lived to catch on to little Donnie Joe. By the time he was eight, most everyone around knew enough not to believe one word the tow-headed waif said. And to watch their valuables when he was in the vicinity.

But instead of learning that all lies are eventually found out and that the liar suffers the consequences, Donnie Joe learned that you just find new people to lie to. When his mother decided to pack up the family and head to Charleston, Donnie Joe found an endless supply of new people with plenty of stuff to steal. Victims. Marks. Prey. The city was full of them. His family moved around a lot, so every new address, every new school, offered opportunities for his scams.

At ten years old, he was already a professional con man.

The city also offered Donnie Joe the chance to remake himself. He began calling himself Dale Grant. After a number of run-ins with the police, child welfare took him away from his mother, who had no qualms about giving up her son to foster care. Now he was someone else's problem.

He stayed with each family long enough to convince his caregivers their loving home was all he needed to finally turn away from a life of crime. Then he'd pawn the stereo. He'd do a little time in juvenile detention, and it was on to another unsuspecting family.

Donnie Joe/Dale believed he was making people happy. He had an uncanny talent for discerning exactly what a particular person wanted most then convincing that person he could give it to them. For a while, anyway.

A few days after his fifteenth birthday, he decided he'd had enough of living with foster families. Instead of going to school, he took the stash of money he had hidden in his motorcycle boots and bought a bus ticket to Memphis—he'd always wanted to see Graceland. No one bothered to look for him.

By that time, he'd added sex to his repertoire. Men offered money. Women offered food and shelter. He had no qualms about sex with men; it didn't require as much effort as the women did, plus you could rob them afterwards and they'd never turn you in. Women had to have love on top of the sex, and stealing from them, he had to be a lot subtler than walking off with a wallet or a stereo. A pack of checks from the bottom of the box, a credit card surreptitiously lifted from her purse and returned before she noticed—that was where the money was.

Derek knew how to handle women. In fact, he felt he was damn good at it. He could say "I love you" as easily as "pass the salt." Since he'd never seen a normal relationship between a man and a woman, he patterned himself after characters in old movies he'd seen on cable. He even learned to speak like the actors, ridding himself of his Appalachian accent. Cary Grant, Rock Hudson, Charles Boyer and Humphrey Bogart were his mentors; and he knew their methods well. For the two to three weeks he had before the credit card bills arrived, Derek was the Man of Every Woman's Dreams.

The routine worked like a charm. Women went nuts over it. He had memorized a whole soliloquy on how much you—insert name here—meant to him; how he'd never known a woman like you—insert name here—before, and he'd never known what love was until you—insert name here—came into his life.

Even now, down on his luck at Ray's Hollywood Videos, Derek still used the same material word for word.

He was revealing one awful truth about himself every time he gave this speech, though he never realized it. He didn't have the vaguest notion of what love was. And didn't care.



## 4.

### *CLOSING IN*

The last few hours at the video shop flew by as Derek planned his next move. He knew he could probably get at least a few thousand from the fat chick—he'd already checked how much credit she had on the Visa she'd given on her application. He would find out how much more she had once he got her credit report; he had all the information he needed from her video club application, including her Social Security number.

When he arrived in town, he'd hooked up with Kevin, a fellow hustler who'd just gotten a job at a credit office for a department store chain. Kevin could call up a credit report on anyone.

Of course, once his superiors found out about the unauthorized credit checks he was running, Kevin would be fired immediately, but that was at least another two or three weeks away. In the meantime, Derek and his cohort would make the best of the opportunity.

In the world where Derek and Kevin lived, nothing lasted more than two or three weeks.

After hanging the SORRY, WE'RE CLOSED sign on the door and locking up, Derek picked up the phone and dialed. The hotel charged him for phone calls, so he had to conduct his business from the video store. Imagine charging for the damn phone. Not that he ever intended to pay his hotel bill.

"Yo, Kevin, could you run a C-check for me? Yeah, this chick looks pretty good. She's a fat one, and you know how those fat girls are. You just look at them, and they practically throw hundred-dollar bills at you. I just got her available on Citibank...Yeah, three thousand. See what else she's got...Deborah Pratt.

"A party Friday night?...Where?...Oh, I don't know, man. A gallery opening? Pretty damn stuffy, all those snooty stick women and fruits...Okay, guess you're right. It's worth a shot. Those stick women and fruits always seem to have more money than they know what do with...Four-

teenth and Main? What's the name of the place?...A-Lawn? Oh, Elan. I knew a hooker in LA called Elan. Wonder if it's the same chick...See you there Friday around eight-thirty."

Hanging up, Derek felt as close as he ever got to happy. The wheels were turning, and opportunities abounded. Little Donnie Joe was about to get his share.

"Okay, a little after ten isn't too late. Let's do the fat chick," he said to himself as he picked up the phone and dialed her number. Sounding like a grown-up version of the poor little towheaded waif, he said, "Hi, Debbie. This is Derek—you know, from the video store?"



It was so easy. Just act friendly and throw in a few compliments here and there. The excited tone of her voice assured him of a successful venture.

In the guise of getting to know her, he made a mental list of Debbie's financial assets. He managed to find out where she worked as a systems analyst for some whoop-dee-doo company in Blue Ash and that she was making pretty good money, that she drove a late-model Toyota—and that she felt the dealership had ripped her off—and how often she used credit cards. He even got a rundown of her stereo equipment and major appliances.

He figured on a haul of at least twenty thousand, not including the free food and rent, which he expected to be enjoying within the next three or four days. He was just about to be unjustly fired; and sweet, understanding Debbie was going to take him in and help him get back on his feet. She would see his potential and all his good qualities.

The whole scam played out before him like a well-choreographed ballet.

In the empty, darkened store, amid the dusty shelves of old videos and back-room smut, Derek felt invincible. He was going places; he'd be scoring big soon. He was sure that some rich fuck at that gallery opening Friday would find him just as attractive as Debbie did.

To celebrate his upcoming change of fortune, Derek scooped out the cash in the register and stuffed it in his back pocket—something he'd planned the minute he'd started the job. He knew all about his employer's troubles with the vice squad and was sure the last thing Ray wanted was to call any attention to his business. He wasn't going to call the police about it.

Derek could see the fat chick's face just oozing sympathy and generosity as he explained how the money just turned up missing and he got the blame for it.

Then he remembered her bitchy friend. She came into this place a lot—like, what a weirdo!—and was pretty tight with Ray. One look at her, and he knew this was a woman who wasn't buying what he was selling. She would be sure to pass along Ray's version of what happened—i.e., the truth—and would probably badmouth him every chance she got.

But he had that covered, too. Classic case of pretty friend can't stand to see ugly friend happy. It was jealousy, pure and simple, he'd tell Debbie. Experience had taught him that when it came down to him and what their friends said, the women chose him every time.

At least for two or three weeks.

Grinning ear-to-ear, he walked out the door and locked it behind him. Life was good for little Donnie Joe. And about to get better.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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