

***KAZ***



**Karldon Okruta**



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*To all my family and friends  
And to all the people who'd given me help and support  
throughout this project  
And to all those now in the hereafter whom I've known  
and loved  
Who continue to warm my heart and raise my smile*







# *PROLOGUE*

Maynooth—North Hastings County, Ontario  
September 1, 1987

IT WAS A TWENTY-SIX MINUTE drive down the “62” to Winifred’s General Store, an olden-times, barn-like structure built before the famous 1949 uranium finding—a discovery that had triggered an eleven-year mining boom in our middle-of-nowhere community. Back then, townsfolk had ridden in on their horses and buggies from the nearby hamlets to buy their household goods at Winifred’s, but then as time evolved, the main roads were paved and motor vehicles became the way to get around. New businesses had flourished, the diminutive population had grown noticeably, historical sites were drawing in tourism, and the section in front of “Winnie’s,” where the old hitching posts still stood, now served as the Greyhound bus stop. It wasn’t a standard stop on any of the major bus routes though, but rather a “milk-run” stop that comers and goers needed to arrange in advance.

Today’s 4:45 westbound had been requested last week. The silver coach arrived in front of Winnie’s six minutes early and was ready to depart at 4:42.

I was today’s only fetch.

“Your sack’s safe in there, son. You’d best get on,” advised the seasoned operant, locking the baggage compartment. He then stepped up to his driver’s perch, whistling the first seven notes of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.”

The engine quaked vibrantly at start and gradually simmered to an even tremble, waiting to be set into drive.

“Get on, son, we got no time for dawdling; I got a tight schedule to follow, here.”

My focus remained on the two good-looking guys facing me. None of us could garner even a speck of cheeriness. From babyhood

to now, we'd been an integral part of each other's lives, and the fact that our bond was about to break was making my departure even more heart-rending. This easier-said-than-done goodbye held the flavour of abandonment over-salted with awkwardness.

"You bozos take care of yourselves," I mumbled sadly, hugging both friends at once. "Bye, Billie... bye, Matt." Forcing a thin smile, trying to appear brave, I turned with damp eyes and climbed aboard the Greyhound bus.

We began moving the moment I settled into my seat. Looking earnestly out the window, I waved at my buddies until they were no longer in the picture.

Winnie's general store, too, had vanished with them.

The circumstances that led to my being on this one-way ride had been a hopeless battle—nothing but humbling bouts of wasted efforts that sucked spirit from soul and extinguished desire. Without desire, one was a walking cadaver. Right now, my only desire was to not be a cadaver.

# ONE

THERE'D BEEN THREE OF US living on fifty acres, surrounded by countless lakes and rugged highlands. Our dwelling was mortgage-free for more than a decade, thanks to Mom's crafty budgeting. Conversely, Pa's constant craving to win a poker hand had kept all savings depleted and us consistently broke. If Pa had been able to put money away like he'd bet it, we could've had three paid-for houses and a more enriched way of living—but he'd stayed on the chase, playing to recoup his losses, borrowing money, and consequently losing more. As far as he was concerned, a hundred dollars had no better value than a dime, especially when it came to calling someone's bluff.

Unable to break his gambling obsession, but coping with it, Mom had smartly squirrelled away a small bundle of cash behind Pa's back. She'd stashed it in the fridge wrapped in foil, taped behind the crispier. "Should anything happen to me, Kazek, I want you to know this is here," she informed me, as if she'd sensed some sort of tragedy would soon occur.

And it did.

Mom had shown me the aluminum packet last year in August, twelve days before her untimely death. Its contents paid for her funeral services—and then Pa's, five months later. That was it. I had no more family—and only a few hundred dollars to my name.

Left with my parents' possessions, orphaned and stunned, I assumed I'd get by on what I made at the local hotel slinging beer and cleaning tables. As long as the property taxes and utilities could be paid, I foresaw no struggles. Pa, however, had neglected to tell me something before his liver gave up this past February.

It was a rude awakening when the bank called me out of the blue, threatening to repossess my property.

"What are you people talking about? There's nothing owing on this place. It has been paid off for years," I'd argued stubbornly, hanging up on the bothersome woman a second time.

The documents that came in the mail afterwards proved otherwise. Without my knowing, Pa had taken out an equity loan on our house two months after Mom died, and not one installment had been paid. While the card sharks had gained all his money, Pa's smooth talking had been keeping the bank's sharks at bay with defaulting guarantees—and all of a sudden, *boom*, these sharks were ravenous. Anxiety shred my insides as I read the terms, glancing repeatedly at the outstanding balance. *Not only are the monthly payments perverse—they're giving me a month to square up the arrears. How am I going to deal with this? Do I start selling the furniture? I'll have to plead for some leniency and more time. There's no way I'm losing my home...*

Cleaning barns, pumping gas, splitting wood... I did whatever extra I could to sustain the only home I ever knew. Matters worsened when the hotel tavern closed in early April for renovations, abruptly suspending my key income. Alas, I got further and further behind. For every one mollified creditor, another three emerged to badger me. All hopes of upturn were draining as fast as a run of tap water—my best wasn't good enough, no matter what. I couldn't catch up.

After four and a half hellish months, the bailiff came knocking at my door.

“Good afternoon. Are you Mister Kazek Carter?”

“Yes... what can I do for you?” I pretended I had no idea why he would be disturbing me.

“I need to serve you this in person. Today's Friday, July 31st, and you have until Monday, August 31st, midnight, to be out of here.” He spoke coolly, handing me a foreclosure notice. “I'll be back to change the locks on the first of September and I'll be expecting you to be gone.”

Thirty-one miserable days passed, and then today arrived—Tuesday, September 1st. At sunrise, I'd hiked to the cemetery to say goodbye to my parents' plaques and then, reminiscently, I trudged back home for my last time. *Everything happens for a reason* I supposed, uneasy about what the future had charted out for me.

I was still in my emptied house when the bailiff arrived this afternoon, trailed by a locksmith.

“Was I not plain enough with my orders?” he asked gruffly, bothered upon seeing me. “The midnight hour is long gone and you should be, too.”

“I’m just waiting for my friends... they’ll be here shortly,” I explained my lingering presence calmly. “This is a lot harder than I thought it’d be. My mom passed away here a year ago yesterday; she and I were very close. It wasn’t an appropriate day for me to leave, so I stayed until today. I didn’t see what difference it would make.”

“That’s a really sad story. I’m touched, but rules say you’re not permitted to be here. Unless you want to face trespassing charges, you’ll have to wait by the road for your friends. That’s how this system works. Now, if you’d be so kind as to see yourself out, we’d like to go ahead with our work.” The bailiff shot me a smug look and then led the locksmith towards the back door. What bugged me most about him was that he delighted in his compassionless duties, which, in a manner of speaking, empowered him to torch a squirming unfortunate roped to a stake.

“Hello, world,” I said under my breath, stepping onto the porch with my duffel bag in hand. “Here I am, booted out of my home with six dollars and forty-five cents to my name... great. Oh, well. At least I don’t owe anybody anything anymore—not yet, anyway.”

A ghostly tone swelled inside my head at that moment. It came like interference from faraway airwaves, coercing me into action.

*Go back inside... take the crisper out of the fridge... look for the money, Kazek... you have to get the money...*

*Yeah, right. Wishful thinking, my mind rebutted. There’s no money left.*

Impelled nevertheless, I put down my bag and crept back into the house. Treading softly, I slipped into the kitchen and opened the fridge. No light, no electricity. Only a musty odour lingered amid the empty racks. “You’re playing ‘Simon says’ with yourself,” I joked whisperingly, sliding out the once-cold drawer.

Except for a scatter of onion peels, there was nothing in or around the bin. I flipped it to shake out the debris and, with disbelief, noticed a shiny packet patched to the underside.

*No way. That can’t be what I think it is... can it?*

My mind went into a tailspin, questioning.

*Has this always been here? Didn’t I ever look underneath? No... why would I have looked underneath? Mom only showed me the packet at the back—right?*

Apprehensive, I peeled and unravelled the wrapper. “Oh, my, God,” I murmured shakily, counting out ten fifty-dollar bills. *If this isn’t a phenomenon, I don’t know what is.* “Thank you, Mom,” I

uttered, gazing upwards. Then, hearing footsteps, I quickly tucked the money into my rear pocket.

The bailiff burst forth into the hallway, hollering to his helper, “My in-laws have first dibs on this property, so use a premium lock!” He then poked his boar-like face into the kitchen, startling me. “What are you still doing here, and why are you taking the fridge apart? You shouldn’t be touching anything, you know. The contents don’t belong to you anymore.”

“Oh, right... *Jeez*, I’m so sorry, how forgetful of me. Here, you can slide this back where it belongs.” I smiled cutely and handed him the crispier. “Be careful when you bend down, though. Something’s liable to sneak up behind you and kick your butt, right when you least expect it. You have yourself a good day, now... bye-bye.”

I walked out of the house breathing easier, relieved that now I wouldn’t be a financial burden to anyone, at least for the time being. Amazing how a bit of cash can raise one’s confidence.

*TOOT-TOOT!* Matt’s red Chevy convertible pulled up the driveway.

I scanned the acreage I’d grown up on one last time, embedding the divine sweet-grass scents of sun-baked fields into my senses, feeling like a guiltless man whose moment of unjust execution had come. The guillotine’s blade plummeted down at chopping speed, and now I was being resurrected within the same body I’d inhabited.

*TOOT-TOOT!* My angels of mercy were ready to take me to the starting point of a new cycle.

It was time for me to go.

My plan had been to remain in Maynooth, staying at Billie’s house for a while, at least until the hotel reopened. However, last week, while I still had phone service, a long-distance call from our “gone astray” friend, Julie, had changed my mind.

“My apartment’s big enough for both of us,” she’d assured good-naturedly. “Face it, Kaz, you’ve got nothing left in Maynooth except memories. You’ll find a gazillion more opportunities in Toronto, trust me. If I can manage here, then so can you. Besides I, um... already bought your bus ticket. You should be getting it in the mail tomorrow.”

*Julie...* We’d been destined to be friends for life, even though our communications had dwindled from rare to rarer over the past year. I was to blame for that, though, not wanting to depress her with the

updates of my ongoing miseries. I had nothing pleasant or positive to exchange and felt it better to be quiet and unresponsive. Nevertheless, Julie knew what was going on with me from her conversations with Billie and Matt. She'd missed the "outgoing guy who used to be" and, from miles away, had taken my matters into her own hands.

"You have no choice, Kaz, and there's no debating this. You're coming to Toronto and that's that. I'll be at the bus station next Tuesday to pick you up and, um... you'd better be there." She gave her slightly apologetic, chortling laugh. She did this a lot.

As soon as Julie's laugh ended, my phone went dead, cut off by the phone company. I later wondered if that particular moment was a coincidence or an omen; a sign like others I'd gotten, but couldn't read. I also wondered what to do, given such an overwhelming alternative.

*Toronto... me? But I only know country life... my roots are here...*

Even when I'd received the ticket, I was unable to see myself breaking away from my natural habitat. In the back of my mind, though, something was telling me that I'd be doing the right thing by going. After wrestling with gnawing reservations for hours and a day, circling round and round the ring, I conceded defeat and declared my opponent the winner.

*Living with Julie... could be interesting...*

She'd moved to the big city over a year ago, on her own accord. I never figured out why, but that was Julie—always full of surprises. This sparkly-eyed blonde succeeded at getting wide-eyed reactions to many of her peculiar stunts, though her intents were never to flabbergast, but more to instigate a bit of merriment and take some of the humdrum out of the norm.

On a whim once, she'd raced towards a stranger coming out of the hotel tavern and, at two feet away, she hurled her five-foot-six frame up as high as she could, assuming the guy would heroically reach out and catch her. Instead, she dropped at his boots like a gunned-down duck, making him trip and fall on top of her. That was Julie's first encounter with Rory Farrell, who on that day had rolled into our town in his mud-covered jalopy.

"Whatta fugg'r ya think yer doin' ya fugg'n bish?" his drunken speech sprayed onto her face. "Ya try'n'a get fugg'd or what? Ya like hav'n yer fugg'n legs in the air? C'mon, bish, I'll fug ya."

Not expecting such dung-fragranced crudity and instantly regretting her fumbled fly in the air, Julie wincingly manoeuvred out from beneath him and skedaddled. The next day, however, Rory went around telling folks that he and some hillbillies had spent the night “fugg’n the dopey blonde’s brains out,” and Julie’s repute among the gullible went from being a “sweet virgin” to being the “town pump.” Luckily for Julie, who really was a virgin, the degrading scandal waned after everyone got to know Rory a bit better.

Another “Julie spectacular” was when she’d stood on the arm of her couch and, for no logical reason, leaped over a cabinet against the wall. Billie, Matt, and I watched, mortified, as she banged herself into an X shape and then plummeted to the floor with an inelegant grunt. “Oh, um... wow. I don’t know why I did that,” she moaned perplexed, but unharmed. “I, um... really could’ve done some serious damage to myself.” Then she gave her happy, chortling laugh.

Yes, Julie’s actions were somewhat questionable and odd at times, but her heart always beat with the dedicated goodness of a cherub. We were like a brother and sister who’d lived five pastures apart in Eden—and now we were going to be reunited as roommates in her one-bedroom big-city apartment.

Unreal—but true.

The Greyhound bus hummed smoothly, moving along its westbound course in a timely manner, delivering me.

Killing time in a pool of nostalgic thoughts, the fine points of an evening that involved an eastbound bus began to illuminate behind my closing eyes. My mind went back to the night of Julie’s sendoff party, in June of last year, an unforgettable mark in time that proved how inventive our little gang could be, working as a team. Easing back in my seat, I grew aware of a silly smirk warping my mouth. *Oh, what a night... we were evil...*

We were like four peas in a pod: Matt Bolton, Billie Dempster, Julie Marlen, and myself, Kazek Carter. Although we’d surpassed the age of thirty, we all still lived with our folks. None of us had any brothers or sisters, nor did any of us date much; but if we did, it wasn’t for long. We were happiest being amongst ourselves, enjoying a tame life in the country, four of us.

Julie was the first to pursue change. She’d alarmed us with her plans to relocate, which put a bumner start to last year’s summer.

Unable to alter her unbending decision, Billie, Matt, and I pooled enough money to throw her a surprise farewell party at my place. In big lettering, the fronts of the invitations read “OPEN BAR.” Everyone who’d received an invite immediately said they’d come, except for our parents, because they were all going to the Boltens’ cottage for that weekend.

The Saturday events began in the late afternoon. I took Julie on a two-hour walk so she’d remain clueless as to what was going on. Billie and Matt were setting things up in my front yard, but came across problems with the sound system. This was delaying their trip into town.

“The stores are closing soon, Matt. We’d better get the beer and liquor,” said Billie, flustered.

“We still have half an hour. Let’s try reconnecting the wires one more time and then we’ll go, okay?” Matt never liked to leave anything unfinished. “We’ve gotta get these darn speakers to work.”

Tires all of a sudden skidded and squealed off the road.

In dire need of a muffler, Rory Farrell’s beat-up Falcon raced up the driveway, zigzagging. The abrasive redneck had been tarrying about our area for weeks, doing nothing but drinking and being a foul-mouthed nuisance.

“Hey, faggots—where’s the fuck’n free bar? I’m fuck’n thirsty,” Rory shouted, honking the horn, his head hanging out the window. His oval face projected round eyes and big lips, making him look naturally clownish.

The guys watched as he stepped out of the clunker, wearing his usual tight jeans and grease-stained T-shirt. They had no liking for Rory whatsoever and wished he would disappear off the earth.

“We haven’t gone to get the booze yet,” Billie yelled out. “We’re expecting everyone at seven o’clock, so come back then.”

Rory spat vulgarly on the gravel, as he would into a public drinking fountain or a urinal. “You pretty boys been pack’n the fudge all day or what? Fuck, pay me a couple of bucks and I’ll go get the fuck’n booze.”

They hesitated—but as time was of essence, Billie and Matt took Rory’s offer.

An hour later, they were in a sweat, greeting guests and praying for Rory to return.

Julie and I strayed in at seven-fifteen as planned. She was tickled pink, especially when the locals gathered around her to sing “For She’s a Jolly Good Fellow.”

Balloons coloured the trees, music played, food was set on tables... but nobody held a drink. Billie ran up to us, panicking.

“We sent Rory to pick up the alcohol and he hasn’t come back. The asshole’s got our money, the stores are closed, and we’re bone dry.”

Six jugs of Kool-Aid unfortunately didn’t meet our guest’s expectations. Many had felt they’d been lured to an Alcoholic’s Anonymous shindig and cleared out, saving their disappointments to voice around town. Before an hour was up, the only people left in my yard were Julie, Billie, Matt, and I.

“Let’s go find that piece of coon shit, Rory, and kick his ass,” Matt flatly suggested.

“Hold on—I have a better idea,” said Billie, his face stretching into an insidious grin. “Julie, do you still have that outfit you wore at last year’s costume party?”

“Um... yeah, I think so,” she answered pensively, remembering how she’d dressed up as Betty Boop. “It’s probably packed with the things I’m throwing out.”

“Good! We’re gonna have to go get it.” Billie sorted his thoughts for a moment and then looked at me, determinedly. “Kaz, we’re gonna need a few razors and shaving cream and a bottle of your pa’s corn whiskey. That God-awful stuff’s guaranteed to knock anyone out.”

“What are you planning to do?” I asked skeptically.

“I know what I’m doing—trust me on this one; it’ll all be for the best,” Billie assured me with poise, grabbing my arm and pulling me into my house. “You just go round everything up while I call Greyhound to arrange a special pick-up. Mind if I use your phone?”

We disappeared inside. Julie and Matt lit cigarettes and waited by the porch stairs, quietly puzzled.

“What’s he hooking us into, Julie?” Matt whispered guardedly.

“Um... I dunno.” Julie shrugged and puckered a smile. “But I’m sure it’s good, whatever it is; you know Billie!”

“Yeah, I sure do,” Matt sighed, then chuckled. “That’s what scares me.”

The first star showed in the sky as the countryside’s vividness began to dim. Billie explained the game plan to us in Matt’s car en route to Julie’s house. He was known for his wild ideas, but this one cut the cake. In the back seat, Julie and I laughed in spurts as visions of *the scheme* played in our minds.

Matt was also amused, dropping his jaw behind the wheel. “You managed to get a bus going to Montreal, tonight? C’mon, Billie, you can’t be serious!” he cried out, steering sharply into the Marlens’ driveway.

The cunning look on Billie’s face answered *yes, I’m totally serious*. Billie then jumped out of the car and opened the rear door for Julie. “C’mon, little lady, let’s go find your girlie wear.” Flashing a huge grin, he gripped Julie’s hand, and together they ran into her house. His voice streamed out of an open window. “We’ll be back in a few secs, guys; don’t go anywhere.”

“I don’t know about this, Matt,” I commented laughingly, stretching myself out across the back seat.

“Me either, Kaz... me either,” Matt muttered.

Rummaging through boxes in her closet, Julie located a black curly wig and sparkly high-heeled shoes. “Hold on, there’s more...” Handing the items to Billie one by one, she pulled out red fishnet stockings, a black button-up blouse, a black bra, and finally a black mini-skirt. Then, feeling along a back shelf, she found an “Instant Beauty” makeup kit. “So, um... do we need anything else?”

“Nope. What we have here is perfect,” exclaimed Billie, hovering over her. “Let’s get going; it’s getting dark out.”

Psyched, we all drove into town to hunt down Rory. Our first hunch was correct. His car was in the hotel parking lot, looking abandoned. It would subsequently remain there as an aftereffect, indefinitely.

Matt stopped in front of the tavern entrance, leaving the engine running. He looked at Billie and me through his rearview mirror. “You two guys farm out the cow-pie. I’ll wait here with Julie.”

“We shan’t be long. Keep the moonshine handy—our war bride’s gonna be ‘fuck’n thirsty,’” Billie mocked Rory’s signature words, rounding his eyes. “Let’s go get him, Kaz.”

“I’m right behind you, bucko.”

“We’re really gonna go ahead with this, aren’t we?” I heard Julie ask Matt.

“Yep, I guess we are,” he replied, shaking his head slowly up and down.

Billie and I marched into the tavern where I worked during the weekdays. The patrons gawked at us, already brimming with gossip about the party that had “falsely advertised” free booze. Nodding hello, looking about, we noticed our man draped, flaccid, over a table; drunk.

Good.

This task was going to be much easier than we'd anticipated. We sneaked up behind Rory, slipped our hands under his armpits, and lifted him from his chair.

"Whatta fugg'r ya fugg'n doin'? Getta fug off me, ya mugger fugg'n fags." He resisted feebly, unable to shake our grasps.

"Take it easy, bud. We've got a big party to go to, remember?" Billie's voice feigned excitement. "The car's waiting outside for us and so's a bottle of hooch. Even Julie's waiting. She say's she's gonna 'do it' with ya. C'mon, you're gonna have the best time ever."

"Oh, fug, yeah... le's go fugg'n party..."

Rory was like a wet noodle, hanging his head, incapable of standing on his own. Billie and I lugged him to the convertible and set him between us in the back seat. Looking to the front with half-closed eyes, Rory caught Julie staring at him.

"We're all gonna fug ya, ya fugg'n bish. Ya wanna sug my fugg'n dick?" Drool ran down his chin as he extended his tongue at her, wiggling it.

"Um... I don't think so," she mumbled turning her head, shuddering. "*Eew, that's disgusting.*"

"Hey, Rory. Look what we got," Matt playfully teased, handing the whiskey bottle to Billie. He then turned up the radio, stepped on the gas pedal, and zoomed towards a deserted dirt road hidden between a bear's share of tall, white-barked birches.

"*Mmm...* look at what I got, Rory. This stuff's really *good.*" Billie opened the bottle and, cringing at the fumes, waved it past Rory's nose.

"Gimme somma that, ya fugg'n asshole."

"Okay, but you can't use your hands. Angle your head back and open wide, *that's* it... good, boy." Billie winked at me then flipped the bottle into Rory's gaping mouth.

Rory guzzled a third of the barrel juice like it was water. "Ah, fug, yeah. Tha's fugg'n good, man," he spewed out, fluttering his lids before closing them.

Billie slapped Rory's cheeks a few times, lightly. "Hey, wake up, big guy. It's time for another drink, open your mouth—hurry, hurry, hurry." He tipped the bottle once again, drenching his lip-framed target.

“Aargh... ah, fug... ah, yeah. Fugg’n party,” Rory gargled his words, gushing and hacking, and then that was it. He passed out, snoring.

Matt pulled over by a ditch and stopped. “This is as good a spot as any. Nobody comes around here.”

We hoisted Rory out of the car and laid him on soft ground. A minute or so later, he was stripped down to his underwear and covered head to toe with shaving cream.

Billie checked the pockets of Rory’s jeans. “Shit. There’s only fifty-five bucks left. The son-of-a-bitch spent over a hundred bucks of our money,” he loudly complained. “Oh, well. There’s no sense in bitching about it now. Everyone grab a shaver and let’s get to work.”

All of Rory’s hair, except his pubic region, was carefully scraped off inch by inch. Rory, completely motionless, didn’t look like Rory anymore. He resembled an androgynous store mannequin.

“Take a gander at these beauties,” Matt jested, running his hand along Rory’s calves. “They’re smooth as butter, *woo-hoo!*”

Billie rinsed all remaining lather with the corn whiskey, using Rory’s shirt as a wipe-cloth. He then tore the saturated rag into pieces and stuffed them into the bra cups. “You’ve got more practice at this, Julie. Can you fasten these hooters around his chest? Be careful though, they smell pretty bad.”

“Um... sure.” She accepted the packed bra, chortling, and then her face distorted. “Whoa, you’re right. Man... this thing really, really stinks.”

Matt began rolling the fishnet stockings up Rory’s legs, but encountered a glitch. “Oh-oh—these darn things are too short. I can’t get the panty part past his hips.”

“Just poke his feet through the bottoms; then you’ll be able to yank the top part up,” suggested Billie, shrugging.

“But then the bottoms are gonna bunch above his ankles and his feet will be exposed.”

“So, what’s the big deal? Once we clamp the high heels on those hoofs, it’ll all look good.”

“Okay, if you say so. Here goes...”

We did the best we could with what we had. With the blouse tails now tied above his navel and the skirt draping below, Rory was coming along fine.

Julie applied makeup to his snoring face and shaped the wig on his scalp. Her experience with cosmetics was next to nil, but she'd somehow managed to make the end result passable.

"It's too dark to see what I'm doing, guys. I, um... think I overdid it with the lipstick and the mascara, but it'll have to do. What do you think?"

"Wow." Matt was impressed by the transformation. "That's amazing, Julie. He looks more like Betty Boop than you did—and those eyelashes, shit... they must be three inches long."

"You drew his eyebrows way too high, Jules," I said, snorting accidentally. "He's going to look like he's in shock whenever he blinks at anyone."

"Hmm." She shrugged carelessly. "Oh, well. He can change them if he doesn't like them."

"I think we did a splendid job," Billie praised, gloating. "We've gotta hit the road, guys. This babe's got an appointment with destiny."

While our creation snored next to him, bowed and undisturbed, Matt drove us back into town. He parked outside Winnie's, where a Greyhound bus was idling.

"There it is, right on time." Billie jumped out from the back seat. "You strong men carry the lady while I schmooze the driver."

"I'll, um... just enjoy the show from here," Julie decided, climbing into the front seat after we'd cleared it. "Good luck, guys," she giggled.

Matt and I positioned a noticeably taller, high-heeled Rory between us. His feet dragged negligently, scouring the pavement as we moved along behind Billie.

"Look at us. We're like two hunchbacks hauling a corpse," Matt muttered humourlessly.

The bus driver opened the door, scowling. "What's going on here?" he asked suspiciously, looking down upon Billie.

Billie cleared his throat before speaking.

"The lady here needs to go to Montreal, sir; I think it's urgent. She's had a few too many drinks and fell asleep a few minutes ago. She's sort of like a rag doll right now, as you can see, so we're just helping out and making sure she gets on the bus safely, that's all. She didn't have any luggage, but here's the thirty-two dollars for her fare."

Wearing a face that could easily pass him off as a member of the celestial hierarchy, there was no need for Billie to say anything else.

Leaning down from his seat to accept the cash, the driver had obviously fallen for Billie's schmoozing. "Just be careful bringing her up the stairs," he cautioned, radiating a friendly smile. "You young gentlemen don't want her to get bruised, now, do you?"

Billie answered with an even more radiant smile, then stepped away and gestured for us to get on with it.

Matt and I lifted the glamorous Rory onto the bus, and, as we dragged him down the aisle, the wretched stench of corn whiskey began to fill the space around us.

"Don't put her beside me, whatever you do—she stinks," one male passenger candidly stated, motioning for us to move on past him.

"That woman looks and smells like a dirty whore. They should get her off," someone bitterly muttered behind us.

We plopped Rory into a seat at the back and then swiftly got off the bus, suspending our laughter.

"Goodnight, sir," Matt managed to say to the driver.

Billie stood waiting for us by the door. "Good job, guys; let's go to the hotel for a beer. We deserve it. We've done our good deed for the day."

We got into Matt's Chevy convertible and watched the bus drive away into the starry night.

*Bye-bye, Rory.*

"That was kind of an interesting bon voyage party, guys, um... thanks," Julie commented on the way to the hotel.

Rory never came back to North Hastings County, though once in a while his name cropped up here and there. The town rumour was that he'd joined a carnival... but nobody really knew for sure what had become of him.

Nobody really cared.

Our driver's voice surged through the PA system, jolting me out of my daydream. "We'll be arriving at the Toronto terminal in twenty-five minutes."

The young man beside me stirred, but couldn't contain his yawn. "Excuse me," he groaned lethargically, disregarding my presence. Tranquilized by the music playing inside his headset, he slanted his head towards the aisle and turned into a statue.

From behind, the toilet swished a second time. The woman who'd sat ahead of us had been in the tiny cubicle for almost an hour. I wondered if she'd gotten stuck.

*CLICK.* The latch opened.

Laboriously, the poor soul waddled down the walkway. Her bountiful hips swept the sides of the seats, creating a noise similar to washboard scrubbing. When she ambled past our row, her tail end whacked the headset off my neighbour's ears.

"Wha...?" he gasped, suddenly perked.

"Watch it, you little prick."

Her abrupt rudeness was surprising. She glared at him hatefully, and then grounded herself into her seats—she took up two of them. Moments later, an odious smell of salt and vinegar prevailed. She smacked her lips as she began shoveling handfuls of potato chips into her mouth, noisily masticating. Then, sucking her fingers clean, she leaned forward and farted twice... three times. These were not mild putt-putts that went by unnoticed, that's for sure.

"What a cow! *PHEW!*"

He didn't intend for her to hear him, but she did. Pushing out of her seats, the woman turned in our direction, glowering. "There's lots left where I keep the sardines. Do you want some more?" she offered raising her tone.

"No," the man at my side timidly replied.

"Then mind your own business, twerp." Again, the woman waddled to the rear of the bus and squeezed into the lavatory.

Biting my upper lip to refrain from laughing out loud, I observed the protean views outside my window. Quiescent sunset hues extended over a now-distant countryside. Dizzying multi-storey buildings and blocks of cloned houses emerged. Then farther along, factory smokestacks emitted streams of smoke, masking the sky.

*There's no way I'll be able to get used to this,* I thought, instantly homesick.

Thousands of windows sparked from numerous skyscrapers as our bus entered the city. I'd never seen anything like it, except in films and magazines. Glued to the sights as we rambled along into the core, I felt a strange excitement building inside me. *This is a whole different world. I'm in for an adventure, that's for sure...*

"Toronto downtown terminal. Kindly remain seated until we've come to a full stop."

The driver pulled into the depot and then alongside a concrete platform. With a loud settling hiss, the bus came to a standstill.

"So—I'm here," I murmured with a fretful sigh to my faint reflection in the window. "I know you're with me Mom."

## TWO

WHEN I STEPPED OFF THE BUS, a handler passed me the duffel bag containing my worldly belongings. I then had to twist my way through swarms of people to get into the station. *Wow, this place is insanely busy...* my mind raced wildly as my eyes shifted in every direction.

An aged man sat hunched in a corner. His scaly hands reached out, begging as passersby tossed him the odd coin.

*I'm never gonna become like that,* I promised myself, momentarily touched by sadness, understanding the anguish and humility that accompanied poverty. *Nobody in this world should have to live that way, ever.*

A skinny girl with tattooed arms and a shaved head approached me. It certainly wasn't Julie. "Excuse me, sir, do you have any spare change?" the late teen asked with fidgety eyes, clenching her browned, rotting teeth.

"Sure... it ain't much, but this is all the change I got." I gave her the quarter and two dimes from my front pocket, oblivious to the fact that she was actually "jonesing" and in need of a cocaine fix.

"Thanks, man," the girl muttered, wavering, and then she trailed off to ask someone else for more money.

I felt culture shocked, big time. Then, somewhere above the commotion, I heard my name being shouted. I looked around, lost.

"KAZ! KAZ, YO, OVER HERE!"

Forty feet ahead stood Julie on a bench, frantically waving her arms above her head. She looked identical to when I'd seen her a year ago, when she'd come back to Maynooth for Mom's funeral. Shoulder-length hair parted in the middle, eyes sparkling with endless delight—nothing about her seemed different. Excitement overtook me as I happily waved back, feeling instant relief at being found amidst all the unsettled craziness.

Julie charged towards me with widespread arms. “Kaz, I’m so thrilled to see you,” she gleefully broadcasted as I put my bag down, preparing for a big embrace.

*Oh-oh—she’s not slowing down*, I realized two seconds before her cannonball impact made floor garnishes out of us.

“Um... hi,” Julie said demurely, standing up and brushing dirt off her jeans, unaffected by the fall.

“Hi,” I replied with a weak laugh, lifting my carcass off the ground, rubbing the back of my head. “That was one helluva greeting.”

“Yeah, um... I had to make sure it was a good one,” she laughed. “Are you okay?”

“Couldn’t be better.” I gave her a gentle hug. “Good to see you again, Jules. You look great.”

“You look good yourself, Kaz. A little stressed and underweight, maybe, but still, really, *reeeally* good.” Julie paused and looked at me seriously for a moment. “I feel awful about all the crap that’s happened to you since after I moved and, um... for not being there for you when your dad died. You’ve really been through a lot—are you sure you’re okay?”

I smiled warmly, knowing she saw the look of discouragement in my eyes. “I’m fine, Jules. Really.”

“I’m so glad that you’re here. Everything’s gonna be hunky-dory from here on—you’ll see.”

We hugged each other again, meaningfully.

“So... how does going a block for a beer sound before we go home?” she brightly suggested. “It’ll help you unwind and adjust to the change.”

“Sure. I can definitely use a beer about now.” I picked up my bag and then curled my free arm around her shoulder. “C’mon, Jules. Get me out of this zoo.”

Looking more like a romantic couple than best friends, Julie and I ambled out of the crazy terminal and onto the lit-up, noisy streets of Toronto.

Rock-and-roll music bellowed from inside the bar as Julie and I approached. An immense doorman with ass-level hair tied in a thick ponytail greeted us with a congenial nod. “Room over there by the bar,” he directed, pointing to a section where I couldn’t see space for two people to fit into.

After several “Scuse me’s,” Julie and I managed to get to the stand-up area beside the bar. She then went to order from the bartender while I lit a cigarette and marvelled at the surroundings.

Folks sure appeared a whole lot different here than back home, especially the girls. They wore a variety of hairstyles, unlike the domestic spaniel do’s the ladies in Hastings County copied off each other. Their clothes and accessories were more colourful, stylish, and better fitting. Toronto girls were attractive and fashion wise. Even the guys seemed cleaner looking and somewhat conscientious about their images. Then, gazing deeper into the crowd, to my bewilderment I spotted a few startling exceptions that were prematurely primed for Halloween.

A clique of five persons sat around a table, staring at each other pensively. They all had assorted bits of hardware sticking out of their ears, lips, noses, and eyebrows. Three had jet-black hair straggling over their blanched faces and rose-red lips, making them appear vampire-like. These three I figured to be females. The other two characters flaunted spiked, multi-coloured hair and blackened eyes, which were complemented by cobweb designs drawn across their temples. I was unable to determine their genders.

Julie came up behind me. “So... what do you think so far?”

I turned to see her grinning and handing me a beer. I accepted the bottle and shrugged, lost for words.

“It’s not like home, I know. Don’t worry, Kaz. You’ll get used to everything in no time at all. Cheers. Here’s to your fresh start.”

We clanked bottles and indulged in a long, cold, refreshing swallow.

I couldn’t help wondering how Julie had managed to maintain her small-town demeanour, uninfluenced by anything my eyes were currently sampling. Even her chronic little laugh sounded with the same staccato pulse, characterizing her speech as always. Julie hadn’t transformed to the likes of the big city girls, not at all. She was a basic fern amidst all the chirpy birds of paradise. Although she was slim and had a shape worth showing off, she chose to hide her figure in loose clothes, just as she had back home. Her pretty face wasn’t highlighted with any makeup, but concealed partially by her hair. This was how she’d looked since our teens.

We smoked cigarette after cigarette, standing in one spot sipping our beers, reminiscing about some of the good times we’d had in

Maynooth. It began to feel like we hadn't been apart for more than a day.

"I just realized I gotta go pee," Julie announced rapidly, farcically clenching her teeth at me. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Don't take off anywhere."

Soon after Julie scrambled off to the ladies' room, a voluptuous young lady, perhaps twenty-five, came up to me. She was fashionably dressed in a black hip-hugging skirt, knee-high boots and a white, low-cut top that revealed an impressive bustline. Her rich hair, dark and crimped, fell loosely to her waist.

"Hi, was that your girlfriend?" Her tone was soft and sultry. Her makeup was expertly done up like the girls' I'd seen in girlie magazines. A shifty grin enlivened her pretty face, showing awareness that I was eyeing her chest.

"Um... no. She's my friend... my, um... best friend," I stumbled over my words, feeling at once embarrassed.

"That's nice." The alluring female hummed a giggle and pointed a ringed finger into the crowd, making me glance in that direction. "My girlfriend sitting over there and I both agree that you are absolutely gorgeous. Tell me, are you single?" Her full smile revealed perfect white teeth.

"Yes—yes, I am," I answered throatily, taken aback by her forwardness. I'd never heard of a guy being referred to as "gorgeous" and most certainly had never thought of myself in that category.

She extended her bejewelled hand palm down, very ladylike, changing the position of her fingers just enough to make the precious stones twinkle. "My name's Charmaine. And you would be?"

"Kaz Carter." I gently squeezed the thin-skinned area between her knuckles and her long manicured nails and shook twice. "How do you do?"

"It's very nice to meet you, Kaz. You look like you're from out of town. Are you?"

"Uh-huh."

"Where are you from?"

"Maynooth."

"Where?" she squealed, squinting her face.

"Maynooth," I repeated with a snort. "Real small place in Hastings County, east of here... wonderful farm country."

“Oh, okay. Are you just visiting?”

“No, I’m going to be living here. I just got off the bus about forty-five minutes ago.” I took a quick peek in the direction Julie had disappeared into. “I’m staying with my friend who’s still in the bathroom.”

“That’s terrific—welcome to Toronto. Listen, Kaz, I have to get back to my girlfriend, so let me give you my phone number, okay?”

“Sure, okay.”

Charmaine opened a leather pouch that hung off her belt and took out a pen and note pad. She wrote quickly, then tore out the paper and handed it to me. “Here, don’t lose this. Call me any time you feel like going somewhere. I know all the hot spots and I’d be more than willing to show you around.”

“Thanks, Charmaine. That’s very kind of you,” I said politely, easing a big smile.

“*Mmm...* you really *are* gorgeous. I’m going to look forward to seeing you again, Kaz. Call me soon, all right?” She tickled my cheek with a few feathery scrapes of her nails, and then she strutted back to her table.

I watched as she leaned into her girlfriend, shielding her mouth as if to tell a secret. *Gorgeous, huh?* I mused, tucking her info into the rear pocket where my ten “miracle” fifties were secured.

On the way back from the ladies’ room, Julie tripped on a stair and stopped her fall by latching onto some man’s arm, which in turn caused him to spill his drink onto his beige slacks. A prominent stain resembling Italy on a map shaped neatly from his groin, lengthening down one leg. She offered him a ten to replace his beverage and pay for cleaning—but he refused and waved her on, keeping his eyes fixed jadedly on her as she walked away.

*That girl hasn’t changed one teensy little bit; her feelers are still glued on backwards,* I thought with a snort, shaking my head at the mishap.

“So, um... I guess my version of *Swan River* didn’t go over too well.” Julie came to stand in front of me, her face still flushed as a result of her klutziness. “I’m kinda ready to go now if you are.”

“I’m ready.” I lifted my bag and motioned for her to walk ahead of me. “After you, Jules; lead on—but watch out for that pole over by those railings.”

“Don’t worry, I see it.”

Just before we exited, I looked over my shoulder and saw Charmaine and her equally pretty friend observing us. They delicately wiggled their fingers my way, tittering. I smiled and waved goodbye to them, then continued behind Julie.

The doorman nodded his head and bade us a firm good night.

Within two blocks we passed by more people than our hometown's population. I was truly out of my element; a foreigner fresh in from "the land that time forgot." There was so much beating on the senses to take in all at once—so much cultural diversity... light and noise... panhandling... pungent smells of fast foods... interminable motor traffic...

An old-timer sat on a crate in front of a store window, plunking a one-stringed guitar, bouncing a foot to his same-note concerto. "Bless you, my friend," he acknowledged Julie's dropping of two quarters into his case.

"I always see that guy in that same spot whenever I come down here," Julie mentioned to me as we continued along the endless street. "I bet you he makes a better living than I do, playing that same song over and over again." Laughing, she led me through a wide gap between two buildings and into an alleyway, where a yellow Volkswagen Rabbit waited for us. "There's my car."

"You have a car?" I asked, suddenly filled with angst, calling to mind her skills behind a wheel.

"Yep, I bought it in spring just for shopping and stuff. It's six years old, but it runs great." She unlocked the doors on both sides and then slipped into the driver's seat. "C'mon, get in."

I sat silently crunching my molars as she drove up Yonge Street, the infamous main vein that divided the city's east and west. Although she'd never had an accident, Julie was a horrendous driver as far as I was concerned—braking the last second at every red light, gawking the opposite way while making turns, swerving too much across the centre lane... These were just a few of her habitual and menacing driving habits.

We came to a street lined with high-rise buildings, and Julie turned onto it sharply, bumping the rear wheel over the curb.

"You live in one of these, huh?" I asked, intrigued by a sight so unfamiliar to a country boy, trying to sound composed.

"Yep, this one."

I spontaneously bared my teeth and gripped the dashboard as she steered into a semicircular driveway without reducing her speed; then an agitated grunt escaped me when she abruptly stomped on the brakes—right at the start of a steep ramp.

“Here we are, home sweet home. All we have to do now is park the car in the underground garage.” Julie rolled down her window and inserted a plastic card into an electronic box. At once, an extra-wide metal door at the bottom of the ramp began to rise, opening a gateway to the depths of the earth.

*Wow... that’s kind of nifty*, I thought as the door got to the top of its frame—but then my stomach tore up behind my Adam’s apple as Julie’s foot hit the gas pedal. We whooshed down the hill and through the opening, and then she veered onto another slope that spiralled to the sub-basement.

“This garage is like a maze. I got lost down here a few times,” she said with her two-beat laugh.

I glared at her edgily, not saying a word, certain that a rickety roller coaster ride in a shopping cart would be more endurable than this nerve-busting joyride.

“Over there’s where I park.” Julie zipped into the first of three spots between two concrete pillars and slammed on the brakes. “We’re here,” she intoned, shutting off the engine and pulling the key out of the ignition.

*WHEW... we made it in one piece! Thank you, Lord.* I eased out of the car with wobbly legs, swearing I’d never again get into a car with Julie driving.

A thunderous racketing boomed unexpectedly over top of us.

“That’s just a car leaving,” Julie explained, noticing my alert expression. “You really get a strong echo down here.”

We passed through an exit door and entered an undecorated foyer, where one of three elevators waited with an open door. We stepped in and Julie touched to spark number 14 above number 12 on the wall panel.

“Why’s there no number thirteen, Jules?” I asked curiously.

“Um... I dunno—superstition, maybe. I know I wouldn’t want to be on a thirteenth floor; I’m on the fourteenth.”

“Well isn’t the fourteenth actually the thirteenth, if there’s no thirteen between twelve and fourteen?”

“Um...” Julie looked at sea for a moment. “I’ve never thought of it like that, but wow—yeah, you’re right.”

The door slid shut and the compartment began to rise.

I watched the overhead numbers light on and off as we rose past each floor. “What’s the ‘P.H.’ beside 29 stand for?”

“Oh, um... that’s where the rooftop swimming pool is.”

“A rooftop swimming pool?” I exclaimed with sudden interest.

“Yep. I haven’t been in it yet, but it’s kind of a bonus.” Julie gave her little laugh, and then the elevator stopped, the door slid open, and we stepped out. I followed Julie down a red-carpeted corridor to unit 1410. I could vaguely hear whistling winds circulating around the building. Music and conversation sounded loudly from inside unit 1408.

“I guess my neighbour has company.” Julie flicked on a light as we filed into her apartment. “You can put your stuff by the door for now, Kaz.”

A small rectangular hallway led to a clean, comfortable-looking living room. Beige carpeting, a camel-coloured sectional couch and a floor-to-ceiling wall unit made the space cozy. Facing the couch corner was a rocking chair, which I immediately recognized. It was Julie’s favourite piece of furniture that used to be in her room, back home.

“You wanna beer?” she kindly offered, turning on a lamp and then the stereo radio.

“Sure.” I removed my boots and went to sit on the couch. “This is a nice place you’ve got, Jules. It’s very homey.”

“Thanks.” Julie passed through a set of swinging saloon doors that hid an undersized kitchen and, after a subtle clanking commotion, returned with a bottle of beer in each hand. “These are really cold; you just gotta twist the cap off.” She passed me one and sat down in the rocker, just as her bedroom door creaked and a sleek black cat came prancing out.

“Meow.”

“You have a cat? I thought you didn’t like cats.”

“Well, um... they weren’t my favourite until I met *this* guy. I didn’t know a cat could have so much personality. His name’s Duke. He’s not mine, but I’d love to keep him. I’m just looking after him for my friend, Sue, while she’s away. She’s visiting with her folks in Sudbury this week and, um... she should be back after the long weekend.”

“Oh, really... Sudbury?”

“Yep. That’s where she’s from originally.”

“That’s where they trained astronauts to walk on the moon,” I said with a laugh, somewhat familiar with Sudbury—the Nickel Capital of the world. Having been an aspiring novelist back in my school days, I’d considered applying to Sudbury’s Laurentian University to further my education—but then as issues at home cropped up, my aspirations became a pipe dream. There was no way I’d leave Mom alone with Pa, regardless of how encouraging she was about my writing potential. In fact, I ended up leaving school halfway through the twelfth grade.

“Meow.” Duke skittered up to me and began brushing himself against my shins, back and forth, purring for my attention.

“Hey, Duke—what’s up?” I spoke impishly, giving him several head-to-tail strokes. “He’s very friendly with people, isn’t he, Jules?”

“Yeah—it’s pretty easy to get used to him.”

Content with his rub-down, Duke slinked away from me then stiffened, fixing his dark green eyes upon Julie with a freaked-out glare.

“Here, pussy, pussy, pussy... here, pussy, pussy, pussy...” she began whispering at him, teasing him further by running her fingers like five-legged crabs along her thighs. “Pss-pss-pss... here, pussy, pussy, pussy...”

Duke prudently prepared a pounce, and then he leaped onto her lap and over her shoulder in one swift motion. Landing gracefully behind her on the carpet, he hastily scampered into the kitchen.

“He likes jumping across me like that, but only when I’m sitting in this chair.” Julie smiled and shrugged at me. “It’s kinda like a little circus trick we invented.”

“Talented cat; I’m impressed.” I chuckled and peered under the saloon doors to see Duke polishing up a bowl of tuna remains.

The radio switched from a rocking Billy Idol tune to a Peter Gabriel chart topper. Julie and I undid the tops off our beers, but held off on taking a drink.

“So, Kaz, this is going to be your room. The couch folds out into a really comfortable bed and you’ve got the TV in front of you.”

“This is great, Jules. Thank you.”

She pointed to the hallway closet. “You can hang all your stuff in there, whenever you’re ready to unpack.”

The space looked plentiful, but still, I snickered at the irony of going from house to closet.

Julie got up from her rocker and went to the wall unit to pick something off a shelf. “You’re also going to need these. This key opens the door to the lobby and the pool area, and this one’s for the apartment.” She handed them to me. “Welcome to your new home.”

“Thanks again, Jules. I really appreciate what you’re doing for me. I’ll get you back one of these days, I promise.”

“Don’t you dare think about that for even one second. It’s a privilege to help in any way I can without you feeling like you owe me. That’s what friends are for, Kaz.” She pointed her beer at me. “Cheers.”

“Cheers, Jules... to great friends.”

We daintily clanked bottles and tasted the frosty wetness, approving it with satisfied grins.

Julie plunked herself back into the rocking chair. “I know you’re probably hungry, so um... I can make some turkey sandwiches—unless you’d rather get a pizza or something.” She reached to pick a delivery menu off a side table and then extended it to me. “This place has good food.”

“Turkey sandwiches sound great,” I eagerly replied, disregarding the red-and-white pamphlet.

“Okey-doke. I’ll even slice them into quarters, just like you’re used to having them.” Julie sprang out of the rocker and rushed into the kitchen. “Do you still prefer brown bread?”

“It doesn’t matter, Jules, really. I’m no longer as fussy as you remember me to be.” I stooped to see under the swinging partition. “Can I help you with anything in there?”

“Nope.” Her head was well inside the refrigerator. “I just gotta find some lettuce.”

I took a swig of beer and then listened for a moment to the ongoing sounds beyond the balcony—sounds of continuous two-way traffic, thirteen floors down.

“So... have you made many friends since you’ve moved here, Jules, or has any ‘Mister Right’ come around for you yet?”

“Um... no, not really,” she answered carefully, laying her sandwich makings on the counter. “I, um... go out with Sue quite a bit. She likes to have a good time and she’s got an incredible personality; she’s kinda unique.”

“Oh, yeah? How’d you two meet?”

“I work in foreign exchange and, um, she needed some U.S. currency, so she came to where I work. That was a while ago,

maybe two months after I moved here. Anyhow, we went out for a few drinks one night and got really hammered and, um... we've been really close friends ever since."

"Hmm. Good way to get to know someone, I guess."

Julie came through the swinging doors holding a platter of sandwiches, while Duke purred and squirmed around her feet. "Yeah, Sue's great. I've told her a lot about you and, um... she's excited about meeting you when she gets back. I said I'd make dinner and she's gonna come over." Gently moving Duke aside with the side of her foot, Julie set the platter on her oval coffee table. "How about you? Whatever happened to that girl you said you were seeing around Easter time—Judy, or was it, Janie?"

"Jodie," I corrected with a snort. "We drifted apart real fast. The more shit that kept coming around, the more difficult it became to see one another. She wanted a guy that was financially stable, and I was not that guy."

A frown enhanced the faint lines on Julie's forehead. "Dumb chick. It just goes to show that some people don't know a good thing when they have it."

"It was no great loss, believe me, Jules. Anyway, I'm supposed to be starting my life over again, right?"

"Right," Julie robustly agreed.

"That was then and this is now, right?"

"Right!"

We finished our beers and the sandwiches. Julie ate two quarters, and I devoured the rest. Upbeat music resumed playing on the radio, following a news report and a car sales advertisement.

Julie stood up, stretching her arms, and let out a gaping yawn. "It's going on midnight and I have to be up early for work tomorrow. There's a blanket, sheets, and a couple of pillows in the—I mean *your* closet. If you want more beer, well, you know where it is."

"I'll pass on the beer, but I do need to catch up on some rest. I didn't eat all day and I think the sandwiches made me sleepy all of a sudden. I'm stuffed."

Julie looked at me thoughtfully. "It's so good to be with you again, Kaz. I missed you and, um... I'm happy you made the move. I know things will be awkward for a while, but you'll get used to it all. I know you will, trust me," she guaranteed with a growing smile. "You're gonna do great, you'll see."

My sense of optimism had fizzled many months ago. I didn't feel as positive about my fate as she did.

"You're a true friend, Jules; you always have been. Thanks for the encouraging words—now go to bed so you'll be fresh for work. *Git!*"

Julie chuckled at my country twang then wandered into the adjoining room, where Duke had already curled up at the foot of her bed. Moments later, she came out wearing a full-length cotton nightie and gently kissed me on the forehead. "You are my best friend, Kaz, and you have nothing to worry about. Everything is going to be hunky-dory. Okay?"

"Okay." I smiled like a trusting little boy.

"I'll be as quiet as possible in the morning so you can sleep in."

"Okay. Goodnight, Jules."

"Goodnight, Kaz." She gave me a reassuring look and slipped back into her room, closing the door. Two minutes later, her light went off.

I quietly unfolded the couch and then gathered the bedding from the closet. *Wow... this is really going to be a different life*, I realized, spreading the sheets evenly over the mattress. *Take it one day at a time, Kazek—one day at a time.*

I stripped to my briefs and T-shirt, then stretched out beneath the blanket and sank my head into the down-filled pillows. The bed was comfortable, as Julie said it would be. With the lamp dimmed and softer music playing on the radio, I blocked out my thoughts and drifted into a luxurious slumber.

The night winds sang sporadically around the tall building, which contained the apartment that was now home.

## THREE

DUKE FINISHED RUSTLING in his litter box by the toilet, then he moved sneakily into the sunlit living room and jumped onto the foot of the couch bed. Hunching his back then relaxing it, purring loudly, he carefully climbed onto my stomach and began kneading his paws as if working dough, waking me.

“*Huh?*” I popped open my lids and grimaced at the needling sensation, suddenly mindful of my whereabouts. “Oh... hey, there, Duke. You’re real cute but, it’s about those claws first thing in the morning—ouch.” I lifted him off my abdomen and gently set him on the floor. “Good morning, Jules,” my voice sounded with good cheer. “Are you gone to work yet?”

No answer.

Duke began sharpening his nails on the side of the couch.

“Hey—don’t be doing that on Julie’s furniture.” I clapped twice and he took off into Julie’s bedroom. Finding a sunny spot on top of her laundry hamper, he settled in for a snooze.

The radio was still on from last night—no music, just a woman talking. I folded my hands behind my head and listened to the end of her report on Toronto real estate.

“...The average cost of a semi-detached home in Toronto was fifty-six thousand in 1985, seventy-eight thousand in 1986, and has escalated to a whopping hundred-and-nine thousand in 1987. Isn’t that something? Experts predict prices will continue to rise by at least twenty percent over the next year, as the sellers’ market remains strong and the demand for new housing increases.”

“Well, so much for even dreaming about ever buying a house here. That’s really reaching for the stars.” I snorted dismally then eased out of bed, stretched, and barefooted past the swinging saloon doors.

A half-pot of coffee sat on the kitchen counter, still warm. Next to it was a note with a twenty-dollar bill clipped to it.

*Good morning sleepyhead.*

*Hope I didn't disturb you when I left for work. Coffee made at 7:45—just make a new pot if it's stale. Loads of food in fridge—eat up. I don't know how your cash situation is so I'm leaving you some just in case. I can't remember my phone number at work but I'll call you later if I have a chance.*

*Luv, Julie*

Taken aback by Julie's thoughtfulness and acknowledging how lucky I was to have her for my friend, I put the note back on the counter with the twenty still attached. I didn't need any cash from anyone. I wouldn't want to accept any even if I did—unless of course I worked for it. There was still some thread of dignity left in me that I hadn't been stripped of.

I poured myself a black coffee, which tasted fine, and then sauntered out onto the balcony—a five-by-ten-foot concrete playpen spotted with gobs of pigeon droppings and featuring a panoramic view of the surrounding high-rises. A sparse patch of treetops, the only visible vegetation, showed like yellowing broccoli between two buildings. “Ugh,” I thought aloud, at the same time finding the pre-autumn city air murky, lacking the fresh scents of country air. I then leaned an inch over the steel railing and looked down, right away seeing twice more distance to the ground than from the top of our town fair's Ferris wheel. “Whoa—okay, that's good enough for me,” I muttered and went back inside, recognizing I wasn't a fan of heights.

However, that stroke of uneasiness wouldn't deter me from going up to swim in the rooftop pool. No way. I wanted to get physically fit again—step one towards positive change. Swimming had always put me into a good mental frame and kept me in lean form, not overly muscular but well toned. A good diet, however, had been an unaffordable luxury and I'd become at least fifteen pounds underweight, extra-lean but not gaunt. I needed to start eating properly and exercising regularly—beginning today. The dare to

once more want something for myself, to desire, awakened cautiously within my emotive safety zone.

Upon opening Julie's fridge, I made a gruesome face at the higgledy-piggledy mess of odds and ends she'd crammed inside—half bad, half good. This girl threw nothing out; even a turkey leg without a smidgen of meat on it was being stored between two plates. As desperate as I'd gotten, I'd never been that frugal—and Julie was nowhere near desperate. She was always into saving a buck, but this keeping of useless bits and bites was absurd. I took the initiative to throw into the garbage the bone and whatever else was expired or unidentifiable, filling two garbage bags. I ate what was still edible of two blackened bananas, finished a blueberry muffin that had one bite out of it, then cleaned the fridge interior and made room for new fare that I intended to buy, thanks to the money I'd found yesterday. Certainly I'd come across a supermarket somewhere in the vicinity—and while there, I could also see about a job. *Excellent plan.*

After organizing my stuff into the hall closet, I put on my swim trunks, grabbed a towel and my keys, and then went for an elevator ride up to “P.H.”

“Wow... this is really first class,” I mumbled, awed, pitter-pattering into the “Bathing Suits Must Be Worn” area. One wall was entirely windowed, with two sets of sliding glass doors leading onto a wide-ranging concrete sundeck. I didn't go out, but was able to see from inside the remarkable vastness of the city.

There was nobody in the long and narrow pool, which smelled heavily of chlorine. First dabbing a foot to test the water's temperature, I dove into the deep end and glided as far as I could before surfacing, totally exhilarated. After twenty-some-odd lengths, feeling unusually good about myself, I dried and went back down to the apartment. *Bring on the day.*

Duke was now lying on one of my pillows, and I clapped to get him off so I could fold the bed back into a couch. He again scooted into Julie's room, but this time hid under her bed and remained there.

One more thing I wanted to do before heading out, for good luck, was to wrap eight of my ten fifties in foil and tape the lot to the back of the crisper. *A hundred bucks should keep me going for a while*, I figured. If I had to break into the pack next week or the week after, so be it. Step two towards positive change—I'd simply go with the

flow and not allow myself to worry anymore. *A lot of good that did me.*

Out in the untried territory with no clue as to which way to go, I stopped and asked a pedestrian for directions to a grocery store. It wasn't far, eight blocks, and along the way were some businesses I thought might be worth visiting.

"Sorry, I just hired a girl last week," said one restaurateur.

"We're overstaffed right now, but try back next month." Two different bar managers gave me the same line, word for word.

"We don't take applications here," an old biddy behind a doughnut counter was brusque with me.

"No, we no looking for nobody—no job here, you go now," a Chinese variety store owner rudely turned me away.

I got to the supermarket, and on the window was a sign saying:

#### STOCK PERSON AND CASHIER NEEDED

*Okay, here we go... yes!* I thought positively, passing through the main doors.

Bypassing the rows of carts, I asked a clerk where to apply, and he directed me to an office at the back of the store. There, a short woman with a quarter-sized mole bulging between her brows tended to me. "You can fill out an application, but I'll also need a resume to go along with it."

*Huh?* I gawked at her, blinking my eyes rapidly a few times. *A rez-ew-may... what the heck is that—and how many legs does it have?*

"You do have a resume, don't you?" she asked charily.

"No, I'm afraid not." Not wanting to appear ignorant, I made a dimwit out of myself instead. "I've been looking around for those 'rezmay' things, but darn, everyone seems to be out of them. You don't happen to sell them here, do you? If so, I'll just buy a few and bring you one."

The mole rose evenly with her brows as she stared at me like I was loco, then she coughed out a laugh. "To tell you the truth, we've already filled all the positions—but we'll call you if anything else comes up."

*Liar. You don't even have my name or phone number.* I looked at her with distaste, thanked her kindly, and left.

On my way back to the apartment, carrying five bags of foodstuff, I couldn't remember how that obtuse "R" word went so I could ask Julie about it. *Remesay... ramazoom... razmasay...*

Oh, well. So I didn't land a job today. No worries. Rome wasn't built in an afternoon. At least Julie and I would be having a steak and potatoes dinner when she got home.

Duke would have a special treat, too—a fancy "flakes of chicken" mixture I'd found in the pet aisle. He'd love it.

The transit system was a complicated mess of buses, streetcars, and subway trains that travelled above and below ground. Hundreds of thousands of Torontonians relied on the "TTC" every morning, noon, and night. For the next couple of days, while Julie was at her foreign exchange job, I began familiarizing myself with the city, exploring various districts using the inexpensive Toronto Transit Commission's services.

On my first venture going southbound, the train squealed to a halt at an unenclosed station named "ROSEDALE." The passenger doors slid open, but not many people stepped into or out of the cars. After hearing a second whistle, just as the doors were closing, something triggered me to slip through and get out. I suppose I just wanted to see what a place called "Rosedale" looked like—and boy, did I get an eyeful.

Finding myself in an otherworldly sector of wealth, a neck of the woods where the filthy rich hibernated, I walked around spellbound by palatial homes that had three-car garages bigger than my three-bedroom house in Maynooth. *How can some people have so much and others so little?* I had no answer for that, nor could I imagine the mindset of those living here.

One particular mansion behind tall iron gates gave me the creeps, as if it were the core from where malevolence grew. I was no kind of psychic, but I sensed impending death and misfortune emanating from this property. Then I got a rapid chill and shuddered. *Beware of the madman who once roamed these grounds... he's gonna getcha*, my mind whispered as I quickly paced away. I later laughed at myself for having let my "writer's imagination" get the best of me.

Although I missed seeing dirt roads and cornfields, the big city offered many wondrous sights. Toronto wasn't boring, that's for sure. My eyes seemed constantly filled with excitement, and I

stopped dwelling on my tales of woe. Funnily, I found myself getting drawn into this action-packed metropolis—even though jobs weren't falling out of the sky for me.

When the weekend arrived—Labour Day weekend—Julie entrusted me with the spare key to her car. “I’ll let you be the chauffeur from now on. I know how much you *love* my driving,” she said, adding a hint of cynicism to the word “love,” but chuckled to remove the sting. She also handed me a plastic card. “This is to get into the garage; you saw how it works. I, um... always take the subway to go to and from work, so if you want to use the car to go job hunting or whatever, um... go ahead; I’m insured for a second driver.”

“Thanks, Jules,” I said, curving an appreciative smile. “Not to abuse the privilege, but what say I put some gas in the tank and we go out for a spin?”

“Sure,” she laughed, “but the tank’s full right now.”

Getting hardened to the madness of city driving was a feat, especially with Julie navigating from the passenger seat. She had me switching lanes unnecessarily and kept changing her mind about making turns, which aggravated some drivers enough to honk at us and yell rude names. Regardless of that, I was happy and relieved that I’d taken over the “chauffeur” duties.

Julie and I spent the whole weekend motoring up and down streets and avenues, stopping often to go strolling around and visit some tourist attractions—plus we ate great meals throughout Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. The two pounds I’d gained showed on me like ten pounds.

“You’re looking so much better than when you got here last week; you’ve filled out a bit, and there’s no stress left on your face,” Julie said to me during Monday’s wicked spaghetti dinner, which she’d spiked with a cup of red wine in the sauce. “You’re starting to look like the real Kaz again—and that’s a good thing.”

My sex drive, too, was coming back after a year-long sabbatical. Sure, I’d dated my ex-girlfriend, Jodie, for almost two weeks—but nothing really happened between us physically. I’d pretty much become a born-again virgin, abstaining from satisfying any stirrings in my groin until the pangs stopped altogether. Now they were returning, gradually, coaxing my manhood to be used as nature had intended it.

There'd never been any sexual attraction between Julie and me, nor had we ever discussed having sex. We more or less viewed each other as if we had no more anatomy between our legs than "Ken" or "Barbie" dolls. Perhaps the strong friendship we'd shared up to now was a stepping-stone towards something yet to develop. Maybe... just maybe... we were meant to progress from being best bud's to being man and wife. Although inconceivable for now, time would tell down the road.

On Monday evening, Julie's friend, Sue, phoned to say she'd come back from Sudbury. For nearly an hour, Julie did more listening than talking. "Uh-huh... uh-huh... *heh-heh*, uh-huh..." She finally ended the call, telling Sue she'd see her with Duke after work.

"Sue and I usually go out on Tuesdays and then I stay the night at her place and go to work from there," Julie explained to me after she'd hung up. "You'll have the apartment all to yourself tomorrow night. Oh, um... and Sue's coming over for dinner on Saturday, so you two can meet."

"I'll look forward to that, Jules. I'm sure if she's got this 'incredible personality' like you say, then we'll get along super swell."

"Yeah, um... I hope so. You might just think, um... that she's kinda different."

"Oh, yeah?"

I wasn't sure what Julie had meant by "*different*," nor did I ask. It wasn't important. I could hold on until Saturday to find out.

I was in the midst of sorting my laundry when Julie arrived home to pick up Duke. In the rear pocket of my jeans, I found a little slip of paper; then remembered that I'd left it there after taking the fifties out. I read the paper silently.

*Charmaine Brody—944-7821—Call me—don't forget.*

*The girl I'd met in the bar—"gorgeous"—right.* I had completely forgotten about her. My mind had been too preoccupied with getting to know the city and trying to get employed.

"Whaz-zat?" Julie asked nosily.

"Oh... just a phone number some girl gave me the first night I arrived." I shrugged my shoulders and struck a naïve smile.

“Oh, yeah? Let me see.” Julie snatched the paper out of my hand and stared at it for a few seconds. “Wow, that was fast. Are you gonna call her?”

“I think I will,” I said, playfully re-seizing the note. “I’ll see if she wants to go out for a drink or something.”

“Or something,” Julie snorted sarcastically, insinuating I had sex on my brain.

I waggled a finger and skewed my eyes at her. “Be nice,” I said, laughing, then went to the phone and dialed.

*One ring, two rings...* “Hello?” a soft voice answered.

“G’day—can I speak with Charmaine?”

“This is Charmaine... Kaz?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?” I asked, surprised.

“I recognized the country charm in your voice,” she replied, humming a giggle. “It’s funny that you called; I was just thinking about you. Where are you?”

“I’m at home, feeling a little restless. Listen, Charmaine, I thought if you weren’t doing anything tonight, I was wondering if you’d like to go out with me?”

“Would you like to come to my apartment for a drink?”

“Huh?” I grunted, dolt that I was, taken aback by the impromptu invite.

“Would you like to come over and have a glass of wine with me?” Her voice became humid.

“Yeah, sure... when?”

“Whenever you like. I’ll be home all night. Do you have a pen handy?”

I picked up a pen and pad of paper from beside the phone. “Yep.”

Charmaine rambled off the directions, along with a code number to press when I got into her lobby. “Did you get all of that, Kaz?” She maintained her sensuous tone.

“Yep, got it all.” I comically contorted my face at Julie as she gave me a baleful stare.

“Don’t bother bringing anything with you, except yourself. I have everything we need,” added Charmaine, humming another giggle. “So, when can I expect you?”

“In about an hour or so,” I estimated, leaning to see the clock on the wall unit. “Is that all right?”

“That’s perfect. I’ll see you then.” *Click.*

I sat down in the rocker, shaking my head as if waking out of a complex dream.

Julie looked at me leery-eyed. “So, what was all *that* about?”

“I can’t believe it. She invited me over—” I snapped my fingers. “Just like that.”

“Hmm... I guess she must really like you. Anyway, I’m off to Sue’s for the night. Have a good time with Chartreuse, or Charity, or whatever her name is. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Duke began scratching inside his carrier box, wanting out.

“You have yourself a good time too, Jules. Say hi to Sue for me, and tell her I’m all keyed up to meet her on Saturday.”

“Yeah, I’ll tell her.” Julie accidentally banged the crate against the doorframe as she was leaving. “Oops! Sorry, Duke. ’Bye, Kaz.”

“Bye, Jules... ’bye, Duke.”

I read over what I had written of Charmaine’s directions. They seemed simple enough to follow; only six subway stops.

*I’ve still got a couple of clean shirts, and my jeans are wearable for at least another couple of days. The laundry can wait. I was raring to go.*

## FOUR

RADIATING LIKE A MILLION-DOLLAR JEWEL, Charmaine opened her door in a full-length, white silk wrap. The lapels were purposely spread to lure attention to her cleavage, and she'd tied her hair back into a long, lustrous ponytail—which better showed off the arresting diamonds adorning her lobes and neck. Being a respectable gentleman, I tried limiting my gaze to above her breasts—but kept failing.

“Hi, Kaz. It's so nice to see you again,” she said amicably. “Come in, please, and take your boots off.”

Her downtown apartment was at least twice the size of Julie's. The scent of fresh lilacs lingered fragrantly throughout, though there were no lilacs in sight. My socked feet drowned gloriously in dense broadloom as we stepped into her living room.

“Wow... I've never seen an all-white room before. You must spend hours trying to keep this place clean,” I remarked, glancing about.

“Not me, I don't clean. My maid takes care of that. As you can see, he's impeccable. I love the ‘*eau de violet*’ powder he sprinkles over the carpet. It stimulates my sex drive like you wouldn't believe.” Charmaine stared at me with a kittenish grin, stroking the gems encircling her neck. “Have a seat in one of the couches and I'll get us a drink. What would you like, Kaz, beer or wine?”

“Beer, please.” I patted the soft leather cushion before planting my butt on it.

“Bavarian, Mexican, Polish, or Dutch?”

“Polish, thanks.”

“Isn't that funny? I knew you'd pick that one.” She giggled then sashayed to her kitchen.

I sat admiring the magnificent suite, dazzled by her expensive-looking furniture. Harpsichord music softened the mood, tinkling from two tiny speakers above an ornate cabinet. Several porcelain

figurines were showcased inside the glass case, reminding me of a collection that Mom once had.

“Did you miss me?” The robe sailed in waves behind Charmaine as she re-entered the room, smiling perfectly.

I answered by smiling back at her, intrigued by her beauty. It seemed like I was watching a slow-motion film clip as she moved towards me.

“I brought a glass for your beer. I can’t pronounce the name of it, but it’s definitely Polish.” She set the drinks on the coffee table and nestled beside me, intentionally shifting the gown to expose her shapely legs.

I reached for the bottle and read the label, articulately. “Zywiec.”

“You’re Polish?” she exclaimed, rounding her eyes with surprise.

“Only half, from my mother’s side.”

“Oh, well, okay—that explains where you get your handsome European features.” She watched with sparkly eyes as I poured my brew into the glass. “So, tell me about this place you’re from—what was it called?”

“Maynooth. It’s a small locality near Bancroft. Really beautiful countryside.” I set the emptied bottle on the coffee table, and then tasted the beer from the chilled glass.

“Did you live there for very long?”

“Yep. Ever since I was born. I’ve never been anywhere else, really, until I arrived here.”

“That’s remarkable. I can’t imagine what it’d be like to spend my whole life in only one place.” Charmaine took a dainty sip of her Chablis, easing back into the mushy cushions. “So what brings you to Toronto?”

“I needed to start my life over again... you know, make something of myself.”

“What is it that you want to do?” Her voice took on a sultry tone.

“I’m not sure yet,” I replied shrugging. “Right now, I need to find a job doing whatever.”

“You know, Kaz, with your incredible looks and sex appeal, you should think about becoming an actor.”

“Yeah, I’ll give that idea some real serious thought.” I began to laugh, lifting my glass to my mouth to use as a pretend microphone. “And the Oscar goes to... Kazek Carter!”

“I’m not kidding, Kaz. You are so good looking and... so innocent.” Charmaine placed her hand on my thigh, massaging

towards my crotch with soft, circular strokes. “I’ve wanted to devour you from the moment I saw you—I could seriously fall in love with you,” she cooed into my ear. “Let’s put our drinks on the table.”

“Okay.” I set my beer beside her stemmed glass.

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– and Thank You!