

Lingering Feelings



A "Her TV" Novel



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Alex Miller

“Cameras are on, girls. Everything’s a go.”

Bright lights flashed on all around me, half-blinding my vision.

I hoped it was so for everybody else too. There I stood, standing for multiple cameras. Watched by many pairs of eyes and I couldn’t have been more embarrassed of my live.

They were shooting a commercial, that’s what they said to me, and I seemed to be one of its main actors. Or should I say *actresses*. I was a guy, but I didn’t exactly look masculine and that wasn’t the worst of it. It was what I wore and that everybody could see me like that.

How did I ever end up in this situation? My mind started to look back to when everything seemed to go like it should for a man of my age.

I lay on the couch staring at the letters in a book. Much the same as I had done every day for the last few months. Something my mother obviously couldn’t appreciate.

“Will you please go look for a job? It has been months and you still have no new job.”

My mother was right. I should go look for a job, but I had given up.

The one I lost was my first job and I was lucky to have gotten that one. It only lasted a little more than a year. I got fired. Not that I didn't do my job right, I did. At the end, I just wasn't what they looked for. I was a timid man, not old, only 23, with black hair and no beard to hide my face.

Not unhandsome to women's standards, but not macho handsome. I never was and I never will be. That had his obvious reasons.

Just not having the characteristics of a macho man was the most important one. Another one was that I was too short, according to today's standard. I was only five-foot-four and therefore a lightweight. My stepsister was almost a head bigger than me, a lot of women were. Not by a head necessarily, but they were bigger. Sharon, my so-called stepsister, had no problem tossing me over like a feather and she did if she felt like it, no matter how hard I protested. I was stronger than I looked, but I was no Superman. The laws of nature just demanded that I could not win. My biggest handicap ever, was my shyness. I could not do anything about that, no matter how hard I ever tried. My mother and even my stepsister tried to help me on some rare occasions; my step-dad never bothered.

The day we met I saw in his eyes that he never would consider me as his stepson, feelings that never changed and his death made it impossible that they ever could. So I never felt myself comfortable in the presence of woman, not that of men. The men, those that didn't ignore me, treated me as a softie and the woman did the same. They liked my kind character but none of the women took me seriously as a candidate for more than friendship. That was the reason that I didn't have much experience.

There were the occasional contacts with a person of the female sex but they never lasted long. Mostly because they were blind dates and more than one of them didn't like having to look down. I blamed it on their high heels. Therefore it wasn't only a job I was looking for.

I was, as it turned out, more destined to have success in finding the right job than in finding the right woman. At that moment I had given up on both.

I had a good education, thanks to a scholarship I had won. It wasn't a lot, but I was smart. But even there I had bad luck. The scholarship was for an economic degree. Not my first choice, not even one of my top ten, but it was my only chance for a decent degree at a well-known university.

I only got the scholarship thanks to Step-dad. Which he made me know every day, over and again. He was a big shot at a big company, one that saw offering a scholarship more as a tax reduction than as helping to shape someone's future. So my step-dad decided what degree I should pursue. I had nothing to say in it. My majors and minors were chosen *for* me, not *by* me. My choices would have been totally different; history, art or literature, choices my step-dad would veto before they were spoken out loud.

The problem was that I was not the right material for the corporate world. Not that I was not capable of doing my job. I was not hard enough, not impressive enough. My job interviews always had the same beginning, the frowning of eyebrows. Whatever they expected, it was never someone like me. Luckily, this time I could convince them to give me a chance, but they clearly regretted that decision, as did I. It was not a job for me, but I had no other choice. It wasn't the years of economic prosperity. Those days were over. Now you had to take what you could get. But that didn't mean that you did.

There weren't many jobs I was fit to do. I could do some physical labor, but almost everybody was a better fit for such a job than me. A minimum wage job at a fast food restaurant wasn't the future I had in mind. So the only job I could look for was the same old thing and for now I had enough of it all. I needed a break, away from the world where I didn't fit in.

But that was not what my mother had in mind. Every opportunity she had, she used to scold me. No son of hers would be a lazy bum while she was around. I lay down with a book and never looked up until it was evening.

It was to avoid my mother's eyes and the questions that were hidden behind them, questions that would repeat themselves so long as I didn't had a job. My mother had a Sixth Sense for it. The book wasn't yet down when out of the kitchen came her voice.

“Your step-dad would kick your ass if he saw what became of you.”

“My step-dad didn’t care what I became. He never believed in me anyway.”

Maybe he did in the beginning, but not after my graduation. Not after it was obvious to him that I would never be able to fill his shoes, in every way possible. He had hoped to bring me into his company to climb up the corporate ladder and one day replace him when he would go on his retirement. His disappointment was big, but lasted not long.

Sharon’s company was rapidly growing and started to make big ripples in the lingerie business. Even when he wasn’t crazy about the product she fabricated, he gladly spread the word about his daughter’s success. She was, after all, his flesh and blood. Her success was only natural. I was soon forgotten about as an potential heir for his throne.

But Mother was right. I would have gotten a speech from my step-dad after one day of unemployment. He always judged people, comparing them to him, which rarely had a positive result. Not many were as him, luckily for me and the world.

“Maybe my father never did, but Mother does and therefore so do I.”

I turned myself around in the direction of the sound and found an unexpected guest. Sharon did not live here anymore. She had her own place. The unexpected part was that it wasn’t Sunday, the day she reserved for Mom. There must have been something wrong for her to be her now.

“Hey, Sharon.”

“Hey, Ethan.”

Sharon was hot, beautiful and tall enough to be a model. Not thin enough, though, but that applies to almost everybody, even the models when they like to eat.

But most importantly, why would she event want to be a model? She had her own company. She had long black hair and a hard face. Sharon was my stepsister, but I didn’t consider her family. I never thought about

her as more than an acquaintance. It was not like I saw her a lot.

She went to boarding school. So during school years I only saw her at special occasions and holidays. She was twelve when she became part of my life and I was only seven. One thing I learned fast: the new member of the family always had the last word. I would get angry and wouldn't speak to her for days but in the end she always got what she wanted. She knew what a softie I really was.

What didn't help was that my mother took Sharon's side in almost every discussion. She called it a common female vision. I called it Not Fair. The relation between Sharon and my mother always was more intense, stronger, than her Mother's relationship with me. To her she was a real daughter.

To me, in essence, she was just an older girl who sometimes lived with us. After boarding school, there was higher education and life itself.

She started her company not long after graduating at the university.

After that she visited regularly but it was always my mother who kept her company. At those moments I just saw her face and heard her voice.

We barely spoke to each other, only to argue and I mostly gave that up when I was twelve. I couldn't say what she loved and who; those were things we never talked about. She was my mother's fake daughter, a girl I knew, but not really. A girl I neither liked nor disliked. Well, when she didn't boss me around, that is.

"What are you doing here? Not that I am not glad to see you."

She pinched me on the cheek. I hated that extremely and she knew that all too well.

"You better be."

She placed herself next to me on the couch. My mother had done the same. So there I was, surrounded by female determination and I would soon find out where it was aimed.

“I invited Sharon to talk about your situation.”

“What situation?”

I wasn’t planning to make it easy for them. It was obvious what they wanted, but I would ignore it as long as possible, even if that was only minutes.

“Dinner is ready. We will talk about it at the table.”

It was Sharon’s favorite, Coq au vin, whatever that was. I didn’t care. It was not bad. So she would be busy for a while, eating. But it was my mother that was the first to speak.

“Sharon has a job for you.”

There they were, the words nobody wanted to say and I sure didn’t want to hear. Sharon was offering me a job at her company.

Sharon nodded with her mouth full.

“Mom, I thought that we agreed this was a bad idea.”

My mother had brought this up back at the beginning of my quest for a job. It was a suggestion I always avoided taking seriously, until I had no other choice due to my continued unemployment. So we talked about it and I had a very good excuse not to consider it. Mother never gave up on the idea, though. I already explained that my sister had her own company, a successful one. But the fact was that it was a woman-oriented business and not a place where I would fit in. Creating and manufacturing lingerie wasn’t something I had experience in, only in looking at it. I liked a woman in lingerie. It had the magical ability to make its contents more desirable. The problem was that I barely did anything more than looking.

The only times I had panties in my hands was when Sharon had been too hasty and threw hers in with my laundry. That happened more than once. Someone other than me would have started to doubt if it was just coincidence. So my knowledge about lingerie was limited, very limited.

But Sharon had the knowledge and the experience. She had exceeded the expectations my step-dad had of her. Even the fact that she wouldn’t have had it so easy

without the business loan he got for her, hadn't changed his mind. The fact that she was successful was the only thing that counted to him. Her company had grown in a few years from a small business into a company that left its impression nationally.

"It is, but the alternative is worse."

Sharon's plate was empty and so also was her mind. That meant that there was room for something else.

"But, but there are only woman working at your company! For a good reason."

"Yes, that is true. Nevertheless I am offering you a job at my company."

"Doing what? There is nothing that I could do that somebody else can't do better. What do I know about lingerie?"

It was not that I didn't know anything about lingerie. I probably knew as much as most men. A woman in lingerie was a thing of beauty. But admiring a painting didn't make me a painter.

Sharon's company was successful in a market that was pure a woman's business, so I thought. I stood corrected in sooner than I could have imagined.

"Being my secretary."

"What? Your secretary? Why would that be a good choice for you, your company and, most importantly, for me?"

"It's the least damaging position."

For a moment I didn't know what to say. What *could* I say?

"Um!"

"I'll be your direct boss. The responsibility for your actions lies completely with me. You won't be able to frustrate my personnel with your incompetence. I know you. I know what you are capable of and what you are not. So it will be the best position for you to start in. Later we can see if there will be something that suits you better."

I jumped out of the couch and confronted the both of them.

“Forget it. I will never be your puppet, Sharon. I’ll work for minimum wage before that happens.”

I should not have said that. Now I couldn’t take it back anymore.

“OK, if that is your wish. You’ll get one more chance. But if you don’t find a job within a month, you know what will happen.”

The tone of my mother’s voice let no doubt. If I didn’t get a job in a month, I would be working for my sister, a prospect that made me shiver. Working for her would be of a whole other, scary, dimension. As a part of the family she was bossy, but as a boss, she would be impossible to deal with. I left the both of them behind without looking back. If I had looked back, their smiles would have given me a good indication of their lack of faith in the successfulness of my attempt. It was probably better that way. Looking for a job with that vision burned in my memory wouldn’t have been a good beginning. I would have given up much earlier.

Every day I was out, looking through the usual job search channels for something to throw in their face. But they knew me all too well. I would never take a minimum wage job above working for my sister. There simply were no other jobs just then. Well, not for me.

The competition was hard and, more important, bigger. They say that tall people have an advantage in getting a job over the short ones. I was the living proof that they were right.

Anyway, my chances were slim to find something before that looming Sunday. I was ready to admit defeat and I did a few days before the end of the month. The last few days I left the house like I had done every other day that month, but spent them in the park, a museum, or the zoo, places I could enjoy with an empty mind. My mother never said a word when she watched me go through the door those mornings, which surprised me. The only thing she said was, “Have a nice day, Honey.”

I knew what the future held for me and wanted to enjoy my last days of freedom in peace. Thinking about the job that awaited me was the last thing I wanted to do.

The best way to do was to avoid silent moments where my mind could not escape those thoughts. I made sure that my days were full and tiring. My mind was asleep for it could drift off.

That Saturday, I was just home after a busy day out trying to avoid the looming confrontation when she and my mother came in the room. They had been out for cake and an ice-cream at their favorite coffeehouse, something they did almost every weekend. They always invited me and I always said no and Sharon always gave the same reaction.

“Still afraid to been seen with two beautiful woman at your side?”

I was afraid indeed, afraid of being laughed at, the story of my life and height. I was an easy and well-known target of bullying. In high school one didn't need more than one reason to bully and with me there were more than enough.

It stopped when I went to university. Not because the people were more mature, which they were, but because the bullies had other priorities. After university I still was an easy target for someone who wanted a cheap laugh. Going out with my sister and mother would inspire a lot of would-be comedians. It would have been impossible for me to walk down a street without the chance of meeting old schoolmates and associates. Most of them knew me and my mother and sister. It was a very small town we lived in and my family is well-known. That's the disadvantage of having more money than the average family.

My step-dad liked to brag, one of his many not-so-positive qualities. We were lucky that the town was so small that the police had no trouble keep the crime numbers low, which was the main reason my mother wanted to stay here after remarrying. The other reason was the high quality of education offered here. My step-dad and his daughter were more acquainted with the city life. But my step-dad didn't mind living in a small town. He only was there during the weekends, anyway. The rest of the week he stayed in an apartment in the better part of the city. When my step-dad died, I realized theirs was more a marriage of convenience. He was looking for a mother for his daughter and my mother was looking for a way to survive. At the moment they met each other, we were living off the hush money

my mother had gotten. My father was killed in an accident at work.

The company blamed him, but knew they were really the ones to blame. So they offered Mother a bribe. It was for her silence on the matter. It would be never enough money to live on, but she had no other choice. Go to court and make only the lawyers rich or take what she could get, those were her choices. It wasn't the company's first accident and everybody in town knew that none of his coworkers would dare to testify against their employer. There was more to lose than to gain. We lost my father and we would lose a lot more if my mother sued. Mother had no degree and low-paying jobs were the only alternative.

A mortgage and a kid would mean scraping by, which meant living in poverty, a future my mother did not look forward to. She was, and still is, a beautiful woman. The result was that there was male interest in her enough, but not to replace a father.

A dating service was the connecting factor between my step-dad and my mom. Not long after they met, there was the wedding, a contract and a new family. A new family that I didn't ask for.

"Maybe he doesn't want to be seen in the company of his mother." A remark I couldn't let pass by.

"Of course I do, but I don't want to spoil your women's day out with the presence of a man."

"If you say so. However that excuse will not work forever. You know, your presence can change."

Now I was a little confused. Everybody's presence changes but that had nothing to do with the problem. Sharon was sometimes a mystery to me. I never knew what she really meant by things she said. Surely not when she made strange statements like this one and she loved making them.

She knew they would always leave me in a state of confusion. I didn't know what to think anymore. Sharon saw the surprised expression on my face and could not do anything else than laugh. That made me mad and also made me forget the reason for my confusion.

"Stop it!"

“Make me.”

“Aaaah.”

That was the only thing I could say and do. Trying to pinch her as I had many years ago wasn't possible anymore. She wasn't dressed for it and I was too old to lose such a game. My ego couldn't take the blow so easily anymore. It always ended up with me being the one that was pinched, or worse.

I turned around to seek shelter at my room. My feet had already passed the first steps of the stairs. Before I could escape, Sharon reeled me back in.

“How's the job hunting been?”

My shoulders lowered themselves as a sign of defeat. I didn't dare to look she or Mother in the face.

“Not so well. If you'll give more time, I'm sure I will find a job.”

This time it was Mother putting an end to my escape.

“Hold it, young man. You know what we agreed. Come back here so that we can talk about your future.”

There it was, “young man.” I knew I was in trouble when my mother used that phrase to address me. She would not let me go back on my given word. I had no other choice than to submit myself to their will. If I broke my promise, I knew I would pay the price. My mother wouldn't kick me out of the house, but she would cut me off financially. I would have room and board, but nothing more. Even going to the movies would be impossible without begging my mother for some money. My savings could keep me comfortable for a few months, but not longer. Spending money on books and other enjoyments was way too easy for me. She knew that all too well. Money was no issue anymore for my mother. My stepfather had left her a nice sum of money, all thanks to his life insurance. The rest of his money, savings, and investments went to Sharon, which she didn't need, so she gave it to my mother.

All that meant she could miss it to give me a little financial support just until I found the job that I wanted. But that seemed to be out of the question now. When it had been only my mother, I could have convinced her to

give me another chance. With Sharon involved, I stood no chance. I would be a secretary for my sister. That sounded worse than being unemployed.

“OK, you’ve got me. What now?”

They both were waiting until I dropped my butt in the couch where it had been living for a long time. Not the best place for me to discuss the terms of my surrender. So I set myself down at the table for a serious talk.

My mother smiled at Sharon.

“Our little man is getting big.”

Damn, she knew perfectly well how I hated it when she called me that.

The little self-confidence I had gathered was already vanishing like snow in spring. The emotionless face my sister brought to the discussion raised the temperature even more. When Sharon set herself down next to my mother, both facing me, there was no trace left of any confidence. Suddenly it felt like Doomsday.

“Well, I will fulfill my promise, but...”

Before I could say anything more, Sharon interrupted me.

“No buts, but one. This is what will happen. I talked it over with Mother and you can take it, but not leave it.”

“You can’t just make me do whatever you want. Mother has the last word in this. And I don’t believe she sees it just the way you do.”

My mother’s answer came immediately.

“Oh but I do, even more. I have given her complete control over this little experiment. So you know what to expect.”

Her answer made me swallow. An experiment she called it. Being a secretary for Sharon would be much more than just an experiment for here and surely for me.

“Sharon knows you almost as well as I do and she loves you.

She will always have your best interest in mind. I know that and you should know that too.”

Her smile disappeared and her face looked as serious as Sharon’s.

I hadn’t seen it like that. OK, so it was Sharon. Maybe I was too negative.

In the end, it beats working for a boss who only sees me as a number. Sharon would at least see me as a person who happens to be familiar to her. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. With every thought that passed, I slowly started to believe in this experiment. Now I only had to listen to what it was she had in mind.

“You’ll start as soon as possible. It can be days or weeks, I will be the one to determine this. It all depends on you. In the meantime you have the opportunity to get everything in order.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You’ll be living with me in the city. There is more than enough space and the city is too far for you to travel back and forth to every day.”

“I can’t leave Mother behind. What would she do without me?”

“Isn’t it more the other way around?”

That was a typical reaction from Sharon, but before this could turn into a war my mother intervened.

“We already talked about this. Sharon only agreed to give you this job after I made it clear that it was fine with me. You should have more faith in her. She’s only thinking about your welfare.”

“Yeah, little man, you should.”

For an instant my defiance was gone. For an instant only, just until the moment when she had to tease me.

“Are you really going to live here on your own?”

“Yes, but not for long.”

“What? Have you met someone? Is it that?”

“No, idiot. Mother is coming to the city too. Not immediately, in four or five months maybe. She doesn’t know yet.”

“I always thought you didn’t want to live in the city, Mom.”

“I’m not fond of it, but I think it’s time to give it a chance. If it doesn’t work out, I can always come back.”

“What about the house?”

“I’ll just rent it out, furnished. There is already a lot of interest from the girls in my club. Some of them are looking for a better place. So I won’t have any difficulty with finding a decent tenant.”

“What would you do in the city? It will be a whole other life.”

“Find you a new step-dad maybe, or visit a museum with my daughter.”

“Not with your son?”

I wasn’t offended, only curious.

“Not when he doesn’t change a lot.”

For a moment my mother and sister looked at each other with a sparkle in their eyes and a smile on their lips, something I didn’t see. My mind was occupied with the most suitable explanation. I was, after all, the one who didn’t want to go with them to the coffee house. So why would she take me to a museum? Not until I changed my attitude about it, certainly. That they both had other changes in mind was something I still had to discover.

“OK, I’ll take the job. But does it really have to be the position of secretary? Isn’t there something else that’s more fitting for a man?”

Sharon saw this as an opportunity to mock me.

“Why? Is the job not macho enough for you? Is it that you have to use your brain and not your muscles? And I thought you never used the latter.”

That was not what I wanted to hear and she knew it. But it was my own fault. I should have known that

Sharon would react that way after such a stupid remark. She accepted that women and men were different, but thought they never should be treated that way. And they surely shouldn't behave that way when there wasn't a very, very, very good reason for it. In this case there wasn't.

"You know that everything my company sells is made for us, not by us. These companies have an exclusive contract with us and are very glad for the cooperation. It's a win-win for both of us. They wouldn't consider you a win. You can't seam and lifting boxes isn't one of the majors at the university and they have no need for more management. Besides, the nearest contractor is more than five hundred miles away. Some aren't even on this continent. But if you wish I can put in a good word for you?"

She said it without meaning it, because my answer was no surprise.

"No, that's not necessary. I give in. I'll be your dammed secretary. Whatever that means."

"You will find out very soon. Pack your coat, we're leaving after we have say goodbye to Mom. You are coming with me."

"What? Now? What about all my things? I can't leave them. Besides, packing my clothes will take me hours."

"Yes now. You don't need to pack. You will have everything you'll need and more, a lot more."

"How's that? I need at least fresh underwear for tomorrow. Or do you want me to go commando?"

My mother looked determined. She didn't react, whatever I said. She left it all to Sharon.

"You're right. You'll need your stuff, but Mother already anticipated that. All your clothes are packed and already on their way to my address. It cost mother extra money to have it all delivered by tomorrow. So you have no excuse."

"When and how is this all done?"

"Mother and I have been packing since this morning. Well, 'packing' isn't the right word. You'll have a lot of

work sorting everything out. But tomorrow you'll have time enough. For the first few days I'll leave you be."

Her last word wasn't said before my mother put a bag next to me on the ground. The noise it made caused me to turn my head.

"What's that?"

"Your favorite books. Now you have no excuse anymore. You always said that your books would be all you need when the world came to an end."

"And the rest. I can't leave without the rest. It will take days to pack."

"It will and I am the one who shall do it, not you. The first batch is already packed. You will have everything you need within a week. Then you have everything you need to start a new job and a new future."

I finally started to calm down.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I should have known that you had everything under control. I'm an idiot. I'll just buy some new stuff. In the city there are shops and choices enough."

"There are, but you won't be able to."

My reaction was aimed straight my mother.

"What do you mean? I'm not rich, but my savings are sufficient to buy more than a few new things. That reminds me. What do I get paid?"

I looked straight at Sharon and she answered without even blinking.

"Nothing for the first six months."

"What! Do you expect me to work for free? No wonder you want me to be your secretary."

"You really are an idiot. Do you think you get paid for learning the business? You should be glad you only have to pay for rent and food."

I suddenly stood up, pushing my stool backwards. My frustration started to turn into anger and my voice made that very clear.

“Can someone please give me an answer instead of spouting nonsense? Mom, you first. What do you mean about not being able to buy stuff?”

“You better sit back down, dear, because you won’t like it. But it was necessary for a clean start.”

This time I sat myself down in the couch, lay back, and looked up, hoping this all was just a joke. My anger was gone. Like all my angers, it had a short life.

“I withdrew all your money yesterday and gave it to Sharon.”

Before I had a new fit, my mother continued.

“It is an advanced payment for the rent you will owe here. She’s letting you stay at her house for an amount that wouldn’t allow you to rent a one -bedroom apartment in a bad neighborhood.”

Damn, I had nothing to say as an argument against it, but I tried anyway.

“Why do I have to pay rent if she doesn’t pay me for six months? How difficult can it be just being a secretary? I went to University, damn it.”

“Ethan!” Watch your tongue and don’t be such a fool. Do you intend to stay a freeloader or will you finally take responsibility and act accordingly?”

I shriveled. My mother made it clear to me that she was playing hardball this time. This couldn’t be just about a job. It wasn’t the first time I was looking for one. There had to be something more. But what?

“Besides, I know that you have enough money in your wallet for little things and there’s always your credit card for emergencies. You have plenty. So stop whining over money. You’ll survive.”

My mother put her arms out.

“Now both of you give me a hug. It’s time to leave.”

Ten minutes later, we were on our way.

Hours later, Sharon drove the car into an underground garage. It was so quick, that I didn’t saw what the building looked like. I had seen a picture, but I had

never been on the inside. Sharon never felt the need to show me the place, until now. A stair brought us to the lobby.

“Hello, Jack. I see you’re doing the nightshift today.”

“Good evening, Miss Hannigan. You have a guest?”

“I do and you will be seeing him more than once.”

“Does he need a key, for the elevator and the apartment?”

“Not yet.”

There were two elevators, opposite of each other. We took the left one. A moment later in the elevator, I had to ask her.

“How come I don’t get a key and why didn’t you say I was family?”

“You’ll need to earn both.”

“Now he’ll think I’m a gigolo or something.”

Sharon laughed out loud.

“No he won’t. To be precise, that will be the last thing he’ll think.”

The elevator opened into a little hallway.

“The elevator only goes this high with a key. It’s because this is the highest floor and on it is the place where I live.”

She unlocked the door and opened it while she waved to something behind her. It took me a moment to realize that she waved to Jack, via a camera. We entered the main room which was a mixture of kitchen, dining room, and living room.

“It’s late and it’s going to be an early morning. Your room isn’t ready yet. You better sleep on the couch. You’ll find that it is a lot more comfortable than the one you’re used to.”

She was right. It only took me a few seconds to fall asleep. No dream disturbed me until the morning. Then I was woken by a noise. It was Sharon in her kitchen.

“Hey sleepyhead, what do you want for breakfast, eggs and bacon or just some cereal?”

“Eggs and bacon please.”

“The frying pan is in the bottom drawer and you’ll find the rest in the fridge. Just make sure you don’t burn them.”

I should have known that it wouldn’t be so easy. It was, after all, Sharon’s place. So I started to make breakfast barefooted. She had floor heating, carpet and mostly wooden floors so that wouldn’t be a problem. Not that it was necessary. The days and nights were warm.

“Make mine well done.”

I wanted to protest but I swallowed my frustration. She was the boss from now on. I knew that before I left my home, just as well as I knew Sharon. While I was baking, she was looking over my shoulder.

“Well, it looks edible.”

“Beat it before I accidentally drop it on your head.”

“Touchy! How come you aren’t this self-confident with other woman or is it all just an act?”

I sighed. I expected to be hearing this question some day, so I had an answer ready.

“Because I already know you. I know what to expect of you. It is the first step that scares me. I’m not the man many woman look for. I know I am too soft. That will never change and neither will I.”

I was afraid. Afraid to be looked at as a looser, a fool, a sissy. Scared of failure, unintentionally avoiding the pain and embarrassment a first step can bring. It wasn’t a good excuse but it was the only one I had.”

“You are no fool. But yeah, you are a softie. I’ve known that since I saw you years ago crying during a movie and it wasn’t Bambi.”

“So what? Even the hardest men cry sometimes.”

“Yes, but not during a chick flick.”

A weird silence fell. Sharon was waiting for my reaction and I just wanted her to shut up.

"I'm going to buy a newspaper. I probably won't be back before you go to work wherever that is."

Me alone in the big city, I expected a storm of protest. What I got was disappointing. She was surprisingly friendly.

"You still prefer paper over a tablet, don't you? Well, I'm not stopping you. You'll find a stand at the street corner to your right."

Sharon sat herself down at the table. It wasn't her intention to let food go to waste even if it was only bacon and eggs, something she rarely ate. She only wanted to agitate me a bit. She still knew how to manipulate me into doing things. She took something from the countertop and threw it to me.

"Here, or you won't get in again. I'll notify downstairs so they don't take you for an intruder. They know all the people who work and live her."

I almost dropped the key, but managed to capture it.

"Yeah, yeah."

I passed the counter without looking and, once outside, I went to the right. After a minute, I was cursing Sharon. There was no newsstand to find. So I kept on going. It was of no use to ask a bystander.

I would definitely get lost if I left this street. I'd only been to this city two or three times before briefly and I had left my phone with Sharon. Never leave somewhere in a hurry. Not when you're angry anyway. I had made my mind up to go back when my last footsteps brought me close to a bookstore. My bad temper was gone. There I would find everything I needed and more.

I tapped on my pocket to check my wallet, something I always automatically did. Once incident in the past was enough to be careful not to be embarrassed looking for a wallet that I forgot. This time I was sure to have it with me, so I expected confirmation, something I didn't get. I almost ripped my jacket to peaces, but I still found nothing. How could this be? It was there yesterday. I made sure I had it before we left. There was nothing else

to do than to go back. My mind, occupied with this dilemma, failed to notice the curious look from Jack's colleague in the lobby. I went straight up. Luckily I still had the key to the apartment.

"Sharon, are you still here?"

No answer, which wasn't a problem My phone was in reach. She answered surprisingly fast.

"Sharon, have you seen my wallet?"

"Of course not! What would I do with your wallet? Where did you have it last? You didn't leave it home, did you?"

"I'm sure I had it in my jackets pocket, but it isn't here anymore."

"Well, if you're sure, there are only two possibilities. You have lost it or it was stolen. Either way, your wallet's gone."

Both possibilities made me freeze for a moment.

"When you were on the street did anyone bump into you? That's the way a pickpocket works."

My mind went crazy rerunning my time on the street. The problem was that I had been looking too much at the city environment to notice the people around me.

"Did you lose it in the apartment or on the street?"

It couldn't have fallen out my pocket after I had put my jacket on. My pocket was too deep. But that was no problem for a pickpocket. So if it fell out, it still had to be here, in the penthouse.

"Maybe?"

There was not much confidence in my voice.

"Well, look for it. If you can't find it, you have to block your credit card."

"Shouldn't we go to the police?"

"Why, for a blocked credit card and a few hundred dollars? It isn't worth all that trouble."

If only I could have seen the smile on Sharon's face, I would have known that there was more going on.

"What now?"

"You start working after your search. I will call to block your credit card and I'll even call the police if your wallet doesn't show itself within the hour. You'll be busy with other things. Your room needs to be cleaned and refurnished. You'll find everything you need spread out over the other rooms. Put the stuff the painters left into the last room."

"But which is my room?"

"You'll know when you'll see it." And with that, she hung up.

After an hour I stopped looking. I had to accept that my wallet was stolen. The bedrooms would obviously be upstairs. So that's where I went.

The first door was Sharon's bedroom, big and luxurious. I quickly closed the door. Sharon would bite my head off for snooping there. The next one revealed a smaller, almost empty room, freshly painted. Checking the other doors made it clear that this had to be my room. It was the only one that was painted, white. The floor was covered in plastic. A little stepladder was the only other decoration. On it was standing a big bucket of paint which looked very heavy. A handle was missing from it. So I had to grasp it firmly.

I wrapped my arm around it, slowly pulling it to the edge to anticipate its weight. However, something wasn't right. The bucket didn't move, probably caused by dried paint sticking it to the ladder. So I pulled hard in one go. It came loose in an instant, but my reward wasn't what I expected.

The contents of the bucket poured out and covered me from the chest on down. I stood motionless for a few seconds. Then I put the bucket down, the hole upside. After that I used every strong word I knew in the most expressive way. I was soaked with paint. There was no other choice than to take my clothes, socks, and shoes off. The only thing I was left with were my boxer shorts. Luckily cold wasn't really a problem so far south and surely not this time of the year. I threw it all in a heap into the puddle of paint.