



# Like Glass

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*This book is dedicated to my loving wife, who has put up with more from me than anyone ever should. There are others that I should probably mention as well, but it is because of her strength and near-limitless patience I accomplish anything – without her, the gifts of others would have been wasted.*

*Thank you Patti.*

Like Glass

## Chapter 1

It's generally inappropriate to call a woman in tears a bastard or a son of a bitch, and ordering them to die and rot is fairly tasteless most of the time as well. At least before you know what she's crying about. Rob Jackson might be forgiven for having those words on his tongue when he answered the phone, as it was his brother he expected on the other end and not the quavering, feminine sobs he heard as he put the receiver to his ear.

Five years had passed since he'd last seen Bill's number on the caller id and he'd waited by the phone until it quit ringing then. Five years still wasn't long enough. He still wished his brother were dead.

Of the eight years since Rob had called it quits with his brother, it had taken three for Bill to get it through his head that Rob wanted nothing more to do with him. Now it appeared he was calling again.

He almost ignored this call like the last one, but didn't. It'd been a bad Wednesday already—he'd lost the Grey's Industrial Services account, a new website that would've been great for the company's portfolio as well as its books. The LAPD finally decided that parking in front of the fire hydrant outside the office door was worthy of a two-hundred-fifty dollar fine. To top it all off, Cindy finally admitted to her affair with her trainer. That wasn't that big of a deal; he'd harbored stronger attachments to lawn furniture than any woman in a long time. It just served as icing on top of an already shitty cake of a day. Seeing Bill's number on the caller id had proved that the day really and truly *could* get worse.

Any other day he would've ignored it without a second thought. Not tonight though. Tonight he wanted a catharsis. It'd been a long time since he'd cussed out Bill for what he'd done to him, and it put him in a bit of a better mood at least. A phrase somewhere along the lines of "You bastard sonofabitch, die and rot in hell," had been what sprang to mind, and he marked it as either a good opening line or perfect for the moment before he hung up the receiver on his brother's pleading voice. Either would work, he'd just wait and see how it played out.

When he picked up the phone, he hesitated—an act he was later at least somewhat thankful for, although he could never figure out why he didn't just lay into Bill right off the bat. A rather feminine snuffle greeted his silence, soft, almost

pleading. At the very least it wasn't Bill, and he quickly changed his game plan. His pause apparently confused the tearful woman on the other end as well.

"Hello?" Definitely a woman, speaking in that pathetic, shaky voice of someone who's trying to be strong and failing miserably at it.

"Hi, this is Rob." Confused, he reverted to the office, speaking as he would with a customer before he even realized it.

"Hi, Rob. It's Janet."

"Hi Janet. Long time."

"Yeah. Um, I'm sorry to call you Rob. I know things were never that great with us and everything, but..." *That's a lie*, he thought, but didn't say. It didn't seem appropriate to antagonize her at the moment. Maybe in a few minutes, but at least he'd let her have her say.

"What's up?"

"It's Bill...he's, um, Bill's dead Rob. There was an accident at the factory today and..." Her voice trailed off; she was still trying to be strong, but the façade was crumbling fast.

"You're kidding me. Is he—" He stopped himself; of course Bill wasn't okay, but that was the first thing that came to mind. "Are you guys okay?" In hindsight, this was almost as stupid of a question, but he couldn't think of anything else.

"I don't know. Lisa's handling the um, the arrangements I think. She's watching Jake and Caitlain right now." She was almost at a full sob again. "I just wanted to let you know. I know you guys weren't very close, but..." She couldn't continue, her words drowned out by the deep crying only newborn widows are capable of.

"Janet, it's okay. Look, I'll be out there tomorrow and help out as best as I can, okay?" Something that resembled an "okay, thank you" found its way through her sobs. He told her to take care and that he'd see her soon.

Hanging up the receiver, he sat in anticipation for the sick joy he knew should be coming along. Any minute now, he'd burst into a wide grin, perhaps run to the store and get a bottle of champagne (or some cheap wine from the gas station if the grocery store had already closed). It didn't come though, and he sat in his office, going over various bills and invoices as a light rain blurred the city through the window before him.

After an hour he gave up trying to make sense of work and went online to order a plane ticket to Portland for the next day. He called the office and left a voice mail, telling whoever would get to it first in the morning that he'd be gone for a while and to have Jim run the shop while he was gone.

He walked to the gas station at the corner, and instead of looking for the cheap wine he grabbed a cheap six pack and returned home. Per his custom when he could hear the sleepy grumbling of the past waking up to rear its brutish head, he

set one bottle aside and studied it as he drank the remaining five. Still waiting for the malicious ecstasy he'd been expecting to join him at this long awaited news, he turned his computer off and went to bed.

The next morning he woke early and packed for roughly a week away. If it were longer, he could always buy more shirts and slacks; if it were less, then he lost nothing but about fifteen minutes. He smoked a cigarette on the sidewalk in front of his apartment, waiting for his cab to arrive, doing his part to contribute to the late spring smog.

He hated flying, and was not particularly looking forward to the short voyage up the coast. A "good" flight bores you to tears; an exciting flight is what keeps the airlines in bed with the liquor companies. Turbulence is God's way of gently reminding you (and sometimes not so gently) that you're His whenever He wants you. He hoped the Almighty wasn't in a reminding kind of mood today as the cab pulled up. By the time he arrived at LAX, he relaxed slightly, knowing the flight would be fine; whatever Gods there may be had tried pretty damned hard to remind him of his mortality with the cab ride. If they felt he still needed an extra push they obviously weren't as all-knowing as they claimed to be.

After checking in, he found himself an area near the main entrance where he could enjoy a few cigarettes in peace while he waited the two hours before boarding. Of course, it seemed these days "in peace" meant only two or three non-smokers an hour harassed him, and only five others gave him dirty looks. He didn't really care one way or another about someone preaching at him right now though; he was still waiting for the glee he had been positive would follow the news of his brother's untimely death. He was slightly disheartened that it hadn't made its appearance yet and confused that neither grief nor remorse had taken the absent joy's place.

Almost as much as flying, he hated kids. They could be cute, he supposed, but mostly they were annoying. Too loud, too messy, too much of a nuisance. Cindy didn't want kids; that had been one point in her favor, but she was some other poor sap's problem now anyways. He was sure that the kid who smiled at him as he smoked outside the terminal was no exception to the loud, messy stereotypical child, and he doubted Cindy would've been terribly impressed with her.

She looked like she might be cute at times. Probably most of the time, if one were inclined to think runny noses and poor speech were endearing charms. She was maybe eight, holding onto her mother's hand as the woman dragged her along. She waved at him and he tried hard to look annoyed at the interruption in the thoughts he wasn't having. Nevertheless, he found himself smiling back at her

diplomatically as she walked past, her blond hair bouncing playfully along behind her as her mother tugged at one of her arms, a purple stuffed dinosaur in the other.

He finished his last cigarette with about fifteen minutes to spare before his flight boarded and hurried across the terminal. After a quick bathroom stop, he found his gate and was just in time to stand in line as the attendants boarded the plane. Luckily for him, Blondy was in line right ahead of him. She noticed him, and turned and smiled again.

"We're going to see my grandma." She stated this with such an air of importance that for an instant he thought she was referring to a foreign dignitary. He smiled again at her.

"Really? Well, that's good." The girl's mother turned at him, with stern embarrassment.

"Krissey, how many times do I have to tell you: don't talk to strangers. Sorry about that," she added to Rob. "She's a bit too friendly sometimes."

"It's alright." The lady turned back towards the front of the line, while Krissey kept staring at him and smiling a smile that he could now see was shy a few teeth.

"Grandma's old. Older than dirt, daddy says." The lady gave a sharp tug on her child's arm as Rob tried to hold back a chuckle in spite of himself.

"Krissey, be quiet!"

"Kay."

The child finally listened to her mother as the line started to move. Within minutes, they were boarding the plane, and Rob was relieved to find himself seated alone in the aisle (and noticeably many rows away from Krissey and her mother, which he assumed was the mother's way of showing appreciation for a lack of assigned seats on this flight).

The flight attendants came along briefly to help people stow away their carry-on bags, and as people took their seats another attendant walked down the aisle taking drink orders. He satisfied himself with ordering a Crown Royal on the rocks in spite of the relatively early hour, and within minutes they were in the air. Not long after take off, when the plane had reached a stable altitude, a different attendant returned with his drink and he sat alone with an \$8.00 double shot and his thoughts of the past.

He tried to think of Bill, to try and feel something one way or another as he drank the whiskey, but it was hard—how could you remember anything about someone you hadn't known for eight years? There was *before* of course, all the great times they'd had growing up together, the parties and the ribbing and the long, late night talks about nothing and everything.

And there was *then*. The "then" that he'd used to alienate his brother, when his brother finally grabbed the proverbial straw that broke the proverbial camel's back.

He could barely remember the before, and it was only in thinking of then—the eight-years-ago then—that he started to feel anything. Nothing new there; he'd thought of it plenty of times since it happened, and it always gave enough fuel to the fire that kept him from picking up the phone himself. Part of him didn't want to think of *then*, it wanted to try and grieve over his brother, because that's what you do when family dies, right? He wanted to try and force himself to respect the dead, but he couldn't. As an airy ding signaled the captain turning off the remain-in-your-seats notice, he gave up his battle with himself and let his mind wander to *then*. To the eight-years-ago then.

## Chapter 2

Rarely was Bill one to try and set Rob up with a date. Occasionally he'd find a girl that *might* be interested in his younger brother, or that he *thought* Rob would like, but it invariably became another conquest of his own. Knowing that made *this* blind date seem all the more interesting as Rob walked in the late April evening to a coffee shop on Los Valles Avenue, tucked away in one of the lower-rent areas of town and only a few blocks from his apartment.

He knew the coffee shop somewhat well; he'd spent a handful of evenings there on the patio outside, sipping the cheapest special they had at the time and smoking while other students came and went. Sometimes he'd sit there with a book or two studying for a test when he got tired of staring at the walls of his apartment; sometimes it was just somewhere to go.

Had it not been for Bill's insistence that this girl was Absolutely Perfect for Rob he wouldn't have gone; blind dates were not exactly his idea of how to best spend a Friday night. However, knowing that Bill was hardly one to exaggerate when it came to issues of the fairer sex, Rob set aside his books for the night. He put on the single pair of dress pants he owned and a shirt that was only slightly wrinkled, and made his way in a mixture of curiosity, anticipation, and the God-I-can't-believe-I'm-doing-this self consciousness that stems from blind dates.

While he walked, he tried picturing the "devilishly hot" girl that would be waiting. It was difficult, as "devilishly hot" had been all that Bill had given him to work with. He tried for a moment to think of past girls that Bill had so designated, and knew it was pointless at the size of the list he made with only a moment's thought: one-hundred pound brunette waifs, athletic blondes, and even a redhead that had been at least twice Rob's size had all fit that description from his brother at one time or another. He gave up trying and left Ms. Absolutely Perfect to the fates.

He opened the door to the coffee shop, the aroma of cappuccinos and lattes filling the air, suddenly aware that he couldn't remember the girl's name—Missy, Trixie, Kristy, something like that. He wasn't terribly worried though; he knew he could play it off by looking around stupidly and making it obvious that he didn't

know who he was looking for. She'd come up to him and say "Rob? Hi, I'm..." and fill in the blank for him.

The interior of the shop was deserted, save for one rather large guy about Rob's own age, staring intently at a text book as though it held the secret to the universe. If the guy in the corner was Bill's idea of an Absolutely Perfect girl, this would most likely be a fairly short-lived blind date.

Seeing no other patrons and no specials marked on the black board above the counter, he ordered a regular coffee from the barista, and briefly considered between the fancy glass ashtrays with the coffee shop's logo on it and the plain, disposable tinfoil ashtrays. Knowing he'd do best to keep his risks for embarrassment to a minimum, he chose one of the disposable ones. If he did happen to drop it when she arrived (as of course he would, always the lady killer), he figured the tinfoil was less apt to shatter on the concrete than the glass ones. With his smoking paraphernalia decided on, he took a seat outside to begin what he hoped was a short wait.

After about an hour, as twilight inched onward to full night, he started to realize that Absolutely Perfect was standing him up. He'd already sipped his way through two coffees and was halfway through his third as this thought started to announce its presence more frequently and with a little more insistence. By the time the barista had come out to bring him a fourth one, he'd accepted the fact that this Friday night was better suited to just enjoying his coffee and cigarettes out in the cool April air.

Of course, this acceptance served the fates well, as it gave them an excuse to make him realize he'd only brought half a pack of cigarettes, of which he'd smoked the last one. The barista saw him shaking his pack hopelessly as she sat down his fourth cup.

"Here," she said, tossing a couple of 100's-length cigarettes on the table. She grabbed the disposable ashtray and replaced it with one of the glass ones. He didn't argue; with the chances of his date showing up growing slimmer by the moment, he was no longer worried about it shattering at the most inopportune time.

"Thanks, I appreciate that."

"Not a problem."

He looked up at her; she was far from unattractive. The runways of Paris wouldn't see her any time soon, but she would likewise never be left wanting for a date. Her hair was almost shoulder-length, dark brown or black—the streetlamps didn't provide enough light to allow him to distinguish—and with a slight wave. She was thin, but not anorexic. He doubted she'd beat him in arm wrestling, but she looked like she could probably take him in a foot race (even ignoring the

effects five years of smoking assuredly had wrought on his potential for a spot on the Olympics).

The lighting in the coffee shop did her no justice at all, with the stark fluorescent white stealing all trace of life from her face. While the street lights did little better, they at least gave more shadows, gently highlighting the soft curves and angles of her face.

"So, has it sunk in yet?" she asked, breaking his reverie as she cleaned the table next to his.

"What do you mean?"

She smiled at him, playfully, and not unkindly. "You're obviously waiting for someone who hasn't shown up yet. I don't mean to be rude or anything, but I don't think she's coming."

"Yeah, it was starting to. Blind date." He lit one of the cigarettes she'd given him. Much too light for his taste, but he hadn't even had to ask her for one.

"Ahh...I always hated those."

"Me too." She laughed.

"Obviously. Why else would you be here?" He chuckled a little; she somehow put him at ease, regardless of the comments at his expense.

"Well, I hate to tell you this, but I think your wait's going to have to end pretty quickly here. We're about to close up for the night."

"That's fine. I was going to leave after this one anyways," he said, indicating his coffee with the cigarette. "You guys are closing up awfully early for a Friday though, aren't you?" It was only a little after nine; he'd never been here this late on a Friday before, but it seemed strange to him. She shrugged.

"That's just when we close. Here," she tossed a couple more cigarettes on the table for him. "For kicking you out early." She walked off before he could refuse or thank her. He sipped his coffee as quickly as its temperature would allow, placed the last couple of dollar bills he'd set aside for the night's entertainment on the table as a tip, and walked out.

Rob had only gotten so far as the next block when he heard a female voice call after him.

"Hey! Stranger! Wait up!" He turned around, curious but cautious—he knew this wasn't the greatest area of town, although he doubted a woman would be calling at him to take a couple of shots at him.

Instead of a semi-automatic pistol though, the woman calling after him had nothing more powerful than her purse. While it could serve as a handy blunt instrument in the right hands, he doubted she was calling after him to bludgeon him with it for leaving a lousy tip. He waited patiently for a few seconds as she caught up to him, jogging slightly.

"Hey," she said again as she neared him, panting slightly from the short run. "This'll sound stupid as I stand here trying to catch my breath, but you know those smokes I gave you?" He nodded, though she continued before she could've noticed. "Those were my last ones. Can I get one of them back from you? I hate to ask, but it's a decent walk home and I could really go for a cigarette on the way."

"Sure," he said as he fished his pack from his pocket. The cigarettes hadn't fit very well, being longer than his normal brand, and so the box had crumpled them slightly when he'd forced it in his pocket. She laughed at the slightly curved cigarette he held out to her, but took it anyways.

"Cute." She lit it and took a deep drag, then sighed as she exhaled. "Nothing like a good smoke after a long day at work."

"Very true." She started walking, and he hesitated.

"Mind walking a girl home through a bad neighborhood? You can think of it as earning the cigarettes if you'd like." He considered the piles of clothes in his apartment that he needed to carry to the laundromat, the dishes in the sink, the four tests he had next week that he hadn't even started to study for, and countless other things he *should* be doing with his newly-opened Friday night. This consideration took all of half a second.

"Sure, I'd be glad to."

"Do you have a name? Or should I just call you 'hey you'?"

"Rob. Robert. Or Rob."

"Okay, Rob-Robert-Or-Rob. I'm Janet." She put her cigarette in her left hand and stuck her right hand out. He took it and shook it gently.

"Nice to meet you Janet. How about we leave it at 'Rob'?"

"Works for me." He lit a cigarette of his own and they started walking. "So, Rob, what do you do when you aren't waiting patiently for a girl who doesn't show up?"

"School. Music. You? I mean, other than the coffee shop."

"School. History major. Why music?"

"Just seemed like the thing to do at the time." She laughed.

"Sounds like a nice philosophy to base your future on."

"Well, I've played piano for a long time. Never really thought about doing much else. What about you? Why history?"

"The stories. Wars, politics, murder, incest, adultery. Hollywood has nothing on real life." He laughed again.

They walked in amicable silence for a short while, and he found it both natural and strange that the silence wasn't awkward. It was a contented silence, the silence of old friends who had long since found the spot where they could be comfortable not saying anything.

This was a part of town he was only vaguely familiar with, and he could understand why she probably wasn't crazy about walking home alone if she had to. The houses were all low-income rentals, maybe "handy-man specials" to a real estate agent spinning them for a sale. As if reading his thoughts, she spoke again.

"I hate walking through here. It's just...I don't know...it's just *ugly*."

"You think so?" She looked at him, surprised, as if he'd just announced his undying affection for all things unholy.

"Well, yeah. Just look at it."

"Ah, but there's a beauty to be found in every darkness." He said this more suavely than he'd ever thought possible, as though he were quoting an old classic movie or book.

"Is that Shakespeare?"

"Maybe; I thought I made it up. I think this is beautiful though," he said, indicating the worn out houses. Again, she looked at him as though discovering a resident insanity he'd hidden quite well until that moment. He smiled at her. "Well, look at it. That yard over there? It's freshly cut, even though most of the grass is dead and most of the yard is dirt. There's some toys laying there—they've got kids. The house is falling apart, but you can see where they're trying to piece it back together, even paint it a little. I'll bet that car in the driveway wouldn't make it even just to Riverside, but it's clean, looks like they might even have waxed it. They probably take better care of it than most people with a car straight off the lot."

"Okay, and how is that beautiful?"

"Well, in this whole neighborhood, no one gives a damn. No one cares about their house, their cars, nothing. You can tell by the way everything looks. But that house," he indicated his earlier example again, "they care. They're trying. While the rest of the neighborhood is a wasteland, they're trying to pull themselves up, trying to bring a little life to a desert. It's beautiful." They walked silently for a few minutes, and Rob started to think it was stupid of him to get preachy, or philosophical, or whatever he'd just done.

"You're right," she said finally, confusing him by using the one phrase he hadn't expected. He wasn't sure *what* he'd expected, but it would've been closer to "Okay, I need to turn here and you're freaking me out so bye-bye" than "You're right."

"What?"

"I said you're right. It is beautiful. In a weird, non-beautiful kind of way." She added the last almost hurriedly. In later years, amid the countless times he relived that night, he would realize that it was her way of trying to maintain a front he'd somehow sneaked through. Of course he didn't realize it at the time, and took it as an attempt at another joke. He laughed quietly.

They turned another corner, and right as Rob was thanking God that Janet live so far away as to ensure this night would never end, she stopped.

"Well, this is it. *Chez Edwards*." He looked up at the small house and almost laughed again; it was in only slightly better shape than those she had found so disturbing only moments ago. He noticed an anxiety in her that hadn't been there before, and realized she might be thinking the same thing.

"It's nice, just you?"

"And Lisa, my sister. You going to be alright walking home?"

"Yeah, just a couple of blocks away," he lied.

"Liar. You have no clue where you are, do you?" He laughed; she seemed more at ease now at least.

"No, I don't, but I'll manage."

"Well, thank you for walking a girl home," Janet said demurely, then stepped over and kissed him gently on the corner of his mouth. He stared blankly at her for a moment and she laughed. "Okay, this is when you say 'you're welcome.'" He smiled.

"You're welcome." She started up the walk to her house, and he called after her. "Hey, wait, how do I get home?" She turned to him.

"Los Valles is only a block that way," she pointed behind him. "Can't miss it." He waved sheepishly at her back as she stepped inside, then turned around and started walking.

As he reached the corner where the street he was on intersected Los Valles, he found that their half-hour walk through the neighborhood had ended less than five minutes away from the coffee shop.

## Chapter 3

Between thoughts of Janet's hair dancing in the streetlights (entirely imagined; he'd paid rather little attention to her hair once they'd started walking) and his incessant self-cursing for not even asking for her phone number, it was quite some time before Rob's mind had let him rest that night. He woke the next morning around noon, and went straight to the TV, flipping through the handful of channels he actually received on the cheap television's built-in antenna. He turned it off after hour, worked up the nerve to open his political science book, closed it, and turned the TV back on. He repeated this process several times before giving up.

It just wasn't any use; he had a hard enough time focusing on the books as it was, let alone with his new distraction dancing gracefully in the back of his mind. Not that he had any idea how Janet danced, but he didn't let that stop his imagination. Knowing that sitting in front of the television with his books in front of him was pointless, he changed into some mostly-clean jeans and a t-shirt, grabbed some of the music Dr. Bishop had assigned him, and headed to the practice rooms on campus.

Regardless of his lack of study habits in other academic areas, he practiced regularly, almost religiously. Although much of the time he hardly considered it "practice"—he just liked to play—his near constant desire to "hit the rooms" had placed him head and shoulders above much of the fellow pianists at the school.

He considered himself fairly lucky, living only a half mile from the college, saving him worries about parking (as well as much of the necessity for a car). He walked under the warm spring sky, mostly overcast but bright and unthreatening, humming softly to himself and letting his mind wander.

It was a walk he took often, so he was able to make the short journey in the mindless motions of habit, his feet tracing the same steps they'd made countless times. Oblivious to the world around him, his mind bounced back and forth between trying to decide what he'd work on in practice, the tests he was *supposed* to be studying for, and Janet, never staying on one subject or the other for too long.

Without realizing he'd finished the short walk, he opened the door to the large, single story faux-adobe building that housed most of the fine arts departments and

traced the familiar path through the maze of offices and lecture rooms to the handful of small, soundproof nooks that housed the pianos. Finding all of them unoccupied—entirely normal for a Saturday, as most of the other students were tending to their own weekend business—he chose one with a fairly well-kept baby grand and shut the door behind him. After an obligatory flourish of scales and arpeggios for a pretense of warming up, he played.

As he played, his mind let go of Janet and studying. With the echoes of the piano strings bouncing off the acoustic tiling and his arms and fingers racing like mad up and down the keys, his head cleared and nothing existed but the music. He paused only long enough in between pieces to decide the next one to play, sometimes from the music he'd brought, sometimes from memory, sometimes entirely improvised.

When he finished, he smiled at the keys and gently pulled the cover shut. He knew he'd probably never make a dime as a pianist—a fact his mother constantly reminded him of—but he didn't care. Part of him even looked forward to living the starving-artist lifestyle, the romanced version shown in movies where the artist is always penniless but somehow able to buy food and pay rent.

"I thought that was you," a woman said from behind him, startling him. Caught up in the music, he hadn't heard Dr. Bishop open the door. He turned to see her smiling in the doorway.

"Hi professor. I didn't think you'd be here today."

"Ah, how easily they forget," she said in mock exasperation. He said nothing, just looked at her curiously. "The concert? Tomorrow night? I figured you'd forgotten, since you weren't playing your *ballade*. Either that or you were *trying* to forget."

"No, I'd forgotten about it. Had some...other things on my mind."

"I see. Well, now you can remember. The Rachmaninoff is sounding good, by the way. You're still running your triplets together a little, but it's better than it was last month." He blushed slightly at her praise. "How is the *ballade* going, anyways? Are you still having problems with the end?"

"A little."

"Well, I'm not *supposed* to do this 'after hours', but I need a break—I'm getting tired of going over the scholarship applications. Run through it once and let me see how it's going."

He played the *ballade* for her once, his arms already tired from his earlier practice but able to keep it going until the last notes bounced dully off the acoustic paneling. When he finished, she smiled and nodded at him.

"Robert, that was *excellent*. You'll do fine."

"The ending?"

"You hit one bad note; that's it. It's one of Chopin's most challenging pieces—I know concert pianists who wouldn't have gotten it quite that well. You're going to do great tomorrow. In fact...no, I better not tell you." She gave him a sly smile. He looked at her, puzzled.

"What's going on?"

"Well, I didn't want to say anything, especially when you were already worried about the piece, but..." She sighed, resigning herself to say what she'd apparently thought better to hold in. "You remember meeting Roger Smolenska, from the symphony?"

Rob nodded cautiously; Smolenska was the music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. Dr. Bishop had introduced the two of them in September, before the orchestra had started its season and was visiting the music department to offer lessons and advice.

"Well, Mr. Smolenska is going to be there tomorrow night, looking for bright young musicians—pianists in this case—for an internship next year. I'd specifically suggested *he* come tomorrow night, instead of sending Blankenship—their keyboard chair—to watch you." She laughed as his eyes grew large. "No pressure Robert, you'll do great."

"Yeah, no pressure at all."

After a few moments of trying to be responsible and ignoring whoever might be trying to sell him new phone service or refinance his house, he grabbed the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hey, you sorry son of a bitch."

"Hi Bill." Rob struggled to remember why he'd once thought it a good idea to give his brother his phone number. He knew there must've been a good reason at some time, but he was at a loss.

"Hey, sorry about your date last night."

"Yeah, what happened?"

"She got tied up. You wouldn't have liked her anyways; she's terrible in the sack."

"Well, why'd you bother?"

"I didn't know until last night. Anyways, where were you? I tried to call you after she left, about nine."

He started to answer and stopped himself. For some reason, it didn't seem like a good idea to tell his brother about his new friend.

"Out."

"Who was she?"

"Am I that transparent?"

"Like glass. The only reason you won't tell me what's up is if it involves a girl. So what happened? You bang her?"

"No, I didn't. Just a girl I met at the coffee shop while I was being stood up by what's her name."

"Christy. Why didn't you bang her?" That was Bill, the hopeless romantic.

"Man, I just met her last night."

"So? Is she a dyke or something?"

"No, just..."

"Relax, I'm just busting your sack man. Anyways, what do you got going on tonight?" Rob looked around at his room, his eyes catching the poorly stacked pile of textbooks on his desk.

"I need to study; I've got four tests this week. Big ones."

"Whatever bitch. C'mon, let's go out. Get drunk, get some chicks, pass out. Maybe even in that order this time."

"Sorry Bill, I can't."

"Whatever man. I'll be over there in an hour."

"Not tonight, I really can't. We'll hang out some other time. I really need to study tonight."

"Alright, whatever. I'll call you later." Bill hung up before he had a chance to mention the concert.

He did need to study, but, as earlier, was having a hard time concentrating. His mind kept drifting past the books and the impending concert to a certain girl behind the coffee shop counter. He eyed his text books.

*This is the stupidest excuse in the world. You know that, right?* And he did know that. He kept that thought planted firmly in his mind as he dressed, grabbed his books, and started out the door.

By the time he arrived at the coffee shop it was still early enough in the evening for a fair amount of daylight, though the spring air was starting to chill. Before much longer, he knew this time of day would be miserably hot, but for now it was pleasant as he sat on the patio outside.

He'd ordered his coffee, passing behind Janet as she helped a customer at one of the tables. The man at the counter—probably a nice and interesting guy but nowhere near as pretty as Janet—gave him his coffee and took his money before Rob walked back out to sit down and enjoy a cigarette in the light April breeze. Because that's all he was there for: just a smoke and some coffee while he studied. Like any other customer. Of course.

He gazed intently at his political science book, going back and forth from one meaningless column of text to another as he sat, sipping his coffee and smoking.

After half an hour of carrying on this charade, a familiar laugh came from behind him like an old friend.

"This is quite interesting. Fancy seeing you around these parts again, stranger. Refill?" Janet stood over him suddenly, a knowing smile on her face and a pot of coffee in her hand.

"Sure, I think I'd like that. On the coffee too, if you don't mind." As soon as he spoke, he thought there was little else he could've said that would have been quite so stupid, but she laughed coyly at him.

"Well, we'll work on the coffee for now. Find your way home okay last night?"

"Yeah, I managed."

"I'll bet." She filled his coffee cup again and he thanked her.

"Listen, uh, Janet, I was wondering..." She stopped and looked at him expectantly, still smiling. "Um, do you have any plans tonight?"

"Well, I don't know...I guess it depends on why you're asking."

"I...uh...I wanted to see if you wanted to do something, maybe catch a movie or something like that."

"Hmmm... I don't know. I have that dinner with the governor, and I *am* about to go on tour to promote my new CD and fashion line, but I think I can fit you in somewhere." He laughed softly.

"When could I pick you up?"

"I get off in fifteen minutes—Raoul's closing up tonight. I think *City of Angels* is playing down the street, if you want to see it."

"Sounds great." She could've suggested they spend the evening slowly removing layers of his skin and rinsing him in battery acid; it still would've sounded great at the moment.

"Are we walking? It's not a problem if we are," she added quickly, placing a reassuring hand on his arm as a brief flush came over his face. "I just want to know so I know whether to put on heels or flats."

"Yeah, I think we'll probably be walking tonight."

"Great. So, give me about an hour, maybe? So I can change. Just meet me at my house."

"Sounds great. I'll see you then." She smiled at him, a warm, deep smile that seemed to come straight from the heart.

"Great. I need to get back to work." As if to enforce this point, Raoul (or at least who Rob assumed was Raoul) started yelling at her from inside. She rolled her eyes, gave him another quick flash of that deep smile, and rushed back inside.

Rob left his half-finished coffee steaming on the table and hurried home. He showered quickly, changed back into his slacks from the night before, and found a different slightly-wrinkled shirt.

He searched wildly for enough cash to make the night at least somewhat decent, and finally found a total of twenty-three dollars and seventy-two cents. They wouldn't be making a big night of it—probably have to get the cheap limo and only two bottles of *Dom Perignon*. But they'd at least get into the show and have enough cash for some snacks and a soda. With just enough time to make it to her house as she finished getting ready, he started out the door.

The movie had been decent, what little of it Rob remembered. He'd spent most of the night in an embarrassing school-boy daze, wondering if he should grab her hand or put his arm around her. In the end, he had merely spent the movie sitting there thinking.

Walking home with her was more comfortable by far than sitting next to her in the theater. He was quite thankful he'd paid *some* attention to the movie, as Janet had thought it quite worth talking about. While he wasn't giving a review worthy of Siskel and Ebert, he managed to hold up his end as they walked under the few stars and the streetlights of the city. Before long though, the moment he'd dreaded had come, and they found themselves in front of her house again.

"Seems shorter from the movies."

She smiled; he was starting to love that smile. "Yeah, well, I figured I couldn't pull that one on you two nights in a row."

"You should have. It was nice."

She looked up at him, the gravity in her eyes contrasting with the friendly smile below. "Yes, it was." They stared at each other for a moment, neither wishing to speak, both wanting to say something.

Finally, Rob broke the silence with the only thing that came to mind. "It's getting late, I should be going."

"Well, wait. Would you like to come in? Maybe for some coffee or something?"

"I think I've had a bit too much coffee for a couple of days now." She laughed. He was starting to love that laugh too.

"Well, maybe not coffee, but just come in, hang out?"

"Yeah, I think I'd like that."

"Me too." She took his hand and led him inside.

The inside of *chez* Edwards was far from spotless, but it still made his humble abode seem like the work of an abstract sculptor working in laundry and used pizza boxes. Rob found it to be quite comfortable; a few plates left on the coffee table, some pots piled up in the kitchen sink, a few jackets scattered on the floor. For some reason he'd been sure the place would be fresh from a *Home and Garden* photo shoot, and a bit of clutter relaxed him.

At least, as relaxed as he could have been after an attractive young woman invited him into her home after their first date. If she saw through him now, saw that his mind was racing with many potential (and very adolescent) scenarios of what would happen next, he'd be explaining the red, hand-shaped mark on his face for months to come.

If she saw through him, though, she gave no sign. Neither did she seem very nervous about having a strange young man in her house and apparently alone with her. She also didn't jump on him and start ripping off his clothes either, which was somewhat unfortunate—his adolescent fantasies would have to wait a little longer.

"Are you sure you don't want anything to drink? I can make some coffee; I think we have tea, or soda." She stood just outside the kitchen, the overhead light behind her turning her into a graceful silhouette. He didn't realize he was speechless until he heard her speak again, the smile evident in her voice, with a slight touch of concern coloring it.

"Rob? You okay?"

"Yeah, uh, tea will be fine."

"Okay. Go ahead and have a seat." Her silhouetted hand motioned behind him, and he turned and sat down on the couch. Moments later she returned with two glasses of iced tea, turned on the lamp, and sat at the opposite end of the couch, her knees up to her chest and her feet towards him. "Could you hand me the remote?" She pointed towards the coffee table, near where he was sitting. After a moment's searching, he found it right in front of him and handed it to her. She turned on the television.

"Never anything good on," she said after flipping through the channels for a few moments. Rob sipped nervously at his tea—it was good, not the best he'd ever had, but still good. Not that he'd complain anyways.

His mind struggled for something to say and drew a blank. Finally she found a halfway decent comedy and set the remote down. He soon found himself laughing with her, feeling more at home in less than a half hour at her house than he had in the months since he'd moved into his own place.

After a few moments, he noticed something wrong, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Then it dawned on him: Janet wasn't laughing anymore. He glanced over at her, meeting a somewhat shocked stare.

As he realized he'd been rubbing her feet and stopped, he also realized that her surprised expression wasn't one of disgust, but that of one who just found a letter in the mail from a nearly forgotten but well loved friend.

"No, no, don't stop! My feet were killing me." He blushed slightly, but smiled and resumed his work.

"My mom used to be a waitress for a while," he said in a feeble attempt at playing it off. "I know it's a little tough on the feet."

“Well, you do a great job. If you can do windows, you’re hired. If you can do the dishes and you look good in a Speedo while you’re doing them, we might even let you have some table scraps every once in a while.” He squeezed her foot harder and she let out a squealing laugh he found almost as beautiful as her normal laughter. “Okay, table scraps every night.” He squeezed again, and she squealed louder. “No Speedo, either! Okay? No Speedo!”

“Deal,” he agreed, both of them laughing now. Once they calmed down, he asked one of the questions that had been burning in the back of his mind since she invited him inside.

“So, where’s...?” He couldn’t think of the name, but Janet finished for him.

“Lisa? She’s at a party. So to answer the question I know you’ll ask next and the one I know you *won’t*: yes, we’re alone, and no, you’re not getting any.” He blushed fiercely at this, although he hadn’t *thought* he had planned to ask either of those. She laughed again; from anyone else he would have found that laugh at that time to be mocking, but from her it was still beautiful. “Relax tiger; I know you’re a guy and the thought has probably crossed your mind quite a bit since we came in.”

Rob said nothing, but smiled a thin, sheepish smile.

“I wanted to say something earlier and get it out of the way, but there wasn’t a chance without sounding like a bitch. So, now that’s out in the open, do you think we can relax a little?”

He found that they could.