

The Man In The White Suit

Perry Martin

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ISBN-13:
978-1514719701

ISBN-10:
1514719703

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have taken some liberties with some of the actual locations and establishments mentioned in this book, and have either invented others or combined elements of factual and fictional places for the sake of the story. The description of the layout of the Caesar's Palace Hotel and Casino circa 1985 is not factual. There might once have been an Ah So's Steakhouse in that hotel, but even if there was, it is long-since gone. As far as I know there is not now, and nor was there ever a Mama Mia's Italian Restaurant in Bally's Hotel Las Vegas. The Mountain Creek Chateau in Big Bear, California is likewise a figment of my imagination and its interior design is a combination of various hotels I have visited. The same goes for The Log Cabin Restaurant located within that imaginary hotel.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their help and advice with certain aspects of this novel:

Eric DiLeo, surfer, sailor, songwriter, and all-around good guy for his help in matters concerning the water.

Chris Coleman, another all-around good guy, for technical advice relating to the early development of computer technology.

Steve McVoy for being so forthcoming with technical advice relating to older model television sets. Be sure to visit his web site, **Early Television Museum** at www.earlytelevision.org

*For my beautiful wife, Rowena.
You are forever the inspiration for everything I do*

Chapter One

Los Angeles. California 2014

Last night Carl Becker's sleep had been restless and dream-filled. That, in itself, was significant; because for most of his eighty years of life Carl had always fallen into a deep, dreamless void while he slept. And that was exactly the way he wanted it.

Because memories that have been carefully hidden from conscious recollection can sometimes slip, unbidden, into dreams. Memories of things you'd rather not be reminded of. Memories that carry within them the knife of regret, whose blade can slice through your soul with the precision of a surgeon's scalpel. And of those, Carl's past had its fair share. So, at a certain point in his life, his mind had begun protecting him from such memories by virtually shutting down when his head hit the pillow at the end of each day.

However, last night it seemed as if some spectral hand had extended into the farthest reaches of his mind and stirred up all the pictures it contained, searching for specific events. Once it found the precise moments it was looking for, it then arranged them in no particular order and played them on a phantom projector.

Geoffrey, his friend and former business-partner and his wife Suzanne, drifted ghost-like down a narrow, misty street, their features miraculously unchanged by the passing years. When the two figures reached the end of the street they went their separate ways, each disappearing into the mist.

As he slept, Carl shuddered at the sight of that mist. Deep down, in the hidden recesses of his mind, he *knew* what lay beyond it.

Like a slow wipe in an old movie the scene was replaced by an image of Bobby, his younger brother, laughing in the California sun as the surf pounded the beach behind him. Sorrow, wrapped in chains of shame and guilt, swept through Carl's soul as he reached in desperation toward his brother, begging forgiveness for failing him.

With jarring abruptness he was thrown into the chaos and confusion of the Korean War, where all around him lay the lifeless bodies of those he'd been forced to kill. He turned and fled from the gruesome spectacle. But the ethereal moaning of the voices of the

long-dead pursued him relentlessly, until he cried out in anguish for it to stop.

And mercifully, it did.

For a little while there was nothing but silence and an all-consuming blackness. And then, as if everything that had come before had merely been a prelude to the main attraction, from out of the seemingly impenetrable darkness emerged the indelible image of his wife, Sacha.

Sacha—the shining light of his life—who had lost her valiant battle with cancer almost thirty years ago.

As Carl gazed into the eyes of the woman he'd pledged his heart and soul to, her image slowly crumbled, piece by piece, until the fragments were swept away like autumn leaves in an October wind.

And then there was just himself, standing by the sea shore, an urn in his hand, scattering Sacha's ashes over the ocean. With each handful he cast, dark clouds gathered in the normally bright blue Southern-California sky—as if Mother Nature herself understood his loss, and was empathizing with him.

Then the sky darkened, increasing in intensity, until eventually there was nothing but blackness once again.

When Carl opened his eyes to the early morning light his cheeks were wet with tears. He rubbed his face with his hands, as much to dispel the lingering images in his mind as to wipe the evidence of sorrow from his face, and wondered what could have brought about that unexpected trip down memory lane. It wasn't a journey he'd have consciously chosen to make, and he flinched at the recollection of all he'd seen.

If he sought to revisit any part of his past at all it would surely be his wedding day.

Sacha had looked radiant, almost angelic, in her white-lace wedding gown with her long, blonde hair cascading over her creamy white shoulders, bright, blue eyes shining with anticipation and love. He'd give anything—and he meant *anything*—to journey back in time and relive that day. After that, God, or whoever was supposedly in charge of this damn mess down here, could come and get him any time he

wanted. He'd go without argument. Although, if he was to be judged by the sins of his past, he imagined there might be a quite different final destination in store for him.

So be it. It no longer mattered. He might still be breathing, but in reality his life had ended the day Sacha died.

Truth be told, he'd been ready to go for quite a while. But for some reason this old body of his just kept on going, like the Eveready bunny, despite the way he'd abused it in the years following Sacha's death.

In those dark days Jack Daniel's had been his almost constant companion.

Nowadays he rarely drank more than the occasional glass of wine. But back when he'd been bent on drowning her memory, he'd drunk enough for two—and then some. By rights he should have died of cirrhosis of the liver long ago.

Go figure. Maybe the man upstairs wanted him to linger on a while longer—give him more time to suffer and repent his sins.

He hauled himself out of bed, cursing the stiffness and creaky joints that were his reward for reaching old age. As the years had rolled on, he'd gradually discovered aches and pains in places on his body he never knew existed before.

Dressed in only his underwear, he limped across the bedroom floor to the bathroom, shivering in the cool morning air. The air conditioner/heater in this piece of crap one-bedroom apartment had given up the ghost a week ago, and so far, maintenance hadn't gotten around to fixing it—if they ever would.

He stood in front of the bathroom mirror, grimacing as he strained to stretch the kinks out of his body.

"What I wouldn't give to be in my twenties again," he thought despondently, shaking his head at the image he saw before him.

The once handsome face looked more like a damned road map these days. And his cognac-brown eyes—Sacha had once told him they were his best feature—now only advertised the world-weariness he felt.

He sighed. At least she had been spared this.

He ran a hand through his ever-thinning gray hair, and then turned away from the mirror. Things were depressing enough without

staring at his reflection for any longer than was absolutely necessary. What had he heard someone once say? *“Age is what makes furniture worth more and people worth less.”*

That was certainly true in his case.

Carl leaned into the shower stall, started the water running, and adjusted the temperature. He liked the water as hot as he could stand it because it helped to soothe his aching muscles and joints—temporarily, at least. Once it was to his liking, he slipped out of his underwear, stepped all the way into the stall, and began soaping himself.

When he was done showering and shaving, he dried off, wrapped a towel around his waist and padded into the living room. Once there, he turned the television on and set it to the Weather Channel. Southern California had been enjoying a pretty mild winter so far, but there’d been one or two chilly days lately, so it wouldn’t hurt to know whether or not he should wear a jacket when he went outside. He knew that people in other parts of the country scoffed at the SoCal concept of cold—and he couldn’t really blame them—but he was a Southern California native, born and bred, and he felt the lower temperatures a lot more than he had when he was younger.

He shuffled back into the bedroom and sorted through his closet for something to wear. From the living room came the voice of the weatherman giving the local area forecast. “. . . and for those of you in the L.A. area, better brace yourselves for a brisk, sunny day in the low 70’s. Brrrr!”

Carl rolled his eyes. *Everybody’s a comedian these days.*

Okay, so it would be another mild day. No need for a jacket. One of his old sweatshirts would do.

He donned his clothes, combed his hair, and checked his pockets for his wallet, phone, reading glasses and keys. Satisfied that he hadn’t forgotten anything, he exited his apartment as he did every morning around this time, heading out for his usual morning coffee and blueberry muffin.

As he made his way along the landing toward the stairs, a child’s voice, coming from behind and to his right, caught his attention.

“Hello, mister.”

He frowned and grunted, halting his progress as he turned in the direction of the voice. “Hmm?”

Seated at a small, plastic table that held a children’s tea set was a little girl. Carl, not particularly good with children’s ages, guessed her to be not more than five or six years old. Across from her sat an oversize doll that had seen better days, a pink plastic cup and saucer in front of it. The little girl threw her head back and swept a hand through her shoulder-length, auburn hair in what she must have imagined was an adult gesture.

Her dark-brown, almost ebony eyes were all innocent curiosity as she repeated her greeting. “I said, ‘Hello, mister?’”

“Mmmm,” Carl murmured distractedly, more concerned with where he was going than striking up a conversation. But on second glance, he was forced to admit that the little girl was definitely on the plus-side of cute.

The faded green apartment door just behind her was open a few inches, so it was safe to assume that was where she lived. He couldn’t recall having seen her before today, so maybe the family had only recently moved in.

Now that he thought about it, once or twice during the week as he’d been preparing to go out, he *had* heard a little girl’s voice outside his door. That had probably been her, on her way to school.

Sadly, Sacha and he had been childless. But then, given the course his life had taken after her death, it was probably just as well.

The sorrow he felt at what would never be must have been openly evident on his face, because the little girl frowned and said, “Are you okay, mister?”

Carl’s attempt at a smile couldn’t mask the sadness in his eyes. “Kid, I haven’t been okay for a long time.”

Before she had a chance to say more, he turned and made his way downstairs to the street below.

His favorite local coffee house, Cuppa Joe had been replaced a couple of years ago by yet another Starbucks—as if there weren’t already enough of them. To be honest, Carl didn’t begrudge the company its success. They had a decent product, excellent marketing, and from what he’d heard, their employees were treated

pretty well. He'd once been a senior partner in a large electronics company, so he knew that expansion was a necessary part of continued success and viability. But he still lamented the loss of places like Cuppa Joe, where the owner knew your name and would sometimes join you for a cup and shoot the shit for a while. As far as he was concerned, Starbucks and franchises like it would never truly have that personal touch.

When they took over from Cuppa Joe he'd boycotted them at first. But that didn't last. There was nowhere better within a four-block radius (except for another Starbucks) and even if there had been—when you're eighty years old and on foot—who the hell wants to go that far for their morning coffee? So he became a regular, and though it wasn't quite the same as Cuppa Joe, one or two of the morning baristas had at least made the effort to remember his name and say, "*Hi Carl!*" when he ordered his usual Grande Café Americano—said beverage being as far as he would go toward ordering the multi-layered, multi-syllabic concoctions some people felt they had to have in order to start their day.

He was in full agreement with Dennis Leary, a comedian he'd once heard bemoaning the fact that the popular morning beverage had gradually become something more than just plain, good old coffee. He gave a rare smile as he recalled the punchline: "Cappuccino! Frappuccino! Al Pacino! Just give me a frigging cup of coffee!"

The place was busier than usual this morning, even for a Saturday. Most of the outside tables were already occupied by smokers, banished from the relative comfort of the café interior because of their habit. As Carl entered, he snatched an L.A. Times from the newspaper rack and tucked it under his arm. Scanning the café, he noticed there were only a few inside tables still available. He hoped most of the people he was standing in line with were getting their drinks to go. It was a pain in the ass when he had to hang out by the condiments bar waiting for a table to open up. That had never happened at Cuppa Joe.

Ah well, that's progress for you.

Someone behind bumped into him—pretty damn hard, too. He turned in irritation to see a spike-haired, nose-ringed specimen, his

beady, slate-gray eyes glued to the Smart Phone he held in his hand. No word of apology, no *“Excuse me, sir”*—nothing.

“Look at this idiot!” Carl thought disgustedly. *“His phone’s probably the smartest thing about him.”*

He gave him the once-over, noting the typical mode of dress. Black T-shirt that looked slept in (and probably had been), a ring in each nostril, some kind of jeweled stud on his bottom lip, arms covered in tattoos, and jeans hanging so far below his ass that when he walked it looked like he’d shit himself.

What the hell had happened to the world in the last 25 years?

Carl saw no point in disguising the antagonism he felt. His mouth contracted into a tight line and he gritted his teeth when he spoke.

“Hey! In case you hadn’t noticed—I’m standing here.”

Spike Hair looked up from his phone, frowning. “What’s your problem, grandpa?”

“Me? Oh, I’m just one of those oddballs who think that people should get their faces out of their damn cell phones and watch where the hell they’re going!”

“Whoa! Someone got out of the wrong side of bed this morning. What are you doing here, anyway? I thought old geezers like you spent all their time driving their motorized wheelchairs around Seizure World trying to remember where they live.”

At that last remark Carl’s face darkened, and he opened his mouth to offer an appropriate response, but was interrupted by the barista calling his name. “Morning, Carl. The usual?”

He turned and nodded distractedly, his mind still partly occupied with the ignoramus behind him.

Placing a ten-dollar bill and the newspaper on the counter, he said gruffly, “That should cover it.”

The barista handed Carl a paper bag containing his muffin, and counted out his change. Pocketing the money, Carl picked up the newspaper and slipped it under his arm. Then he snatched the paper bag and moved over by the beverage-dispensing counter to wait for his coffee, grumbling angrily about the “damned younger generation”.

A few moments later Carl’s coffee arrived. With his free hand he retrieved it and moved away from the counter, just as Spike Hair

sauntered over to wait for his order. He cast an insincere smile Carl's way and said, "Have a nice day, *dude*."

Carl ignored him and wended his way over to an available table. He could hear Spike Hair laughing behind him.

"*Asshole!*" Carl muttered under his breath. "*Too bad your mother didn't practice better birth control.*"

Setting his purchases down on the table, he turned and looked over to where the restrooms were located. A fortyish man in a dark-blue suit emerged from the hallway wall that separated the restrooms from the main store area, and walked back to his seat.

"*Might as well take care of it now,*" Carl thought. *Never pass up an available toilet* had been his motto ever since he'd moved into his twilight years. He was just making his way up the short hallway, past a storage door and the Ladies restroom, when a fast-moving figure brushed him roughly out of the way.

"Hey!" Carl said angrily as his shoulder hit the wall.

The figure turned as it opened the restroom door, and Carl was dismayed to see it was Spike Hair.

He wore the exact same mocking smile as before, as if it had been permanently painted on his face. "You snooze you lose, grandpa!"

With that, he slammed the door of the small, one-person toilet behind him, locking it as he did so.

Carl waited outside the restroom, rubbing his sore shoulder, anger and frustration burning inside him.

"You ignorant bastard!" he yelled through the door.

Spike Hair stepped out of the restroom a short while later. With a hostile glance in his direction Carl moved toward the door. But the bully stood firm, blocking his entrance.

A belligerent scowl twisted his features. "What did you call me just now?"

Carl shot him a withering look. "Are you deaf as well as ignorant?"

Spike Hair leaned in closer to Carl, his breath a foul mixture of stale tobacco and the sour residues of whatever alcohol he'd consumed the night before. "You're awful mouthy for an old guy. Why don't you just take that old, broken-down body of yours to the bathroom before I do something you'll regret?"

Carl glared at Spike Hair, pure hatred in his eyes, and thrust a finger toward his face. “Now listen here, junior”

Spike Hair grabbed Carl’s finger and bent it painfully back, cutting short his intended tirade on this less-than-stellar example of the younger generation. “Don’t start something you can’t finish, dude!”

As the bully increased the pressure Carl attempted to fight back, but quickly gave up, lacking the strength to do anything effective against someone almost sixty years his junior. Tears of pain filled his eyes, but he stifled the impulse to cry out. As low on self-esteem as he might be, he refused to give the bully *that* much satisfaction.

Spike Hair released Carl’s finger and gave him a shove in the direction of the toilet.

“Try not to piss on yourself,” he taunted as he left Carl huddled in the corner, massaging his finger.

Defeated and humiliated, Carl entered the restroom and used the facilities. As he washed his hands, he caught his sad reflection in the mirror. With a heavy sigh, he silently lamented his senior citizen status and inability to defend himself.

He left the restroom, shambled dejectedly back to his chair and sat down. From his table he had a relatively unobstructed view of the street and the outside seating area. Before long, Spike Hair showed up, claiming a seat that had just been vacated. He shook a cigarette out of a half-full pack and lit it with a Zippo lighter. Then he took a deep drag and looked arrogantly around him as a stream of blue smoke emerged from his mouth.

As he watched, Carl seethed impotently. His unexpected dreams last night had brought back long-forgotten memories of his time in the Marines. He’d been taught close combat fighting as part of his basic training, and if then was now, he could have easily taught that asshole some respect.

“Ab shit! What’s the use of ‘if only’?” he thought morosely.

Advancing age and years of self-inflicted physical abuse, courtesy of Jack Daniel’s, had left him weak and out of shape. Carl was forced to face the unpleasant reality that his best days were long behind him, and no amount of wishing would bring them back.

He shifted in his seat so he wouldn’t have to look at Spike Hair, sad excuse for a human being that he was. Then he took his reading

glasses out of his pocket, put them on, and lost himself in his newspaper.

The next time he looked up he was surprised to find someone sitting across the table from him. He hadn't seen or heard their arrival. It was as if they had simply materialized out of thin air. On closer inspection he saw it was a man—an exceptionally smartly-dressed man. Immaculate, in fact. He was quite handsome in a rugged sort of way, and if he had to guess, Carl would have put him in his late-forties. His jet-black, well-groomed hair was in stark contrast to the white, tailor-made suit he wore. Instead of a traditional tie, the man favored a bolo tie with a diamond-studded horseshoe-shaped clasp. On his feet he wore a pair of stylish, black cowboy boots.

But it was the man's eyes that really caught Carl's attention.

He couldn't quite make up his mind what color they were. At first glance they appeared to be blue. But then he thought they might be green. No, perhaps hazel. He removed his reading glasses to see if that would help. Hell, now they even seemed to hold a sinister, fiery red glow, giving the impression that other-worldly flames burned beneath the man's skin. The man's eyes seemed to change each time Carl changed his mind about their color.

What the hell was going on here?

"mornin'," the man said in a deep, lazy drawl that put Carl in mind of the archetypal "men who rode tall in the saddle" from the movies of his youth. "Mind if I sit here? This here's the only available seat, 'cept for the smokin' area outside; and I kicked the habit back in . . . well, let's just say a long time ago. Smartest thing I ever did." The man surveyed the store, taking in his surroundings. "Boy, this place is busier than a one-legged cat in a sandbox."

"It's the weekend," Carl said brusquely, still distracted by the enigma of the man's eyes. He shot him one last glance and then gave up.

"Maybe it's the light in here, playing tricks on my eyes," he thought as he put his glasses back on and returned to his newspaper.

The stranger's down-home voice drew Carl's attention away from the article he was reading. "You just gotta make up your mind about them. Then they'll settle down."

Frowning, Carl looked up from his newspaper. "What?"

“My eyes,” the man clarified. “Just decide what you think suits me best, and that’s how it’ll be.”

Carl wasn’t quite sure what to make of this. Was this guy nuts? He didn’t look it, but in a world that was becoming loonier all the time, it was sometimes hard to tell. “I’m sorry, but what the hell are you talking about?”

“Just give it a try,” the man insisted gently. “It’ll do the trick. Trust me.”

Carl’s first inclination was to ignore him and go back to his paper, but the man seemed harmless enough, so maybe he should just humor him. “You’re serious about this.”

The stranger smiled benignly. “As a heart attack.”

With an impatient sigh, Carl set his reading glasses down on the table, focused his attention on the man’s eyes, and settled on brown as the color—and he’d be *dammed* if they didn’t stay that way.

Carl’s eyebrows almost reached his hairline. *What the hell?*

The man in the white suit regarded his reflection in a mirror on the far wall, and nodded his approval.

Carl was mystified by what he’d just seen. “How did you do that? Are you a magician or something?”

“Or somethin’.”

Eyes fixed on the stranger, Carl took a careful sip of his coffee. He was reluctant to admit it, but the man had his interest now. “Hmm. So you’re one of those street magicians, like—what’s-his-name—David Blaine?”

“Well sir, I mean no offense to Mr. Blaine—I’m sure he’s the bees knees when it comes to that kind of thing—but my . . . *powers*, I guess you could call them, extend a mite further beyond the bounds of plain old magic.”

“Powers? What do you mean by ‘*powers*’?”

The man ignored Carl’s question. Instead, he turned and pointed toward the street-side window, gesturing with his head for Carl to look in the same direction. There sat Spike Hair, his feet up on a vacant chair, smugly smoking a cigarette and sipping his coffee.

The stranger shook his head, his mouth set in a disdainful sneer. “I saw what that lowlife did to you.”

Carl wondered how that was possible—unless the man in white could

see through walls.

But before he could question the man's assertion, the stranger spoke again. "No respect for his elders—or anyone else come to that. The boy needs a severe attitude adjustment."

Carl's face flushed as he remembered his earlier humiliation. "Damn right he does! And if I was still in my prime, I'd be just the person to perform that adjustment."

The man nodded and gave an understanding smile. "Do you ever think what a kick it would be to be young again—even for just a little while?"

"Huh! What person my age hasn't wished that at least once?"

The man leaned across the table and lowered his voice. "What if I told you it's possible?"

Carl leaned back in his chair, putting some distance between them. Maybe this guy *was* nuts after all. "That's crazy."

The stranger's voice was gentle, but his eyes burned with an intensity that added power and weight to his words. "Sometimes the most unbelievable things are actually true—*Carl*."

Carl was immediately wary of the stranger before him. "How do you know my name?"

"Aw hell, you'd be surprised how much I know about you, Carl Becker."

Hearing the man utter his last name startled Carl even further. Who *was* this guy?

"For instance," the stranger continued. "I know that when you were eighteen, you joined the Marines and fought in Korea. You got some bad memories of that place, aint you Carl?" It was a rhetorical question and the man wasn't expecting a reply. "But more important, I know *why* you chose to do that. *And* I know your life pretty much went to hell in a hand basket after your wife died. You threw it all away, Carl. Everything you'd spent a good part of your life working for. You gambled and drank your money away over the years, until now here you sit, an old, bitter man existing on Social Security and living in a shabby, one-bedroom apartment on the less-elegant side of town." His features softened, displaying a trace of compassion. "It's not a pretty picture, is it?"

Carl's first reaction was anger. Roused out of the dark apathy he usually cloaked himself in, he opened his mouth to protest. But then he froze mid-movement as he was struck by a disquieting thought: *"How does this guy know so much about me?"*

He was still angry but his voice quavered a little, betraying a hint of fear as he demanded, "Who the hell are you? You're not from the government, are you?"

The man raised his palms in a defensive gesture. "Whoa! Easy, pardner. I sure as hell don't work for Uncle Sam. And I apologize for sucker-punchin' you that way. I just wanted to make sure I had your full attention."

"Well, I think it's pretty damn obvious you've got it. If you're not with the government, and you're not a magician, who are you? And what the hell do you want?"

"More to the point, Carl—what do *you* want?" The man indicated Spike Hair again. "For instance, wouldn't you like to give that specimen out there what he's been asking for?"

"You bet I would. But what's that got to do with . . . ?"

The man in the white suit held up his hand, silencing Carl. All at once the café began to shimmer and buckle, as if the whole place was simultaneously crumbling and melting. Carl's first reaction was panic, and he gripped the table, fearing the onset of an earthquake.

But then he noticed something peculiar. Despite all the shimmering and buckling, the table wasn't moving, the ground wasn't shifting, the walls weren't shaking, nor were the windows rattling. And as he glanced nervously around, it seemed that everyone else was blissfully unaware of anything unusual. The café clientele were sitting comfortably in their seats, drinking coffee, chatting, working on their laptops, or intent on their cell phones.

"What the hell is this?" Carl said, no longer able to disguise his fear. "What are you doing to me?"

A mirror appeared out of nowhere, startling him further. But when he caught his reflection, he gasped, astonished at what he beheld. The age lines in his face had completely disappeared. He had a full, healthy head of chestnut-brown hair. His body was strong and fit, and his eyes held the optimism of a life yet to be lived. Staring back at him was twenty-year-old Carl Becker.

“What the hell . . . ?” He pinched himself. No, he wasn’t dreaming. He flexed his biceps and ran a hand over his flat, muscular stomach. Damn, he felt *great!* How could this possibly be?

Heart hammering in his chest, he stared incredulously at the man in the white suit. “How did you do that? I don’t understand . . . I can’t believe”

Carl petered off, words failing him.

A roguish smile played over the stranger’s face. “We can talk about that later.” He inclined his head in the direction of Spike Hair. “Right now . . . why don’t you go have a little fun?”

Carl instantly caught the man’s meaning. “You mean . . . I can . . . really?”

The stranger nodded confirmation. “Damn straight.”

Carl hesitated a few moments longer, and then decided, “*Why not?*”

For once there would be justice in the world—in *his* world, at least. He pushed his chair back, savoring the litheness in his limbs and the smooth, effortless way he rose to a standing position. No creaking joints, none of the stiffness or aches and pains he experienced these days when he moved from one body position to another. *Wow!* He’d totally forgotten what it felt like to be pain-free. He turned to the man one more time, seeking reassurance, and received an approving nod.

Needing no further encouragement, Carl left his table and strode to the front door, his confidence increasing with each step.

Maybe this was really happening.

When he stepped outside, Spike Hair was still lounging in one chair and using another as a footrest. He was engrossed in his phone, the remains of a cigarette burning in the ashtray that sat atop the table.

Carl tried the polite approach, although he wasn’t expecting it to get him anywhere. To be honest, he was counting on the fact that it wouldn’t. “Excuse me. Mind taking your feet off this chair?”

Spike Hair raised his head, eyebrows narrowing. “Not a chance, dude. It’s occupied.”

Without warning, Carl yanked the chair out from under Spike Hair’s feet and sat down. “No it’s not. *Dude!*”

Spike Hair jerked upright and thrust his chin antagonistically in Carl’s

direction, his beady eyes flashing hostility. “What the hell is your problem?”

“You. You’re my problem. You’re a waste of space.”

Slapping his phone down on the table, Spike Hair stood up and angrily pushed his chair back. The metal legs screeched in protest as they slid over the concrete. “Nobody talks to me like that!”

Carl kept his tone even, unaffected by the bully’s posturing. “You’ve been watching too many gangster movies. Sit down before you get hurt.”

Spike Hair gestured with his hand for Carl to stand up. “That’s it! Get out of that frigging chair!”

In a perfect imitation of the bully’s mocking smile, Carl said sardonically, “Don’t start something you can’t finish—*dude!*”

Spike Hair lunged at him and grabbed a handful of his sweatshirt. Carl had been expecting something like this, and allowed the bully to pull him to his feet. But then he quickly grasped the bully’s wrist with his right hand. Then, in one fluid motion, he slammed the heel of his left hand into Spike Hair’s elbow joint, stopping just short of breaking his arm. Spike Hair let out a loud yelp of pain and immediately loosened his grip on Carl, who then pivoted behind, twisted the bully’s arm painfully up his back, and with his free hand, threw a chokehold on him.

With his remaining hand, Spike Hair immediately attempted to grasp the forearm that encircled his throat and wrench it away. But Carl’s iron grip was unbreakable. This body hadn’t long been out of the Marines and was still rock hard. By now, gurgling noises were coming from the bully’s throat and he was gasping for breath.

Carl could hear murmuring amongst the outdoor clientele, and a male voice to his left called out, “Hey! Come on guys. Take it somewhere else.”

Swiveling his head in the direction of the voice, Carl smiled reassuringly. “It’s cool. We’re friends. We’re just messing around. Sometimes my buddy here gets a little carried away.”

The customer didn’t look totally convinced, and opened his mouth to argue the point. Then he seemed to think better of it and went back to his laptop.

Returning to the business at hand, Carl increased the pressure on

Spike Hair's throat. Keeping his voice low, he said, "Do you want to play some more, *dude*? I can do this all day."

The bully's reply was hoarse and breathless. "No, no. I've had enough. Let me go, man. Please! I . . . can't . . . breathe."

"Sure," said Carl agreeably, relaxing his hold a little.

But then he had an idea. It struck him as highly unlikely that his magical return to youth was permanent—so maybe he could set something up that would provide him with a little extra satisfaction once he was done teaching the bully a lesson.

Spike Hair gagged as Carl tightened his grip once more. "But before I let you go, I'm going to tell you what I want you to do for me."

"For Chrissake, what?"

"Remember that senior citizen you hassled this morning?"

Spike Hair thought for a moment, and then emitted a muffled grunt. "Uh-huh."

"Well, he's my grandfather. So before you leave, I want you to go back into the store and apologize to him. You won't see me, but believe me, I'll be watching. Are we clear on this?"

By now, the best the bully could manage was a painful groan. His eyes were glazing over and he was close to passing out.

Carl released his grip and gave him a rough shove. "I'll take that as a 'yes'."

Spike Hair staggered over to his chair and leaned heavily on the armrest. Harsh wheezing noises, reminiscent of someone sawing wood, emerged from his mouth as he fought to suck life-giving air into his lungs.

"Remember," Carl called out menacingly as he headed back into the café. "I'll be watching."

The man in the white suit slapped his thigh as Carl joined him back at the table. "Yeehaw! I enjoyed the hell out of that. You got a little of the Wild West in you, pardner."

Carl viewed the stranger with newfound respect, mixed with a liberal dose of incredulity, when he considered the impossible nature of what he'd just experienced. How the hell had the man pulled that off? But before he could open his mouth to speak, the café suddenly shimmered and buckled again. Just as before, nobody else was even

remotely aware of the disturbance Carl saw all around him. As everything settled back to normal once more, he too, reverted back to his original state. He was eighty years old again, and all the familiar aches and pains had returned with a vengeance. Much as he'd enjoyed his recent experience, Carl was completely bewildered by it. "How the hell did you do that?" A sudden thought occurred to him. "Wait a minute. Did you just hypnotize me?" The stranger shook his head and made a dismissive noise with his mouth. "Hell, no! I don't go in for that kind of thing. That was the 'real deal' as they say."

Carl looked around the café again, still amazed that every other person in the coffee house had been oblivious to the shimmering and buckling, the mirror, and the physical change he'd gone through. "How did you do all that . . . stuff, without anybody noticing?" The man gave an enigmatic smile. "Trade secret." "Huh. What about you? Can everybody here see you? Or do I look like some idiot talking to myself?" "Oh, they see me all right. But not quite the way you do. To them, I look like your normal, everyday, well-dressed business man." "And the way you do that? Another trade secret?" The man chuckled. "That's right." Carl shook his head. "Boy . . . I don't know about all this." The stranger leaned in closer and patted him on the arm. "Come on, Carl. It was kinda fun, wasn't it?" "Oh, it was fun all right. I'll give you that. Putting that asshole in his place was" Carl stopped mid-sentence, aware that someone had just approached his table. It was Spike Hair, a little worse for wear after his encounter with young Carl. He looked nervously around the coffee house before he spoke. "Um . . . I just wanted to apologize for . . . for earlier. For . . . for what I did earlier. I'm really sorry."

Carl couldn't keep the smug smile from his face when he replied. "Son—I accept your apology. And I'll be sure and tell my grandson." His eyes roamed the café, as if searching someone out. "He should be coming back from the restroom any minute now. He's a good boy, but he's got a bit of a temper. He's an ex-Marine, in case you didn't know. I wouldn't want to be someone who got on the wrong side of

him.” Carl’s smug smile widened into a grin. “But I guess you already found that out.”

The bully shot an anxious glance in the direction of the restrooms, and nodded his head vigorously. “So . . . anyway . . . I better go. I’m . . . er . . . supposed to meet someone at . . um . . . somewhere else.”

As Spike Hair moved rapidly in the direction of the front door, Carl called after him. “Hey!”

The bully stopped and turned his head in Carl’s direction, concern on his face.

Carl winked at him. “Have a nice day. *Dude.*”

Spike Hair merely nodded and resumed his hasty exit.

“I don’t reckon you’ve had this much fun in a long time, Carl,” the stranger said as they watched the bully rocket out of the café as if someone had just yelled, “Fire!”

“Huh! You don’t know the half of it. Or maybe you do, since you seem to know so much about me. But either way—what’s this all about? I mean . . . there must be a reason for all the . . .” Carl waved his hands around randomly. “. . . hocus-pocus. So let me ask you again—what do you want?”

“And let me ask *you* again, Carl—what do *you* want?”

Carl let out an exasperated breath, folded his newspaper, picked up his reading glasses and his coffee cup, and made to leave. “It seems like we’re going round in circles here, mister . . . whatever your name is. Thanks for . . . whatever that was, but if it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll just find another table.”

He felt the man’s hand on his arm. There was no pain involved, but Carl was instantly paralyzed, unable to move a muscle. It was a frightening sensation.

“There *are* no other tables, Carl,” the man said gently. He gestured toward Carl’s chair with his head. “Sit yourself back down and I’ll *tell* you what you want.”

Since there seemed to be no other option, Carl sat down.

The man released Carl’s arm, leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. “It’s all about choices, Carl. The choices we make on our journey through life. Sometimes the right ones, sometimes the wrong

ones. In our quiet moments, when there's no one around but us, a bottle of beer and the bedpost, we look back on those choices, and wonder what it would be like to have another go at it. Think about it, Carl — a chance to re-experience some of the greatest moments of your life. Or maybe” the stranger paused for effect. “. . . a chance to change the outcome of those things you most regret. Know what I mean?”

Carl felt a fiery burn in his stomach, as if someone had just plunged a knife into his abdomen and twisted it. He well knew he'd made choices he later regretted. The results of which he'd thought were dead and buried in a forgotten past until they'd come back to haunt him last night.

And who wouldn't want to re-experience the greatest moments of their life? One immediately came to mind that he'd gladly re-experience—over and over again. But what good did it do to wish for something like that? It was impossible.

As if reading his mind, the man said, “But what if it *isn't* impossible, Carl? What would you give?”

For the second time that morning Carl recalled how Sacha had looked on their wedding day, the image as sharp and clear as ever.

Emotion surged up from deep within, and his throat tightened, making his voice raspy and the words difficult to get out. “I guess I'd give anything.”

Compassion filled the stranger's eyes. “Yeah, I reckon you would.” He sat up in his chair and rubbed his palms together. “Well now I'm afraid you're gonna have to take a leap of faith in order to believe what I'm gonna tell you next.” He paused before continuing, as if setting the stage for his next pronouncement. “I'm authorized to grant you that power. You can go back and re-experience any three separate twenty-four-hour periods of your life. Where you go, and what you do, is up to you. The choice is yours.”

“Okay, hold the phone,” Carl said, raising a skeptical eyebrow. “One of us is *definitely* out of their mind here. Time travel? You expect me to believe that?”

The man's eyebrows narrowed, and he tapped his forehead with the first two fingers of his right hand. “Think, Carl. *Think!* Think about what you just experienced, and allow yourself to *believe*, just for a

moment, that what I'm saying is possible."

An image of Sacha filled his head, and the doubt receded a little. He wasn't fully convinced, but he could feel himself wavering. "Okay. You said authorized. What do you mean? Authorized by who?"

"That's not important right now." The stranger waved his hand dismissively, and something in the gesture persuaded Carl that the man was right—he didn't need to know the answer to that. At least, not yet. "What *is* important is that a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity is being offered to you, Carl Becker."

Carl frowned and tilted his head slightly, his resistance weakening still further. "You *really* have that kind of power?"

The man shrugged and spread his arms expansively. "Hell, I just gave you a free sample. What do *you* think?"

Carl gave a begrudging smile. "That *was* a pretty convincing demonstration, I'll give you that." Then something occurred to him. He thought he already knew the answer, but it couldn't hurt to ask. "What about Sacha? Can I go back and prevent her from getting cancer?"

The man shook his head. "Sorry. Can't do that. This is about you, Carl. *Your* life. *Your* choices."

Carl nodded, disappointment on his face. "Yeah, I had a feeling you'd say something like that."

The man in the white suit said nothing more. He'd made his pitch. It was up to the customer now.

"Supposing I believe you, and I decide to take you up on your offer. What's the catch?" Carl's eyes narrowed. "There's *always* a catch."

The corners of the man's mouth raised in a half-smile. "In this day and age it sure seems that way, don't it?" His expression became serious. "The 'catch', if you want to call it that—is that after the last twenty-four-hour period, you get to come with me."

Carl wasn't sure he liked the sound of that. "Where?"

The stranger's eyes made a brief return to their previous unstable state, vacillating between sky blue and fiery red. The change didn't go unnoticed by Carl, and a tremor ran through his body.

Then the man leaned across the table and fixed Carl with an unflinching stare. "To wherever it is your soul ultimately belongs."

An icy coldness crept into Carl's stomach. Who or *what* was he really dealing with here? Just this morning, he'd been unshakably positive that he could care less what happened to him after he died. But now, as he regarded the mysterious stranger before him, he felt a very real, fearful concern for his immortal soul.

Hardly believing his ears, he heard himself asking, "Are you from up there?" He punctuated the question by pointing upwards. Then he indicated the floor, and his voice dropped almost an octave. "Or down there?"

"Let's just say I'm an independent contractor," the man said equivocally.

The stranger's reply won him a grim smile from Carl. "Independent contractor, huh? I'm not quite sure I know what that means."

"There're a lot of things you don't know, Carl. But if you take me up on my offer, you might be surprised at what you'll discover."

Carl was almost sold. But one thing held is curiosity. "Why twenty-four hours? Why not forty-eight? Or a week?"

The man in the white suit shrugged. "Why is the sky blue? Why is the sun yellow? Why does gravity work? Because those are the rules. I didn't make them, I just follow them. Catch my drift?"

Carl nodded his apparent understanding, or at least acceptance of the man's explanation. "Fair enough. So . . . for argument's sake, let's say I decide I'm going to do this. How does it work?"

"Easy peasy, Carl. Just think of the time and place in the past that you want to visit, and say, 'Back!' Before you know it . . ." The stranger snapped his fingers. ". . . there you'll be. Twenty-four hours later, you'll end up right back where you started from in 2014. If you get a hankering to come back earlier, just put your attention on where you were in the here and now, and say, 'Go!'"

Carl was surprised at the almost childish simplicity of the instructions. "That's it?"

The stranger chuckled. "Would you rather '*Abracadabra*' or '*Shazam*'?"

Carl allowed himself a slight smile and shook his head. The whole thing was ridiculous enough as it was. "No, I guess that's fine. At least it's easy to remember."

The stranger proffered his hand. "So we've got a deal?"

Carl hesitated for just a few moments more, still not entirely sure

what he was letting himself in for. Then he decided, "*What the hell? What've I got to lose? Life isn't worth a damn these days anyhow.*"

As he took the man's hand and shook it, he said, "What if I have more questions? How will I find you?"

The stranger gave a sphinxlike smile, and an ancient wind that seemed to carry upon it the dust of the ages swept ominously through Carl's being.

"Don't worry, Carl. *I'll find you.*"

Chapter Two

Los Angeles, California 2014

As he shambled along the route that led to his apartment building, Carl reflected on what he'd just experienced. Everything he knew about the way the world worked told him that the events he'd just been part of weren't humanly possible. But then, maybe what he was dealing with had nothing to do with being human. His last contact with the mysterious stranger had left him with the distinct feeling that he was in the presence of something truly beyond his understanding. Admittedly, there was a small part of him—the bitter, cynical eighty-year-old for which the world held no joy or mystery—that still clung to the notion that the man in the white suit was nothing more than a clever magician after all. But the larger part of him—the part that longed to see Sacha again, and correct the terrible mistakes he'd made—hoped with all his heart and soul that the stranger was, as he'd put it, “the real deal”.

He was laboring slowly up the well-worn staircase that led to his first floor apartment—cursing and grumbling about the lack of an elevator as he did so—when he heard the voice of the little girl he'd encountered earlier that morning. She was talking to her doll, imbuing it with life as children are prone to do with inanimate objects. As he reached the landing, she looked in his direction.

“Hello, Mister. Are you feeling better?”

His difficulty with the stairs had made him short of breath and shorter on patience. “What are you doing out here? Why aren't you playing in your apartment?”

Unperturbed by his demeanor, she rolled her eyes and let out an exaggerated sigh. “Well, anyone can see I'm having tea with Cathy, my doll. And it's much nicer to play in the garden than to be inside.” A frown accentuated the already deep furrows etched into Carl's forehead. “Garden? What are you talking about? You're not in a garden.”

“Yes, I am!” With a flourish, she indicated the vertical spindles of the banister, then the faded floral-patterned carpet, and finally, the ancient ceiling light that tried half-heartedly to illuminate the landing.

“Those are the trees, these are the flowers and that’s the sun.”

Carl had no ready defense against the vivid imagination of a child, so he went on the offensive. “What about your parents? Aren’t they home?”

“I don’t have a daddy. But my mommy’s inside, doing learning stuff on the computer. She’s going to be a chef.” A note of pride came into her voice. “*And* she’s going to open her own restaurant one day.” She folded her arms and expelled an impatient breath. “Any more questions, Mister?”

Carl felt inclined toward sympathy when he found out the little girl was fatherless, and he softened his aggressive tone. “Why aren’t you in school?”

She rolled her eyes again. “Because it’s Saturday. There’s no school on Saturday, silly.”

Score another point for the little girl. He seemed to be fighting a losing battle. “Well . . . that’s beside the point. I just think it would be better if you played quietly in your apartment.”

The little girl scrunched her face into an expression of non-comprehension. “Why?”

“Because . . .” Carl hesitated. He’d never been a parent himself, but he was still familiar with the “Why-Because” back and forth you could get into with a child her age. He had no intention of spending the next little while playing *that* game. Then, inspiration hit him in the form of something he recalled from his distant childhood. “. . . because the *boogeyman* might get you.”

The little girl made a snorting noise and giggled behind her hand. “Silly. There’s no such thing as the boogeyman.”

So much for inspiration. “You don’t believe in the boogeyman?”

“Of course not. That’s just something big people say when they want to scare children.”

Carl shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands in a gesture of defeat. “Fine! Suit yourself.”

He reached into his pocket and retrieved his keys, unlocked his apartment door and stepped inside without another word. He couldn’t be totally sure, but as the door swung closed behind him, he could swear he heard the little girl mutter under her breath, “See you

later, ‘Mr. Grumpy.’”

Back inside his apartment once more, Carl flopped down into his easy chair with a heavy sigh. Behind that sigh lay 80 years of life—a life that had somehow gotten away from him after Sacha died.

In the early days, when he and his business partner Geoffrey Nilsson had been struggling to get their fledgling electronics company off the ground, she’d believed in his abilities and never allowed him to entertain self-doubt. In later years, when his father had succumbed to lung cancer—and his mother had died of a broken heart shortly after—Sacha had been there to comfort him. Her sense of humor and eternal optimism had helped get them through the toughest of times, and her unconditional love had kept his inner demons at bay.

Right up until the very end, when the cancer had reduced her to a shadow of her former self, Sacha had somehow remained positive. She’d had an unshakable belief in the immortality of the human spirit, and firmly believed that someday they’d be together again. Carl wasn’t sure what he believed. But as her time on earth had grown short, and he’d watched her wither away, he’d clung fast to the hope that she might be right.

Unfortunately, after she passed away, that hope hadn’t been strong enough to prevent him from descending into a pit of grief and despair, where alcohol became his crutch, and he’d gone on to make a mess of his life.

Out of habit, Carl picked up his universal remote, switched on the TV, and tuned in to one of the cable news channels. He was well aware that the constant barrage of death, destruction and political unrest that issued forth from the television never did anything to improve his disposition—quite the opposite, in fact—but it was a hard habit to break.

Sacha had rarely watched the news. He’d once asked her if it bothered her that she wasn’t informed. She’d told him that if being informed meant she had to watch disturbing images of plane crashes, murders, mass killings, war and devastation, then she’d rather be uninformed. Not that she’d been ignorant or oblivious to the world around her—far from it. She’d kept herself up-to-date on all the important political and societal issues, and voted in every election

since she'd turned twenty-one—but never for a particular party. Instead, she'd diligently studied the issues, and voted for the candidate she felt would be best for the country as a whole.

Sacha had been intelligent, vibrant and beautiful, and after almost thirty years he still missed the hell out of her.

Carl allowed his head to sink into the back of the soft easy chair. The combination of last night's dreams, and the strange events of the morning, had awoken memories he'd long ago laid to rest in a dark and abandoned part of his consciousness. Mingled in amongst the shame, guilt and regret that were evidence of things he dare not acknowledge the existence of, were memories of happier times. It was to one of those happier times he felt the urge to return. He closed his eyes, and as he drifted into the past, the sound of the television faded into the background.

* * * *

The Carl Becker who returned home from Korea in 1953 was a haunted man. The war had affected him in a way he hadn't expected. He'd gone there foolishly believing he'd find some kind of salvation, and that by displaying bravery on the battlefield, he could somehow atone for the one act of cowardice he could not forgive himself for. It had been a mistake. A *terrible* mistake. It had only added more pain and heartbreak to his already tortured soul. And so he'd drawn a black curtain around the portion of his mind where those memories dwelt, to shield him from the things he'd seen.

And perhaps more important—from the things he'd done.

Back once more in his hometown of Dana Point in south Orange County, California, Carl bummed around for a while, doing odd jobs here and there; anything to make enough money to leave home—because he really needed his own place. Things had been rocky between him and his parents—especially his dad—ever since that summer with his younger brother, Bobby. And his decision to go to Korea had only made matters worse.

The atmosphere at home had become uncomfortable, to say the least.

Oh, his parents still loved him; there was no doubt about that. After all, he was their son. But he could tell, by the way they sometimes looked at him, that things had changed. They tried to hide it, but Carl knew it was there. There was a rift between them that could never be repaired.

He had the option to go to college, courtesy of the G.I. Bill, so he'd given it a shot. He didn't exactly graduate magna cum laude, but he made it through. It wasn't that he wasn't intelligent enough to have done better. Far from it. But he just couldn't keep himself motivated enough to really concentrate on his studies.

Part of it, he knew, stemmed from the fact that he was there not because he really wanted to be, but because he thought it might make his parents happy. And given how things were between them, he wanted so badly to do that. But the larger part was that every once in a while, the protective curtain in his mind would draw back slightly, allowing him an unwanted glimpse at what lay behind it, and it would require great effort and attention to force it shut again.

Little by little, over the next few years, the memories began to assert themselves more and more, finally reaching the point where he found it difficult to sleep at night. His savior, at least until Sacha came along, was his intense interest in electronics. It was the one thing that could keep his mind occupied enough to at least quiet the demons within, if not banish them completely.

After he left college, he immersed himself in his chosen field of interest—reading, researching and experimenting day in and day out, to the exclusion of all else, often to the point of complete physical exhaustion. He had no social activities at all. He completely shut himself off from the outside world.

It wasn't much of a life, he knew—but it kept the curtain closed.

For as long as he could remember, he'd been fascinated by the inner workings of radios, television sets—anything with valves, tubes and circuitry—and had studied up exhaustively on how and why everything worked. As a kid, he'd endured his younger brother's jocular derision when he'd subscribed to *Radio-Electronics* magazine, and later on in the fifties, *Popular Electronics*. The predictions for what

the world might expect in the future from the field of computers were of particular interest to him, and he always stayed abreast of the latest developments.

Carl eventually secured a semi-permanent job at a radio and television repair store. He worked there nine to five, Monday thru Saturday. It was the perfect occupation at that time of his life—being paid for indulging in his love of tinkering with things electronic. He quickly became proficient at diagnosing and repairing the various TVs and radio sets that came through the store. As such, he became an invaluable employee to his boss and store owner, Frank Richards.

But as much as he enjoyed it, Carl didn't see himself working in the repair store for the rest of his life. He had bigger plans. He wanted to be an innovator. A creator of things. When he wasn't working, he continued to spend all of his free time studying. He became a sponge for information. Not only did it keep his tormented mind occupied, it fed his passion and fueled his dreams.

Those dreams took a step closer to reality when he encountered Geoffrey Nilsson—a tall, blonde-haired, blue-eyed man of Nordic descent who, like Carl, had an interest in things electronic.

Carl met Geoffrey one afternoon when he was lunching in a burger joint, the latest copy of *Popular Electronics* in front of him. The magazine was open to a page entitled “The Evolution of the Computer” and the title caught Geoffrey's attention as he was walking by, searching for a table. The two struck up a conversation, and found they shared a mutual interest in electronics—computers in particular.

Since 1939 the progression from vacuum tubes to transistors in the 1950s had brought about radical changes to this technology. Geoffrey, eight years Carl's senior, had been researching this area for quite some time. He'd been carefully monitoring the progress of companies like UNIVAC and IBM, with an eye to somehow getting involved in this emerging technology. It was his opinion that if they could “build a better mousetrap”—so to speak—their fortunes would be made.

Geoffrey's superior knowledge of the business aspects of this pioneering field and Carl's natural ability in the technical area made a

formidable combination, and before long a partnership was formed. All they needed was the money to finance the research and development. Since Geoffrey had served in the Army during World War II, he qualified for a loan under the G.I. Bill. They secured sufficient funds, barely, to set up shop in a small office with an equally small warehouse space in the back. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

It was a Saturday afternoon, summer 1958, when Sacha came into Carl's life. By that time, he and Geoffrey's company (which they'd grandiosely named Nilsson-Becker Enterprises) had been limping along for a little over six months. Carl was still holding down his job at the repair store during the day, and working in what they called the company's "Technical Department" in the evening. In reality, the Technical Department was nothing more than a small section of the warehouse that had been set up with a workbench and the necessary tools and supplies Carl needed for his work.

Geoffrey had a commission-only sales job, which gave him a little more freedom to moonlight at their office during the day. In the evenings they could both be found there, burning the midnight oil. But so far, their company had yet to generate any real income, and despite their frugality the loan money was slowly but surely running out. Rent, utilities and the loan payment were due every month, and various supplies and parts had to be purchased from time to time to keep the research and development going.

If they didn't come up with something marketable soon, they would be forced to abandon their dream.

Carl's place of daytime employment, Frank's TV & Radio Repair, was located in downtown Orange near the Orange Square Plaza. Frank Richards, the gruff, sixtyish owner of the store, usually kept Carl working in the back room, which was where he was when he heard the *ding dong* of the front door chimes on the day that would change his life. Carl set down the TV manual he'd been studying, and went out front, expecting to see the weather-beaten features of his boss as he returned from a late lunch.

What he saw instead took his breath away.

Her eyes were blue. Not the Nordic, arctic-blue of Geoffrey's eyes. More the warm blue of a crystal-clear Arizona sky—and just as

endless. Or at least that's how they seemed to Carl, who was instantly captivated by her smile. The effect she created on him was such that, for the first time in almost six years, he felt like venturing into the outside world.

"Hi. I wonder if you can help me," she said hesitantly.

"I'd be glad to. Are you looking for a particular store in this neighborhood?"

She shook her head. "No. I think this is the place. You repair radios, don't you?"

"Radios. Televisions. Some small appliances."

That smile again, almost pulling his heart out of his chest. "Perfect." She gestured towards the street. "My car's parked a few doors down, and my poor, broken radio is in the back seat. It's a big clunky old thing—the radio, that is—and I didn't want to lug it down here if you don't do that kind of thing."

"Well, we *do* that kind of thing," Carl said. And then, hoping to impress her, he added: "Or at least, I do. Frank, the owner, has pretty much put me in charge of most of the repair work. Radios are my specialty."

"Then I have definitely come to the right place." She turned toward the door, and the sudden movement caused her floral-print sundress to swirl around her legs. The red and pink roses that made up the pattern seemed to come alive, as if they were swaying in a sudden breeze. "I'll just go get the radio then."

Carl, temporarily mesmerized by the vision before him, snapped out of his trance and stepped rapidly out from behind the counter. "No. No. Allow me."

"That's nice of you, but you don't have to. It's not *that* heavy."

But Carl didn't want to let her out of his sight. Not for a second. He was smitten and he knew it.

"I know. But I'd like to, if it's all right with you."

"Of course." She glanced around the store. "Is there anyone else here? I mean . . . is it okay to leave the store unattended?"

"Don't worry. This is a good neighborhood. And we won't be gone but a minute."

He followed her down the street, admiring her legs as she clacked

along in her white high heels, to where sat a 1949 Ford Sedan. It was parked just outside Jimmy's Market, the local grocery store. Jimmy Coccia, the rail-thin, lantern-jawed, second-generation Italian store owner, happened to be out front sweeping the sidewalk. When he caught sight of Sacha he pursed his lips in a silent wolf-whistle. Carl shot him a grin. He couldn't blame him.

They came to a stop by her car, and Carl looked it over. Considering it was almost ten years old the vehicle looked to be in excellent shape. From the almost flawless Meadow Green paint job, to the shiny, chrome bumper and whitewall tires, it was a beauty.

Sacha caught Carl's look of admiration. "It was my dad's. He gave it to me on my twenty-first birthday. He took really good care of it. Still does, actually. He makes me bring it by regularly so that he can clean and polish it." She chuckled. "That way he gets to see his old car *and* his daughter."

"Smart man, your father."

She fumbled around in her handbag until she found her keys, and then unlocked the passenger side door, holding it open while Carl leaned in to grab the radio—a beautiful Grundig Majestic. Encased, as it was, in highly-varnished cherry wood, the set looked as majestic as its name implied. It was an older model, but Carl was familiar with it. They were well-made, and rarely needed repairing. It might just be something as simple as a loose connection or a faulty tube.

Both hands clutching the radio, he waited by the car while she relocked it, and then they walked back up the street to the store. Once inside, Carl set the radio down on the counter. Stepping back behind it, he slid an invoice book over from where it sat further up. A pen was secured to it by a string, and he picked it up, looking at her expectantly. "I'll need your name, address and phone number."

"Okay. Sacha. S-A-C-H-A. Last name, Billings. 175 Cambridge Street, Orange. My phone number is Orange 9-3765."

As he wrote down her information, Carl repeated her name softly. "Sacha." He enjoyed the way it felt on his tongue. It was a name that should be whispered. "What a beautiful name."

She smiled. "Thank you. I was named after my grandmother on my mother's side. She was originally from Russia. I'm told I get most of my looks from her."

Carl looked up from the invoice book. "Is your grandmother still alive?"

"Oh, yes. Very much so."

"I'd love to meet her some time and thank her for passing on her stunning looks."

She folded her arms. "If you're going to flirt with me, don't you think you should introduce yourself?"

Carl felt the heat of his neck and cheeks reddening. "I'm sorry. Was I out of line?"

"Well, my grandmother might think so." She gave a reassuring smile. "But it's all right with me. After all, this is 1958—not 1858."

Relieved, Carl extended his hand. "Carl. Carl Becker."

She unfolded her arms, took his hand and shook it lightly. "Becker. German, isn't it?"

"Somewhere along the line. We think one of our ancestors fought in the American Revolution."

She arched an eyebrow. "Which side?"

He grinned. "The winning side."

"Glad to hear it."

"What about you? Your grandmother's Russian. But Billings sounds . . . English, isn't it?"

She nodded. "Originally. My ancestors on my father's side settled in what eventually became Rhode Island."

Now it was Carl's turn to arch an eyebrow. "And which side did *they* fight on?"

She smiled. "The winning side."

"Phew! That's a relief. I'd hate to find out our ancestors were mortal enemies just when we were getting on so well."

"Well, we're good friends with our English cousins these days, so I think you and I would probably have managed to call a truce."

Carl emitted a brief chuckle. "So is that where you were born? Rhode Island?"

"Uh-huh. My mother's sister and her family still live there. But my dad moved us to California about ten years ago. Have you ever been over that way?"

He shook his head. "Can't say I have. My dad's originally from the

East Coast. He might have.”

“It’s so beautiful in the fall. My childhood memories are full of the reds, golds and yellows of a Rhode Island autumn.”

“You paint a pretty picture,” Carl said, trying to think of ways to keep the conversation going. “So . . . do you work anywhere near here?”

“Not too far. I do secretarial work for a small law firm in Tustin.”

“Sounds interesting.”

She shook her head. “It’s not really. It’s not criminal law or anything exciting. It’s all wills and probates and things like that. I find myself typing lots of wherebys and wherefores.” She lifted her arm and glanced at her watch. “Well, as much as I’m enjoying this—and I *am* enjoying it—I do have a few other errands to run. Is there any way you can tell me how long you think it might take to repair my radio?”

“I’ll take a look at it right away, and then I’ll call you when I’ve found the problem. What time do you think you’ll be home?”

Sacha consulted her watch again and chewed her lip while she did some mental calculations. “I would say a couple of hours or so. Certainly no later than four-thirty.”

“I should have it figured out by then.”

“Wonderful. My parents gave me that radio when I was a teenager, after they’d bought a newer model. I used to listen to it in my bedroom when I was doing my homework. Weekends I’d turn it down low and leave it on all night. Sometimes I’d wake up in the middle of the night to find one of my favorite songs playing. When I moved into my own place, well . . . naturally I took it with me. This might sound a bit silly, but it’s become like an old friend. I really hope you can fix it.”

“Don’t worry. Grundig’s a good brand. I’m sure it’s got a lot of life left in it.”

“Thank you, Carl. I’m so glad I decided to bring it here and not somewhere else.”

“Me too.”

They stood there for a short while, gazing into one another’s eyes. For one crazy moment Carl entertained the notion that she was expecting him to lean over and kiss her—and he almost did. But a car horn outside broke the spell and brought them both back to

reality.

“Um . . . well . . . I . . .” she stumbled over her words and ran a hand self-consciously over her lightly-coiffed blonde hair. “I suppose I ought to go.” She walked to the door, and then turned toward him just before she opened it. “You won’t forget to call tonight? About the radio, I mean.”

Carl shook his head. “I won’t forget to call.” Then he added with a crooked grin: “About the radio, that is.”

She smiled shyly. “Yes, of course. About the radio.”

The door chimes *ding donged* as if to signify that this brief encounter was over. The next moment she was gone. To Carl, the store appeared a little darker and emptier in her absence.

Carl took Sacha’s Grundig into the back room to inspect it. Technically there were one or two other items ahead of her radio that he should work on, but he decided they could wait. He promised himself that he’d get them done later, or even tomorrow. Today belonged to Sacha.

His hope was that the problem would be something simple, something that could be repaired right away. Then he could call her and surprise her with the news that her radio was fixed.

And he’d get to hear her voice again.

The door chimes rang and he heard Frank’s harsh growl. “It’s only me! Keep working!”

Carl called out a greeting to his boss, and then got to work. Making room on the workbench, he put the radio down and set about removing the rear panel. Within ten minutes he’d found the culprit. An EL12 tube had given up the ghost for whatever reason. Carl spent some time testing the rest of the tubes, just to be thorough, but the remainder appeared to be in perfect working order. Frank made it a rule to keep the store well-supplied with just about everything one would ever need in a modern electronics repair shop, and the correct tube for a Grundig Majestic was no exception.

Once he’d installed the tube, he plugged the radio in and waited for it to warm up. As it slowly came to life, the strains of The Everly Brothers’ “All I have to do is Dream” issued from the speaker. He

closed his eyes and imagined Sacha lying on her bed late at night, softly singing along.

He let the radio play for a while longer, tapping a screwdriver on the workbench while Eddie Cochran cut loose with the teenage anthem “Summertime Blues”, followed by The Monotones wondering who wrote “The Book of Love”. Satisfied that the radio was now in good working order, he turned it off and unplugged it. Then he reattached the back cover. Checking his watch he was disappointed to discover that barely an hour had passed. It would still be quite some time before Sacha arrived home.

Carl left the backroom and went up front to the customer area. Leaning on the counter was old Frank, bald as a cue ball, ever-present cigarette dangling from his mouth, a frown of concentration on his forehead as his hazel eyes scanned the daily newspaper. He looked up when he heard Carl enter, and took the cigarette out of his mouth, coughing as he did so.

“Hey, sonny boy,” he said, his voice as rough as 40 grit sandpaper. “Taking a break?”

“Yeah. Just fixed an old Grundig Majestic.”

Frank took a drag from his cigarette and a lump of ash fell onto the newspaper. He brushed it off with his free hand. “What was wrong with it?”

“Nothing much. One of the EL12s had packed in. I replaced it and it’s working fine now.”

“Did you check the rest of the tubes?” Frank waved his hand dismissively. “Ah, of course you did. Hell, by now you’re better at this stuff than I am.”

Carl smiled at the compliment and decided to press the advantage. “Hey, Frank. I was wondering if you could deduct the labor and material for the Grundig repair from my pay.”

“Oh? How come?”

“I’m trying to impress a beautiful lady.”

“Uh-huh. And the beautiful lady wouldn’t happen to be the owner of the Grundig, would she?”

Carl nodded. “She would.”

Frank issued a gruff grunt, which rapidly became a cough. He waited for it to subside before speaking again. “Sure, why not? How

much time did you spend on it?”

“Probably an hour at the most.”

“And you used just one EL12?”

“Just one.”

Frank stroked his chin, and even from where he stood, Carl could hear the scratchy sound of the rough stubble that peppered his boss’s face. “Just how beautiful *is* this lady?”

The blissful smile on Carl’s face told Frank all he needed to know.

“Oh, boy. You’ve got it bad—which is good. I was beginning to wonder if you’d *ever* pull your head out of your work long enough to notice that there’s more to life than vacuum tubes and transformers. Never saw anyone who liked to bury themselves in this stuff the way you do.” He took a final drag from his cigarette, and then stubbed it out in the ceramic *Fabulous Las Vegas* ashtray that sat on the counter. “Okay. Because it’s you, and because you’re such a good worker—and we’re talking ‘affair of the heart’ here—this one’s on me.”

“Hey, thanks Frank. I really appreciate it.”

The store owner waved him off. “Yeah, sure. Just don’t let it get around that I’m a sentimental slob. I’ve got a reputation to uphold, you know?”

“Don’t worry, Frank. Your secret’s safe with me.”

Carl returned to the back room, leaving Frank to his newspaper, and began tinkering with the guts of a Motorola television set—one of the items he’d put on the back burner so that he could devote his efforts to the Grundig Majestic—but he found it hard to concentrate. Images of Sacha filled his head, and every so often he would check his watch, willing the time to pass more quickly.

He pondered Frank’s observation—about burying himself in his work—and was forced to admit that his boss was right. Between his job at the store during the day, and the long nights in the warehouse of his fledgling company, there was little room for anything else. He would go home late each night, so exhausted that he fell into a black, dreamless sleep—which, to be honest, was exactly the way he wanted it. He didn’t want to dream. Frank had never asked why, and Carl had never volunteered an explanation. It was common knowledge that

Carl had been to Korea, and Frank had served in the Army himself during World War I, so perhaps there was a mutually tacit understanding—some things you didn't talk about.

But the moment Sacha had walked through the front door of Frank's TV and Radio Repair, everything changed. It was as if her very presence had caused his inner demons to cringe in fear, and they'd hidden themselves, lest they wither and die beneath the light she'd brought into his life.

Finally, around four-twenty, when he could wait no longer, Carl picked up the phone and dialed Sacha's number.

She answered on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Sacha? It's Carl. Carl Becker from the repair shop."

He could hear the smile in her voice as she said, "Hello, Carl Becker from the repair shop. Have you got some good news for me?"

"I would say so."

"You can fix my radio?"

"Can. And *have*."

"Already? Wow! I'm impressed. What time are you open until? Can I come and pick it up?"

"Sure. We usually close at five, but I don't mind waiting until you get here if you need more time. "Or" He hesitated. Should he suggest dropping the radio off?"

"Or?" she urged.

Carl took a chance. "I'd be glad to drop it off on my way home."

Her immediate response told him he'd made the right decision.

"That would be awfully sweet of you. Are you *sure* it's on your way, though?"

Carl checked the address again. 175 Cambridge Street, Orange. Just a short, five-minute drive from the store. That was nothing. It wasn't technically on his way. He actually lived in a small apartment in Dana Point, a good thirty minutes in the other direction. But that didn't matter to Carl. He'd have driven to Tucson, Arizona if it meant seeing her again.

"It's not out of my way at all," he said. "In fact, my boss might let me leave early today—in which case I can be there in ten minutes or so."

“That would be wonderful. I can’t thank you enough, Carl.”

“It’s my pleasure. See you in a few.”

He placed the telephone back on its cradle, and made his way to the front of the store.

His boss was still intent on the newspaper — specifically the Sports section and last night’s baseball scores—squinting as the smoke from the cigarette he held in his mouth wafted up into his eyes. Carl didn’t smoke, but if he did, he was sure he wouldn’t park a cigarette semi-permanently between his lips the way Frank did. It seemed more of an irritant than anything else.

Frank glanced Carl’s way, and said with a growl of pleasure, “Them damn turncoat Dodgers are having a miserable season. Serves them right. They should have stayed in New York where they belong.”

Carl’s boss was originally from the Big Apple, and though he’d moved to the sunny climes of Southern California some twenty years ago, he’d remained a stalwart Brooklyn Dodgers fan. Stalwart that is, until the team had relocated to California and become the Los Angeles Dodgers. Frank couldn’t countenance what he considered to be an out-and-out betrayal of their New York fan base. So he’d switched his loyalty to the Yankees, and the Dodgers be damned. Consequently, he’d been closely following the team’s progress during their inaugural season, and never missed an opportunity to gloat when they lost.

Carl on the other hand, despite being born and raised in California, was a Red Sox fan. Mostly out of loyalty to his father, who originally hailed from Boston. Like Frank, Carl’s father had moved to the West Coast many years ago, but had remained loyal to the team he’d grown up with.

“I caught the last few innings of that game on the radio last night,” Carl said. “The Dodgers sure took a beating.”

“You bet they did. Wish I could have seen it,” Frank said with a harsh laugh that rapidly became a coughing spasm. When he recovered he took another drag from his cigarette. Then, pinching it between his thumb and forefinger, he examined it closely. “These damned things will kill me yet.”

Carl laughed. “I doubt it. You’re too ornery to die.”

Frank grunted his agreement. “You might be right. Either way, as long as I outlive that traitorous bastard O’Malley I’ll be happy.”

O’Malley. Walter Francis. Sports executive and owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, he was responsible for bringing Major League Baseball to the West Coast in 1958. He’d coordinated the relocation of the New York Giants to San Francisco, and moved his own team to Los Angeles. While that may have pleased baseball fans in California (and some neutral parties who regarded him as visionary), it won him nothing but disdain from Brooklyn Dodgers fans. As for Carl, being neutral himself, he could appreciate that it was probably a smart move from a purely business standpoint. But, intent on leaving work early to see Sacha, he decided against any discussion of the matter. He needed to improve Frank’s mood, not darken it further.

“Well, you never know. Maybe the Yankees will win the Pennant this year.”

That won him a broad, toothy grin from Frank. “Hah! Now wouldn’t that be something?”

Now would seem to be the right time to ask. “Hey, Frank. Do you think I could leave early today? I’d kind of like to drop the Grundig off to that beautiful lady in person.”

“Oh, you would, would ya?” Frank took a quick look at his watch. “Yeah, go on. Scram. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Frank. I’ll come in early to make up for it.”

Re-entering the back room, Carl walked briskly over to his work bench. Picking up Sacha’s radio, he exited via the back door and went out to the parking lot where his car sat. He was currently making monthly payments on a second-hand 1952 Plymouth Cranbrook. He was grateful to have a car, but it was a far cry from the sleek, tail-finned 1958 Plymouth Fury he’d had his heart set on. Unfortunately, that particular model was just a little out of reach at his current salary, so he’d settled for the Cranbrook. But someday, one day in the future, when he and Geoffrey had made their fortune, he’d have the pick of the lot.

Maybe even a bright-red Ford Thunderbird.

Now *there* was a car.

A short while later Carl turned onto Cambridge, a pretty, tree-lined

street not too far from the Orange Plaza Square. 175 was half a block down on the right. Sacha's house was a small, quaint structure, and like most of the houses in the area, had probably been built sometime in the 1920's. Here and there, dark-brown paint was peeling off the fascia and trim, and some of the cream-colored stucco had detached itself from the front walls, but Carl decided it lent the place a certain rustic charm. Of course, it didn't escape him that his viewpoint was heavily influenced by the fact that Sacha lived there. Had the place been literally falling apart, he'd still have found a way to describe it in a positive light.

Lifting the Grundig out of the car, he kicked the door shut with his foot and made his way up the short pathway that led to the entrance of the house. The walnut-colored front door boasted an impressive knocker in the shape of a majestic lion's head. There was also a doorbell to the right of the doorway. Carl opted for the cheerful chime of the doorbell, rather than the jarring *rat-a-tat-tat* of a metal door knocker.

Through the door he heard a faint *ding dong* and then the sound of high heels walking across a wooden floor. A few moments later the door opened. Sacha still had on the pretty, floral-print sundress she'd been wearing when she'd come to the store, and for the second time that day, Carl was left breathless. When she saw him standing there, her beloved radio clutched to his chest, the smile he received made him positively light-headed.

Carl dared to believe at least some of that smile was for him.

She opened the door wider, and stepped aside, ushering him in. "Thanks so much for taking the trouble." She gestured to her right. "You can put it on the dining table for now."

A small crystal vase that held a bouquet of daisies sat in the middle of the maple-wood dining table, and Carl was careful not to disturb it as he set the radio gently down. Searching for a nearby power outlet he found one to the right of the table. The radio's power cord would just reach. He leaned over and inserted the plug into the outlet.

"We should make sure it's still working okay, while I'm still here," he said, hoping to prolong his stay.

"By all means. Um . . . do you have to rush off? Would you like a

cup of coffee?”

That sounded promising. “No, I don’t have to be anywhere. I’d love a cup of coffee. If it’s no trouble, that is.”

“Not at all. I was just brewing a pot anyway.”

She walked into the kitchen, and Carl could hear the sound of cups and spoons clattering and clinking as she prepared their beverages.

In actual fact, his remark that he didn’t have to be anywhere wasn’t strictly true. By now he should be on his way to his company warehouse in Anaheim, where there was work to be done in the “Technical Department”. But one look at Sacha, and Carl knew Geoffrey would understand. He would just have to burn the midnight oil even later than usual tonight.

“How do you take your coffee,” she called out.

Carl had just turned the radio on, and was waiting for it to warm up. “Black, please.”

Moments later she reappeared, a coffee cup in each hand. Carl slid the radio a little further to the right, making room for the cups. Then he pulled a chair out, and waited for her to sit before sitting down himself.

At that moment the radio came to life, and the unmistakable voice of Elvis Presley performing his hit “Don’t” filled the living room.

Sacha’s blue eyes sparkled with delight, and a broad smile lit up her face. “It works!”

Carl placed his cup on the table, and spread his arms expansively. “Ta-da!”

Holding her coffee cup in both hands, Sacha began swaying in time to the music. “They call him ‘The King’, you know.”

Carl, who’d been an Elvis fan since his Sun Records days, readily agreed. “I think they’re right.”

They sat in silence for a time, listening to the song. As it drew to a close, Sacha said, “So—‘Carl Becker from the repair shop’—what’s your story?”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, I get the impression there’s more to you than meets the eye. You’re not just some ‘Joe’ who works in a TV and radio repair store. Not that there’s anything wrong with that. Far from it. Anyone who can make sense of the insides of a radio or television has my undying

respect and admiration. But I just get the feeling you have bigger plans in store for your life.”

Was it that obvious? Or was she unusually perceptive? Either way she was right. “I’ve been interested—no—*fascinated* by electronics for as long as I can remember. In fact, I built a radio when I was a kid. It actually worked for a little while, too.” He grinned sheepishly. “Until it caught fire.”

Sacha laughed. It was an easy laugh that showed she was relaxed and enjoying their conversation. “I’m glad to see you’ve improved since then.”

“You and my parents both. But lately my interest has swung toward computers.”

“Computers? You mean like” she snapped her fingers a few times, searching for the word. “. . . like UNIVAC?”

“Exactly.”

“I’ve heard it’s huge. Is that true? “

“It takes up a lot of space all right. Not exactly something you could put in your living room. But I think there’ll come a time when computers will eventually become a common household and office product—as common as the radio or television.”

Sacha leaned in toward him. Her interest seemed genuine. “Really?”

Carl nodded, and continued in an excited voice. “The recent invention of the integrated circuit has led to”

Sacha cocked her head, and gave a puzzled frown. “Inter whatsit?”

“I’m sorry,” Carl said, realizing he was about to lose her in a labyrinth of technical jargon. “I get carried away sometimes. Basically, computer technology is progressing at a rapid rate, and the way it’s going, it’s fairly safe to predict that computers of the future will be smaller, faster, more efficient, and be capable of performing functions far beyond their current capabilities.”

“You sound like a TV commercial.”

He chuckled. “I guess I do at that. I’m actually parroting part of a sales pitch we came up with?”

“We?”

“My partner, Geoffrey and I. We formed a company a little over six months ago. He’s more the business end, and I’m the technical

department.”

“And you’re going to build computers?”

“That’s the general idea. Although, we’re not trying to reinvent the wheel. We’re just looking at ways to improve what’s already there.”

Sacha nodded her understanding. “Kind of like cars, or radios and TVs. You’re improving on existing technology.”

“Precisely. To coin an old phrase: ‘Build a better mousetrap’.”

“Did you learn all this in college?”

He shrugged. “A little. Most of it I figured out for myself while I was growing up. You can’t beat personal experience.”

“Sounds like you work pretty hard.”

He nodded and drank some of his coffee. “Seven days a week. I work at the store Monday to Saturday from nine to five. That pays the bills. The rest of the time I’m chained to my workbench at our company headquarters.”

“I’m not keeping you from your work am I?”

“No, not at all. I don’t have to work tonight,” he lied. “I sometimes get time off for good behavior.”

“Is your partner something of a slave driver?”

“Geoffrey?” Carl shook his head. “No. I’m my own slave driver if the truth be known. I’m giving myself the night off. You know what they say about all work and no play.”

“Speaking of work . . . did you bring an invoice?” She stood up.

“Let me get my purse.”

Carl raised his hand. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve taken care of it.”

No, Carl,” she protested. “I can’t let you do that.”

“I insist. It was a very minor repair. Took me no time at all.”

She needed more convincing. “Are you sure?”

“Completely sure. Seeing you again is payment enough.”

A small smile creased the corners of her mouth. “And now I think you’re flirting with me again.”

“Guilty with an explanation.”

“The court will hear your explanation, and then make its judgment.”

The playfulness in her voice gave him hope.

He took a deep breath, and decided for better or worse, to lay his cards on the table. “You are simply the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met. When you walked into the store this afternoon you *literally*

took my breath away—and I haven't been breathing right since. To be honest, I'd really like to get to know you better. If I'm out of line, I apologize. But that's the plain truth of the matter."

She was silent for a while, studying his face.

He held her gaze. *And* his breath.

Finally, she came to a decision. Smiling at him, she said, "Would you like to stay for dinner?"

Carl's heart took wings. "I'd love to."

That had been where it all began for Carl and Sacha. Six short months later they were married. During that same period, and perhaps inspired by his love for Sacha, Carl had indeed built that better mousetrap, and before long, Nilsson-Becker Enterprises had expanded to the point where they needed to move to larger premises in Los Angeles.

As the company continued to flourish, Carl and Sacha's lifestyle improved, as did their housing arrangements and possessions—but that old Grundig radio always took pride of place in their home. It was the thing that had brought them together, and as such, enjoyed a special place in their hearts. And all through the years since the day Carl had repaired it, it kept right on working.

It had still been working on the day Sacha had left this world for the next.

The radio that had meant so much to her had outlived her. And there it sat now, on Carl's dresser, with their framed wedding photo next to it. He hadn't turned it on since she'd died—and vowed he never would—but it wouldn't have surprised him if it still worked. They'd built things to last back in those days.

It was ridiculous he knew, but for a while he'd resented that damned radio. He'd resented it for surviving when his beloved Sacha hadn't. At one point, in the early days after she'd died, he'd almost destroyed the radio in a fit of drunken rage. Almost. But he hadn't. And he realized then, that he never would. Of all the memorabilia he had stashed away—photos, jewelry, postcards from places they'd visited and much more—that old Grundig Majestic had become the one item that embodied so much of what Sacha had been to him. A

thing of beauty, that when imbued with life, could issue forth sweet music that could make you laugh or cry, dance and sing, and above all, fill you with the simple joy of life.

* * * *

The sound of a particularly loud and obnoxious television commercial intruded on Carl's thoughts, and he opened his eyes in irritation.

"What makes these people think that yelling at you will persuade you to buy their product?" Carl thought as he reached for his remote and searched for the volume control.

The man on the screen insisting that "you can't beat our prices with a stick", was garbed in a white suit, and Carl was immediately put in mind of the mysterious stranger he'd met earlier that morning.

He thought about the power he'd supposedly granted him. The stranger had told him that all he need do was simply choose a time and place and think, "*Back!*" and he'd be there.

Carl's cynical-self reared its ugly head again, and he began debating himself, playing devil's advocate.

Did he *honestly* believe what the stranger had told him? *Could* he actually go back in time and re-experience past events? Or was this some elaborate hoax, the reason for which Carl couldn't even begin to guess?

Okay, so if it *was* a hoax, what was the worst that could happen? Easy question to answer. The worst that could happen would be . . . nothing. He'd feel foolish for being taken in by the nameless man—and he'd damn sure give him a piece of his mind if he ever saw him again—but other than that, there'd be no real harm done.

"So for now, why not assume the stranger is as good as his word?" Carl thought. *"If I can actually go back in time—where should I go?"*

He only had three choices, and he'd already decided what the last one would be—would *have* to be. Sacha. Their wedding day. If he was leaving this world for whatever lay in store for him in the great beyond, he would want that glorious day to be the last experience he took with him.

What would he do with his other two choices?

As if in answer to his self-posed question, he heard the stranger's voice again: “. . . a chance to change the outcome of those things you most regret . . .”

Those things you most regret.

Carl had been given a glimpse of them last night while he'd slept. They were, by no means, events he was anxious to re-experience. He'd spent most of his life suppressing those memories, one way or another, and now that he'd been reminded of them, he could feel the unpleasant emotions they evoked attempting to claw their way out of his subconscious.

Consequently, he spent the rest of the morning in mental turmoil. The visit from the mysterious stranger had stirred up a virtual Pandora's Box of mental images that refused to go back from whence they'd come. Things long-buried were now making their presence known, vying for his attention, as if urging him to choose—and choose now.

But he didn't feel quite ready yet. This was not a decision to be made lightly.

Looking for distraction, he turned to the TV news channels and involved himself in the latest crises from around the world. It didn't do much to improve his emotional state, but it kept his mind occupied.

Around lunch time his stomach began its usual chorus of mealtime hunger growls. One of the few parts of his body that still worked mostly as it should was his stomach's internal clock. It was rarely wrong. A quick glance at his watch confirmed that it still hadn't failed him.

He pushed himself out of his easy chair with a groan — his muscles and joints complaining at the sudden change in position—and shuffled into the kitchen. He wasn't much of a cook, the kitchen had always been Sacha's domain, so he relied on microwave meals and canned soups for sustenance when he ate at home.

Once he'd finished a lunch of Campbell's Chunky Clam Chowder and a toasted English muffin, he settled back down in front of the TV. For the rest of the day and evening he lost himself in television land, mostly watching old, classic movies—stopping only to

microwave a Hungry-Man frozen dinner. Finally, around midnight, he went to bed, hoping to fall into his usual dreamless sleep.

But it wasn't to be.

At some point while he slept, the warm, velvet blackness that usually cocooned him, slowly gave way to the cold, frosty whiteness of winter snow. He felt a bitter, stinging wind on his cheeks, and the acrid stench of death filled his nostrils.

He knew this place.

It was Korea, 1952.

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