

"I'm...very uncomfortable doing this," he said quietly, staring straight ahead, his hands on his lap.

Sally Kendall didn't say anything. Years of experience had taught her that it was usually a turnoff to try to sell to a john. They either did or you didn't, and it wasn't helpful to try and convince them either way. They were all at least a little hesitant, even the over-the-top loud ones. Something about having to pay for what they *should* be getting for free. He was no different from any other.

How it had begun: she'd approached him, sat beside him on the bench, had put on her best mature coquette act. The usual: a shy, sideways smile, maybe a wink if she felt encouraged. And it really was an act for her, the furthest thing from reality. She was anything but reserved in real life. You didn't get very far in her chosen profession as a wallflower. But here, on the streets, it paid to be coy. Most men (and more than a few women) found the whole thing enticing.

This part of Nashville was fairly broad minded, the city's efforts at gentrification aside. You could get anything here if you trolled long enough and in the right places. Young, old, anywhere in between; men, women, half and half, tranny...whatever your particular kink might be, it didn't matter. Just look, just ask. Anything was possible. You found someone willing enough and named a price. It was a lot like fishing, something which, perhaps not coincidentally, Sally also enjoyed. And like fishing, either you got a bite or you didn't. You just had to be patient and take what came your way. She'd gotten some pretty far out proposals during working hours through the years.

Which, should she give the matter some thought, was pretty odd. She got plenty of illicit interest. But personally, in her real life...not so much. Weird how that happened. Or didn't happen actually.

Still, she was content enough to have been successful in her profession. Which she was, if arrest rates were any indication. Besides, she still looked good at 45 and with a little makeup could usually pass for someone ten years younger. Not that this sort of thing mattered to the people apt to approach her. She aimed her pitch at those looking for something a little different, maybe a new experience

with someone ready to try anything. Or a rookie who'd "never done this sort of thing before".

Like this one. John, he called himself; appropriate, she'd thought, if likely bogus. Not his real name, surely. That would be too obvious, too clichéd. At first glance he was attractive enough, maybe a little weatherbeaten. Late twenties or early thirties she guessed, probably homeless at one time or another...maybe even homeless now. Perhaps he was one who'd gotten lucky somewhere along the line and had escaped the streets. There were precious few of those, but they did exist. And yes, they did troll for sex; when you can't get it legitimately, you got it where you could. Sad that he was about to end up in jail.

But. Business was business, and hers was taking guys like him off the street and putting them behind bars. It was a mixed bag; he'd lose his freedom for a while, end up with a mark on his record, maybe learn a lesson about what was and was not allowed in the city. The reward for her being that maybe there would be a little less demand on the streets, a little more wariness on the part of the clients and a few less ladies out plying their trade in her precinct as a result. Maybe less violence and sickness. On balance, not bad.

They sat silently for a while. He, staring up at the stars faintly visible through the glare; she, smiling at him expectantly.

Finally she decided that maybe she needed to make the first move. "You seem very nice, John," she said.

"I am," he said softly. "I guess."

"You guess?"

"If I was, probably I wouldn't be here." He shrugged. "Or maybe I would. I don't know."

"Look," she said, "I understand. You don't think I've heard this kind of thing before?"

"I expect you have."

She nodded. "I have. I do, every day. And from some very nice people. Being here doesn't mean you're not nice. It just means you're lonely."

"Oh, I am that," he said.

"So...?"

"I guess." He held up his hands. "I really don't know how this works."

"Well," Sally said calmly, "you tell me what you want, and I tell you how much

it costs. Then we go to my room, you pay me, and we conduct our business.”

“Business.”

She smiled. “It does sort of sound like a transaction, doesn’t it?”

He nodded. “But that’s what it is, isn’t it? Bottom line.”

“Yes.” She stood and did a slow pirouette. “And don’t you think I have a nice bottom?” She laughed gently, and so did he. And why not? It was a pretty good line. And the fact was, she *did* have an attractive posterior. It was one of her best physical attributes.

“You do,” he said appreciatively.

“So, do we do business?” She winked, then added, “Go on then. Improve my bottom line.”

He paused for a moment, then nodded. “All right. But...can I wait and decide what I want when we get there?”

She thought about it for a moment. This wasn’t exactly SOP. It was also perhaps a little risky, but it was probably safe. They’d go to her pre-arranged room, and her sting team would be right next door, watching via hidden cameras. They were ready to knock down the door and storm in if necessary to protect her. They’d had to in the past and she trusted them. John, perhaps not so much.

“All right,” she said. “I don’t know why, but I think I can trust you, John. We’ll do it your way. This time.”

As if there would be a next time.

She stood, offered him her hand, and led him in the direction of the motel.

“What’s this?” she asked, looking at his hand, in which he held several folded bills.

“Money?” He sounded genuinely puzzled.

“I *know* it’s money, John. What’s it for? We haven’t discussed anything yet.”

It looked like a lot more than she usually negotiated. A fifty, a couple of twenties, a ten, several fives, and a pair of ones. More than average by a factor of two, maybe three. Depending on the person and the act requested, she might be offered anything from from ten dollars to fifty. That was about right for a streetwalker. The call girls made a lot more, hundreds of dollars, but then they had to share that with their agencies.

“I know,” he said. “I...I just wasn’t sure how to go about this.”

She sighed. It seemed as if she was going to have to walk him through this after all. This required caution if she was to get a legit bust. *He* had to make the offer, had to ask specifically for an act of sex in exchange for money. As soon as he did...well, that was pretty much it. The sting team would swoop in and take him into custody.

He sat on the edge of the bed, looked down at the cash. "A hundred and twenty seven dollars," he said absently. "I know. I counted it, twice. I wish it could be more, but it's all I've got."

Sally had heard that before too, usually from men who had two or three times the amount of cash they tended to offer. But haggling was a part of life in this profession and that he wasn't doing it was not just out of the ordinary, it was disturbing. She was inclined to go ahead and give the signal for the team to enter.

But she didn't.

Call it curiosity.

"You never did say what you wanted," she said, sitting next to him on the bed, closer than she really ought to have given the circumstances. "That's a lot of money. You really should tell me what you want me to do."

He looked over at her, and it was then that she saw the shine in his eyes. Not some maniacal gleam, but something else. Tears?

"John?"

"I guess all I really want is for somebody to be with me," he said.

"Be with you?" She knew it wasn't enough, that he had to be more specific for anything to stand up in court. But that wasn't what put the question in her voice. Instead it was the peculiar tremor in *his* voice. "Isn't there anything you want me to do with you? *To* you?"

He shook his head. "If you want to lay down on the bed with me, that's fine. You don't have to. I know I don't look good." He rubbed his cheek. "Or smell good." His voice gave a little hitch. "I *tried* to clean up. Washed and combed my hair. Shaved. I don't think I've been clean shaven in ten years. Maybe longer." It was the most he'd said to her so far.

"You look very nice," she offered.

"No, don't lie to me." He looked down at his hands. "I know what I am. And what I am not. And I don't look nice." He stopped, took a breath, continued. "Maybe once, a long time ago. But not now." He looked away from her, but now

she knew that yes, those were tears, and yes, he was crying.

But silently.

“Not now,” he said, “and never again. But that’s okay. You asked me what I wanted. Well, this is what I want. For you to just be here, in the same room with me. It doesn’t even have to be that long. As long as you think this much is worth to you.” He put the money in her palm, closed her fingers around it. “Even if this is it and you make me leave now. I understand. Maybe it’s meant to be a metaphor for life...you pay your money and you take your chances. Well, this is it for me.”

She looked at the money, and then at him. “So...what you’re wanting is for me to lay down with you?”

“You don’t have to do that. Maybe I’ll lie down for a while and you can sit in the chair. God knows it’s been long enough since I’ve been in a bed this big. Or this clean.”

She laughed, but it was forced. “I can’t say how clean it would be.” Forced, but probably accurate.

“But yes, that’s it. Just...be with me. I don’t care about anything else. I just want someone to...to be able to acknowledge I’m here, I’m alive. I matter, even if just for a while.”

Now Sally Kendall looked down, past the money, to the floor. Saw his shoes. How old were they? Holes, where toenails would be breaking through leather. Clean enough, but old, many years old. Jeans frayed at the edges, holes in the knees. Pale skin peeping out from the slits.

She looked past the clothing, to the person within.

Then she took his hands, put the money back into them, closed them around it. “John? Is that your real name?”

He nodded.

“My name is Sally.” She squeezed his hands. “It’s my real name too. Why don’t you go and take a nice, long, warm shower? Clean yourself up good.” He started to protest. “I know, you said already did. But you’d probably enjoy doing it again, wouldn’t you? Take your time. We have all night.”

He looked at her, confused.

She smiled into his eyes. “Really. All night.”

He sighed, his shoulders slumping. “I’m so tired,” he said.

“I know. I know you are. And you’re probably hungry too. You go ahead and

take a shower, and I'll call and order some dinner."

Now he looked at her blankly.

She stood. "Seriously, John. The dinner is on me. The room too. You'll be staying here tonight." She paused for just a moment, then added, "With me. Now, don't argue, just go get yourself cleaned up. Shoo."

Probably he should've looked astonished. Had he been an ordinary John, maybe he would've been. Instead, he just looked exhausted. He got up and padded in the direction of the bathroom, and she took her purse and walked out.

To the staging room next door. To consternation.

"Are you insane?" Officer Delbert Sweeney hissed.

"No," Sally said, picking up the phone, "just hungry. Just like John. I'm calling Gino's. You guys want any?"

Delbert shook his head. "He's a nutjob, Sal. You've got a classic weirdo there. You're lucky he hasn't whipped out a blade and sliced you. What are you thinking?"

*I'm thinking about getting into another line of work,* Sally thought. "It is possible that this is just a troubled guy who needs help. Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing, helping people? That's what it says on the cars: 'to serve and protect', right?"

"Then we'll call an ambulance and have them take him to City General," Sweeney pleaded. "We're out here to bust Johns. C'mon Sally, we're burning daylight here."

"Let it burn then. We've done well enough this month anyway." She placed an order for three deep dish pizzas, for which Gino's was rightly famous. Two for herself and John and one for her crew, and they were lucky to get that. Then she walked around to the vending area and chose a water for herself and an orange soda for John and returned to the room. She was guessing, but figured that Gino's pizza and orange soda might make a pleasant change from what he'd been consuming lately. Which wasn't much, judging from his appearance.

When the food came, she paid the driver, had him deliver a pie to the crew next door, and took her own load in and laid it on the table. She was pleased to note that the shower was still running, and running hot based on the steam issuing from the cracked doorway. *Maybe he thinks I'll come in and wash his*

*back*, she thought. Then she smiled. *Maybe I should.*

Instead, she sat and waited for him to emerge.

It took a few minutes. She almost went in to check, and in fact had risen to her feet when the bathroom door opened and he emerged.

Sort of.

“I have...nothing to wear,” he said softly. “Nothing clean, anyway.” He peered around the corner. “I tried to rinse my stuff out. It’s...it was pretty awful. But now it’s all soaked.”

“That’s fine,” she said with a smile. “Just drape some towels around you. We’re not concerned with decency here.”

Which, strictly speaking, wasn’t true, she should actually be *very* concerned with it. But it didn’t seem important just now.

“The towels are awful small. Maybe I should have a blanket or something.”

She nodded. “That’s a good idea.” She took the fuzzy blanket folded on the end of the second bed to him. “Here,” she said. “Wrap this around you and come out and have some pizza. You look like you could use a good meal.” She smiled. “It’s probably not a feast, but it is Gino’s and that’s about as good as it comes around here.”

“Oh, pizza,” he sighed. “I love pizza.”

“Everybody does. And this is the best.” She opened the boxes. “Fresh and hot. I wasn’t sure what you’d eat, so I just got one sausage and one all meat. You look like you could use some filling up.”

He looked from the pizzas to her and back again. He looked like he was about to cry again.

“It’s all right John,” she said softly, walking to him and laying a hand on his shoulder. “Sit down and eat something. You look like you’re starving.”

“I am,” he admitted.

“Then eat, for heaven’s sake.” She walked to the washroom and collected his clothes. “There’s a laundry just down the row. I’ll put these in the dryer for you.”

She left the room and walked out, glancing at Del’s face peering out between the drapes of the staging room. She waved at him and mouthed, *I’m all right. Relax.*

John’s clothes might’ve been rinsed, but they didn’t smell any better. Still, he’d be better off than he had been. She dropped them into the dryer, put in

enough quarters to do the job, and returned to the room.

He was still sitting on the bed.

“Here,” she said, indicating where he should sit. “Seriously, John. Let’s just have dinner like two ordinary people might.”

As if he’d been awaiting her permission, he hesitated only for a moment before joining her.

It was...revealing, watching him. And not just in that the blanket kept falling off of his shoulders, revealing more rib than was healthy. He ate three wedges of pizza before he spoke a word. And the word was: “Good,” muttered between bites. “Really good.”

“The best in town, I think,” Sally agreed. “Poor John. Tell me the truth now, when was the last time you ate a full meal?”

“Thursday.”

“Well, that’s not so bad then. That’s just yesterday...”

“No.” He took another bite, washed it down with a swallow of soda. “Thursday last week.”

She stared at him. “John. Seriously.”

He nodded. “You said a full meal.”

“And...it’s been that long?”

“I mean, I scavenge as best as I can. You wouldn’t believe what people throw away. Sometimes it’s pretty good. Sometimes it makes me sick. I do okay, I guess.”

“Have you ever tried the Mission?”

That brought a reluctant nod. “Sometimes. I took a shower there this afternoon. But see, they make you go to church and pray and stuff when you go there, and I reckon that’s not so awful, but I feel like such a hypocrite.”

“Why?”

“Well...I mean, I don’t...believe, I guess.” He held up his hands. “I mean, look at me. What kind of God allows this?”

It was a valid point. “Still,” she persisted, “it’s something I maybe could live with if it meant staying alive and off the streets. Besides, haven’t you heard about all the people disappearing around here lately? I’d think you’d want to be somewhere safe.”

“Oh, I know about all that,” he replied. “I’m next, you know.”



She set down the piece of pizza she was working on. "How's that?"

He nodded. "When you live out here, you know about what's going on."

"That's not what I mean. You're next? What do you mean by that?"

He smiled wanly. "I mean, I'm next. I know I am. Why do you think I'm here?"

That was a fair question. She nodded. "All right then," she said. "seeing as you brought it up, exactly why *are* you here? Obviously love has nothing to do with it."

Another sad smile. "I wish. You seem like a very nice lady. Pretty too, if you don't mind me saying."

"Now, would I mind you saying a thing like that?" she replied coyly, returning his smile.

"I wish we'd met under better circumstances." He took another piece of pizza, eating more deliberately now, it seemed. "Thanks for not arresting me. I know you could've."

That gave Sally Kendall pause. She took a deep breath, then she sat back and smiled again. "When did you make me?"

"Oh, just a few minutes ago. You probably need to stash your badge better. Guys will check out your chest, you know."

"You can see it?"

"Your chest, or your badge?" He grinned, the first genuine smile she'd seen from him. She noted that it made his face a hundred times more attractive. "When you picked up that last piece of pizza, you bent over. The chain made an unscheduled appearance at your cleavage. It didn't take much extrapolation to figure out what it was."

*Extrapolation?* There was a word she didn't often hear from one of her targets. But anyway: "I'm still waiting for you to tell me how you know you're next," she persisted. "And why we're here."

He shrugged. "If I promise to tell you later, can we just eat peacefully?"

She looked at him. Paused, then decided: "Deal," she concluded.

Maybe an hour passed. She'd turned the TV on to a music channel, watched him react to what played. To her surprise, he seemed to delight in a "crooners" channel, which featured the likes of Sinatra, Crosby, Bennett, and Martin. He very nearly swooned over Julie London. The mood set, she decided on a tack she

never imagined herself taking on a prostitution sting...and it was then that she got excused herself, walked to the staging room, and insisted that Sweeney dismiss the group.

Sweeney, of course, flatly—and quite rightly—refused.

“Look,” she insisted, “he’s made us already. It’s *done*, Del. Nothing we could do with him would hold up now. What’s more, he’s harmless. Just a nice young man who needs some attention.”

“Right,” Sweeney retorted. “Just like Ted Bundy.”

“Apples and oranges,” she replied coolly. “And it doesn’t matter anyway. I’m doing this, Del. Maybe we can salvage this one. What’s more, he seems to have some background on the disappearances. I’m going to pump him for what I can.”

Sweeney looked at her for a moment, then finally sighed in resignation. “All right, Sally. We’ll pull out.”

“That’s all I ask,” she said.

“But I’m going to stay within radio range,” he said. “And *you* are going to keep yours on and ready. Promise?”

She smiled and nodded. “Cross my heart.” Then she watched as they collected their gear and left. Only then did she return to adjacent room to John, who was gnawing another piece of pizza.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t want to come off like a pig, but...”

She stopped him. “Here now. I got that for *you*,” she said. “What you don’t eat tonight, you can have in the morning. And bag up what’s left afterward and take it with you. It’s all yours.”

He smiled gratefully. “I don’t know why you’re doing this, but thank you.”

“Because everyone deserves to know that someone cares for them,” she said.

He was silent for a moment. “And you do?”

“I do.”

“Thank you.”

“You can thank me,” she said, leaning back in the chair, “by finally telling me why you believe that you’re next.”

He stood, stretched, and then lay down on the bed. “I’m going to need another shower,” he murmured. “I feel like I’m sweating pizza sauce and sausage juice.”

“But that’s a good thing, isn’t it? And don’t think you’re going to weasel your way out of explaining yourself. I’m not leaving till you spill.”

He rolled over on his side and smiled at her. “So...if I take my time telling you, you’ll stay a while?”

She looked at him. Yes, he was curiously attractive, especially with that almost impish grin on his face. *I could*, she thought. *I think that I could*.

“I meant what I said,” she said softly. “Tonight, it’s just you and I. I have nowhere else to be, and no one else to occupy me. So...”

“So?”

“So tell me all that you know, John. Be forthright. I told you, we have all night. And I meant that.” She stood, walked over, and sat on the bed next to him. “*All. Night.* We can talk about whatever you like, so long as you start with telling me what’s happening out here.” She lay a hand on his cheek. “Please, John.”

He looked at her silently for a moment.

*He does have kind eyes*, she thought.

“You’ll think I’m mental,” he whispered.

“I already think you’re mental.” She laughed. “Anybody who’d pay for the privilege of spending a night with me can’t be sane. Or so I hear.”

He sat up. “Whoever told you that needs their clock reset.” He looked down again, and then back at her. “Would it be all right if I were to kiss you?”

“Well, John...”

“I promise, I won’t ask for anything else.”

She leaned forward. “You need to learn manners and let me finish. See, I think it would be better if *I* kissed *you*.” And she did. Gently, but lingeringly. When she was finished, she moved away. His eyes were still closed, and he was beaming.

“Later,” she said softly, “later, if you like, then *you* can kiss *me*. Now. I want to know about what’s happening out there. And I believe I can trust you to tell me the truth.”

He nodded. “All right.” He lay back down. “But you might want to make yourself comfortable. This is going to take a while.”

“Fair enough,” she said with a smile, circling the bed. Then...she lay next to him.

“Is this all right?” she asked, this time without a trace of coyness.

“Oh yes,” he sighed. “It is very all right.”

“Then make with the story.”

“Okay. Where do I start?”

“Anywhere you feel comfortable starting.”

So he took a deep breath and began.

“When I came here,” he said, staring at the ceiling, “to Nashville, I mean, the first person I met was Will Sager.” He sighed. “Or I guess that was his name. You never know for sure. These folk, they go by whatever name they choose. It might be a different name for every day of the week. Me, I went by ‘David’ for months.” He looked over at her. “It’s my middle name. I figured I’d be more liable to answer to it. Anyway. Will was a good guy. One of the nice ones. I’m not sure how he ended up how he did, but he was never anything but kind to me. Never asked for anything. Not like some of them.” He looked grim for a moment. “Sometimes they ask for...things I won’t do. But it’s tough. Your first instinct is to want to stick with a group as much as you can...there’s strength in numbers, right? And for the most part people share what they have. It’s never very much, but at least it’s something.

“But Will steered me right. ‘Make it on your own’, he told me. ‘Don’t ever owe anybody anything.’ And he was right. I found my own places to stay, alleys to scavenge. I stayed away from folks, I still do. Oh, I’d bump into a few regularly, like Will, usually at the bonfires. Like, under the bridges.” He gestured to the east. “Below the Demonbreun overpass, or the river bridges. Other places along the river, sometimes at the camps. Wherever the wind blew us. And we’d just sort of... oh, I guess, check in, and let everybody know we were okay, and where we could find things, and...and share warnings about who to avoid.”

“Did you know anybody to disappear?”

He nodded. “Several. Oh, I heard stories about people that went missing before I showed up. Me, I came from Louisville. Trying to stay ahead of the cold weather, I guess. But I only knew a couple of the missing myself.” He closed his eyes. “Les. Don’t know his last name, but his first name was definitely Les. Nice enough fellow. Part bald, white hair. Mid to late 60s, I’d guess. A little paunchy, don’t ask me how, I never saw him eat anything. Was a computer guy at some point, he talked about it. Quit that. Drove a truck. Then he got sick, started drinking, and lost his license. Poor guy, he really loved that truck.”

Sally thought: *Les Fine. I remember the report.* “Do you know what happened to him?”

He nodded. “I guess the same as what happened to the rest of them.”

“Which was...?”

He looked at her with mock crossness. “Who’s telling this story anyway?”

She smiled. “You are. I’m sorry.”

“Anyway. So there was Les, and then there was a woman. I never knew her name, she didn’t talk much. Or walk a lot. I think she had one lame leg, she didn’t get around very well. But she had a pretty smile.” He looked at her. “Like yours. Only with fewer teeth. She went missing a few weeks ago. Then Joe Mack a few days later.” He looked grim for a moment. “I don’t like to wish ill on anybody, but if anybody deserved what came to them, it was him. He was a psycho.” Then he sighed. “Then, Will. That was just last week. And now...” Another sigh. “And now me. I’m next.”

She didn’t prompt him. The details would come...eventually. In the meantime, she could certainly identify Joe Mack. “I know the Joe Mack character you mentioned. His name is Joey McMillan.”

“Was. His name *was* Joey McMillan.”

“If you say so. Mid 40s, rough looking guy, black hair going gray. Strong. Did a stretch for kiting checks a year or so ago that he contested pretty fiercely and he may have had a case, but he did the time anyway and came out mad. And yes, he is an unpleasant guy.” She held up a hand as he was about to say, ‘was’. “He has one of those rap sheets that you always hear about; you know, the ones as long as your arm. Or two arms and a leg in his case.”

He nodded. “I believe it. He worked me over when I first showed up. He’s one of the reasons I stay away from people. Well, we won’t have to worry about him anymore. He’s gone.”

“Gone?”

“Gone. Went the same way Will did, sort of. Only less pleasantly.”

Again she waited.

He stared at the ceiling. “This is where things get sort of weird, Sally.”

She reached for his hand, took it, squeezed gently.

“Will was my friend, if ever I had one here. We talked, he and I. About what happened that particular day, about our pasts. Never about the future.” He sighed.

“It was like we both knew we didn’t have one. He was a good person.” Another sigh. “One day...one day, he told me that he’d heard singing, coming from that statue in the roundabout.” He looked at her. “Singing. And music, like the figures in the statue were playing it.”

“Are you talking about ‘Musica’?”

“Is that what it’s called? That’s nice. It makes me smile.”

Musica was a large artwork in the center of a roundabout on Music Row. It was supposed to portray an embodiment of the joy of music and art. It was composed of several large-scale bronze figures dancing around and lifting a single central female figure into the air, which was holding aloft a golden tambourine. It was lovely, evocative, and, being as Nashville was in the buckle of the Bible Belt, and the dancers in the work were nude, rather controversial.

She nodded. “Most people, it does. I like it myself. On the other hand, I was there the day it was dedicated, and some yay-hoo drove around the circle, leaning out of the window of his car shouting, I kid you not, ‘It’s an abomination to God!’”

“Probably one of the same guys that holler at us to get the hell out of their town as we walk down the sidewalk.” He laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound.

“Anyway...?”

“Anyway. Will told me he heard music coming from that thing. And singing. And he said that Joe Mack had said something about hearing the same sort of thing just before he disappeared.”

“Did anybody else ever hear it?”

He gave a little shrug. “You never know for sure. Will said there was talk that if you heard the music, you’re next. That it happened to a couple of others. He just didn’t know who.”

She nodded. “So...did you ever hear it?”

He rolled over to face away from her, paused, then murmured, “Not till yesterday.”

She put her hand on his shoulder, gently tugged him back toward her.

“What happened to Will?”

His eyes were red and teary. “He’s gone.” Sniffed. “He went to the statue. That one figure there, you know, the one who looks like she’s holding out her hand to you? Well, Will took it. Took her hand. And then...he was gone.”

Her eyes widened. “He just vanished?”

John closed his eyes. “I don’t know how else to describe it. Except maybe... maybe...he sort of looked like a candle that was being blown out. He wavered, faded, and then he was gone.”

“That’s a pretty good description, actually.” She tugged on his shoulder. “Come here, John.”

He hesitated for a moment.

She stared straight into his eyes. “Please.”

Finally he allowed her to tug him into her arms. She hugged him gently.

“He heard the singing,” he whispered. “Heard the music. And he went to it, like he was drawn to it. He took that woman’s hand, and he was gone. And soon, that will happen to me.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way, you know,” she murmured, nuzzling him.

“Yes. Yes, it does. Just like with Will. I heard the music, that means I’m next.”

“Listen to me, John. What happened to Will...”

“And Joe Mack, and the others...”

“Even if it did. What makes you think it *has* to happen to you? Us humans, we have this thing called ‘free will’...”

He laughed bitterly. “You do. You have free will. Me, I can’t afford it.”

“But that doesn’t mean that you have to march straight into the lion’s jaws. Right? Whatever it is that’s happening, I mean.” She stroked his cheek. “You don’t really know, after all.”

He was silent for a moment, then he nodded. “Maybe I don’t. But...I’ll tell you what I do know, Sally. *I want to go to it*. In my heart, I want to.” He paused for a moment, then continued: “When I hear that music, it’s like...it speaks to me. Without saying a word. The sound...it sort of reaches into me and tugs.” He sighed. “And that’s what makes it so...so...”

“Seductive?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Like that. Seductive.”

“Do you just hear music?”

“No. There’s singing too. Nothing I can understand, no specific words, I mean. But I hear voices.” He grinned. “They’re not telling me to do things, if that’s what you’re thinking. Nothing like that. But I do hear voices.”

“Men or women?”

“It’s hard to tell. But both, I think. I wonder if I was closer to it, if I would be able to hear it clearer.”

“Are you sure you’d want to do that?”

He shook his head and smiled. “I’m scared. I don’t mind admitting.”

“But why would it scare you? Seems to me, it’s fairly peaceful. You take her hand, and away you’d go.”

“Maybe. Maybe so. Or...maybe not. See, Will was there when Joe Mack went away. And I guess he didn’t go quietly either. He screamed. A lot.”

“What did it sound like? Like he was scared?”

Again John laughed, without humor. “More like he was being torn to pieces.”

Sally felt her blood go cold.

“Now, I don’t know, I wasn’t there. And maybe Joe deserved what he got and maybe he didn’t. But I’m not exactly a pristine person either. I’ve done bad things.” He looked at her. “I’ve had to steal things to survive. I know that hurts people, but I did it. I’m not proud of it.”

“Well, you didn’t do anything on the order of Joey McMillan, trust me.”

He gently eased himself away from her. “Either way. I’m not going to let happen to either one of them happen to me. I’m not gonna give them that kind of chance.” He rolled to his feet. “If it’s okay with you, think I’m going to have me another shower. Talking about that stuff makes me feel...dirty.” He smiled at her. “Besides, I don’t know when I’ll get another.”

“I don’t blame you,” she said. “You go right ahead.”

He padded out of the room and walked in the direction of the bathroom.

She considered the import of what he’d told her. Voices. Disappearing people. Joey McMillan being ripped apart...if invisibly. Seductive music issuing from a statue. It was a little too much for her to grasp.

At least all at once.

And then there was the matter of John, who’d approached her—no, call it what it was, he *solicited* her. By all rights he should be on his way to jail right now, though to be fair, he hadn’t asked for anything specific. Just for her to stay with him. Company, he’d said.

It was...unusual, at the very least. And yes, John could’ve been dangerous, Del had been right about that much. She was prepared well enough to take care of herself, and John wasn’t particularly large or strong-looking. If it had been Joey



McMillan, that would've been a different kettle of fish, certainly. But then she wouldn't have allowed herself to be put in this sort of situation in that case. Certainly looks could be deceiving, but John had looked so vulnerable. Helpless. Lost.

Alone.

Sally Kendall smiled, despite herself. Yes, he was alone. And perhaps that was her good fortune. She was alone too. And he was at least attractive, if a little on the slender side. She couldn't help but wonder what he would look like after a few weeks of good meals and maybe some rest, in a real bed. A bath. Her condo had a bathtub more than big enough for two. It had never played host to anyone other than she...perhaps it was time to change that...

...she cocked her head. There had been a strange sound from the washroom. Not loud, but distinctive. Metallic. Hard to place.

*Better check it out*, she thought, sitting up and climbing from the bed.

As she approached, she couldn't help noticing the smile on her face in the mirror. Funny, how a smile took years off one's appearance. She paused long enough to take herself in: the makeup was perhaps a bit much, but it was for a part she'd been playing on the street, of course. Skin no less weathered than John's, though she had to have at least ten years on him, maybe twenty. Hair bleached, again, for the role she was playing...ordinarily it was light brown going to gray. Somewhat bushy and curly. She didn't take care of it as religiously as some of her friends did, and perhaps that was to her advantage: the lack of treatment by harsh chemicals meant that she'd kept it. A rough look to the eyes, but the right person's company might soften that.

She rapped on the door, which wasn't quite closed. Steam issued from the opening.

No answer. And apart from the sound of water running, the room was quiet.

"John?" She pushed the door open, just a smidgen. "John, are you all right?"

She took a step through the door.

On the tile floor there lay five razor blades. He'd dropped them. *Of course*, she thought with surprising calmness. *The metallic sound*.

He lay in the bath, his body quaking.

"John," she said softly, kneeling next to him. "This is what you came here to do, wasn't it? For someone to acknowledge you before you died."

“Yes,” he stammered. “And look at me now. I can’t even kill myself right.”

“Well, of course you can’t.” She held her hand out to him. “It’s because you don’t really want to.”

“I’m going to die Sally,” he said, turning away. “What’s so wrong with wanting to do it on my terms?”

She rubbed his neck. “Well, that’s all well and good sweetie, if you’re willing to actually do it. But there are alternatives. Here.” She turned off the shower. “Let me help you. We’ll talk about it.”

He peered over his shoulder. “No more cop stuff?”

“No more cop stuff. I promise.”

He rolled over, took her hand, let her help him out of the tub. Then she wrapped him back up in the blanket and led him back out into the room.

“What do you have in mind?” he asked as he sat and contemplated the still-warm pizza.

“Another piece of pizza,” she said with a grin. “Or maybe two. And then a short walk for the two of us.”

His eyes narrowed.

“Hear me out. We’re not far from Parthenon Pavilion, just a few blocks. There’s good people there, people who can help.”

“A nut house,” he said. “You want me to go to a nut house.”

“It’s a *hospital*, for people with specific problems,” she said around a mouthful of pizza. “Don’t be offended.”

“I’m not. But a mental hospital?”

She nodded at him and shrugged. “Whether you admit it or not, John, you’re one of those people with specific problems. They can help you deal with those problems.”

“Problems like hearing music coming out of a statue, or believing it means to see me dead?” He laughed bitterly. “Sally, they hear that, they’ll lock me up and throw away the key. I may be homeless but I’m not naive. Or stupid.”

“Nobody said you were. Listen, it costs you nothing to try it. They’ll take you in, observe you, maybe give you something to help you rest.” She smiled. “You can have as many showers as you like, and you’ll have a warm, dry place to sleep. And food.”

“And I’ll be locked up. Won’t I?”

She nodded. "That's standard operating procedure for this sort of thing. Generally seventy-two hours."

"Three days then. And what happens to me after the observation period is over? Do they just pitch me out the door and leave me to...to, I don't know, whatever this Musica intends for me?"

This was the moment she'd been anticipating. Not necessarily with dread, but with concern. She'd had a thought running through her head, based on her own observations about him. *Maybe*, she thought, *just maybe*...

"What if they do?" she challenged him. "What if they escort you out...and there's someone outside waiting for you?"

"Right," he scoffed. "Who would care about..."

He stopped, looking at her. She smiled warmly at him.

"You?"

She nodded. "Why not me, John? You approached me, right? So you were at least interested in me. I'm not that awful looking, am I?"

"No!" He took her hands in his. There was pizza sauce on them, but that didn't really matter to her. It was Gino's, after all.

"And we still haven't had our date yet," she continued. "So, what if we just delay it till you're turned loose?"

He looked at her, astonished. "You'd do that?"

"Well, yeah! It's not as if I've got guys lining up to date me. So, we're on then?"

He nodded, his face still slack-jawed...but smiling. "Yeah. Yeah, we're on. So, what do we do now?"

"Oh, that part's easy. You stay here while I go get your clothes—they should be dry now—and then we'll walk to the hospital. Together."

He smiled, like he was seeing hope for the first time in...well, a long time.

His clothes were dry and piping hot when she retrieved them. More, there'd been a dryer sheet left behind from the last load, and it had left a pleasant smell on his tattered duds.

"It's not a long walk," she said, handing them to him. "Maybe a mile. You up to that?"

His reply was so soft, she had to prompt him to repeat himself.

What he'd said was: "As long as you're with me."

Sally Kendall was a fairly stoic person, but she very nearly burst into tears hearing this. She just managed to contain the impulse, instead waiting patiently as he donned his clothes. Then she slid her hand into his as she led him out the door. Both were wearing wide smiles.

She had not underestimated the distance. She'd walked these streets often over the years, even when she wasn't portraying a streetwalking prostitute. She knew that from the motel to the park was almost an even mile. Parthenon Pavilion was just this side of the park, the quickest route being straight down Demonbreun to the Buddy Killen Circle with a quick jaunt over to West End, then south and west to the park. Easy. Except...

...except for that massive bit of statuary at Killen Circle.

Musica.

Perhaps it would be prudent to avoid that completely. She escorted John north up 14th to Broadway, which in a few blocks would turn into West End. A little out of the way, but worth it under the circumstances.

He knew, though. "I didn't want to go near it either," he said gratefully as they turned onto Broadway. "I guess I was sort of sweating that."

She squeezed his hand. "I understand. We'll be a good two blocks away. You won't even see it."

"Thanks."

Broadway was fairly quiet; not like Music Row. It was undergoing its own gentrification right now, though one still had to pass a solid block of car dealerships before encountering the first of the towering cranes, lit for safety even at this time of night. She wasn't exactly sure she liked the changes being wrought. One luxury hotel after another was springing up, great glass and steel monstrosities that would likely change hands many times over the next decade and never be full. Investments, then. Whopping great charmless investments whose owners may never even set eyes on. Progress? It was called that, but she wasn't so sure.

They had just passed the last of the car lots (Buick, this one) when he slipped her grip and began to walk south, at a quicker pace.

"John?" she called. "John, where are..."

Abruptly she realized where she was. 16th and Broadway. South would take

him to Buddy Killen Circle, and...

“John! Wait!” She walked faster, then in very brief stages went from a trot to a cautious run. Not easy in heels, but she’d had to do it before. Not for a moment did she stop calling to him. “John! Wait for me, John! I’m coming!”

He walked like he didn’t hear her. Or, perhaps, he was listening to someone else. *Something* else.

She still hadn’t quite caught up with him as he reached the circle. Even at this time of night there was traffic on the roundabout, surely he’d have to pause before...no, damn it, there was a break in the circular parade just as he crossed the street. She wasn’t so lucky, only just avoiding a passing Mercedes and receiving an angry blast from its horn for her trouble.

He’d walked to the south side of the assemblage. Of course, that’s where the one amongst the dancing figures was offering her hand. He stood there staring up at it, his hand raising slowly.

Sally stopped next to him. “John,” she said. “John, listen to me. Listen to *me*, not to *it*, John.”

He looked over his shoulder. “Do you hear it too?” he whispered. “Do you, Sally?”

She didn’t...

...and then, she did. Faintly at first, but with growing strength and clarity.

Music. Guitars, pipes, bells. Pleasant...no, *happy* music. The sort of thing that makes you feel you’re alive, and most glad to be so. Music that made you want to dance with joy, and gave you the energy to do so, even where you had none before. Seductive? Perhaps, but maybe transcendent was a better word.

Then, the voice. Other, softer voices in the background, some speaking, some singing, but one rising above them.

It called her by her name.

*Sally. Sally Kendall. Leave him be. Leave him to me.*

It didn’t even occur to her that she might be talking to a statue when she replied: “Who are you?”

*I am but a gateway. I can take John to a place he can be happy and free.*

“You destroyed Joey McMillan.”

*That was a bad man. John thinks he is, but he isn’t. He’s only sad. He wants to be with us.*

Sure enough, John's hand had risen just above shoulder height, and was reaching toward the statue's hand. His eyes were fixed—or was it transfixed?—on those of the woman in the statue.

She had to act decisively, and fast. "John." Her voice calm but firm.

Slowly, reluctantly, he looked back at her.

"John. You have a chance to be happy here yet. Don't give it up so easily." Then she added, "Besides, you have a date. With me. You promised. Remember?"

His outstretched hand had closed around that of the statue. For a moment, just a moment, she understood what he'd said about the disappearances: his form began to flicker, like a candle flame being snuffed.

"No!" she said to the statue. "No, no, no!" Then, to John: "It's got to be your choice, John. Dance with her now, or later with me."

For a few horrible instants his body continued to fade...and then, so slowly, the awful dematerialization reversed itself.

Sally looked up at the statue. She'd taken its hand herself before, for goofy pictures with visiting friends, but now...surely, the eyes of the dancing woman were staring at her, and looked very alive. So did her body, which had transformed from its darkened bronze metal to bronzed flesh.

She was beautiful.

*Be good to him.*

Sally looked at the statue's eyes in silent contemplation for a moment, then said, "I will. I promise."

Then the eyes looked away and the statue solidified, much as John had.

His hand dropped away from the statue's hand, and he shook his head as if he was waking from a dream. "Sally?" he asked. "Sally, how did I get here?"

"A wrong turn," she sighed gratefully. "Just a wrong turn, John. Let's go."

She locked his arm in hers, and led him away from Musica. They did not look back.