

By the author of
Mental Damnation

SEED ME

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MIDNIGHT DUMPSTER PLEASANTRIES

The pint glass was moist from the frost that had coated it. The cool, bitter beer filled only a sixth of the pint now. My dry, rough hands wrapped around the glass, and I felt the water droplets soaking into my skin. I gripped tight before lifting the pint and leaning it back to take the last gulp. The liquid poured past my tongue and down my throat in a single swallow.

The first beer of the evening was the most satisfying, quenching a thirst that had built up all day. Actually, that was a lie. The quench had been building for the past several years and this was not my first glass of the evening, nor even my fifth, but it was still just as fulfilling to my continuous thirst.

I got up from the worn wooden stool. The small, poorly lit pub was packed with loud-mouthed baboons of all ages (people, really, but one could understand the mix-up). On a Friday night, most of them were practically kids, in or

fresh out of college, getting rowdy with friends or hoping to get lucky with a mate of their sexual preference.

I need a smoke, I thought before sliding off my crooked stool, pushing through two groups of people standing opposite each other. As I passed the groups, I caught a few words of one conversation from the cluster to my left.

“I’m not gonna lie; you really need to get yourself together, man. The drinks aren’t going to solve it,” said a man with a broad chin, lifting a muscular arm forward to place a hand on another man’s shoulder. He adjusted his loose-fitting red baseball cap, which faced backwards, briefly offering a glimpse of a buzzcut.

If I didn’t know any better, I would say that statement applied to me. But that’s just the drink stalking. Fresh air will clear my head. The man with the red cap was actually speaking to his friend beside me; I couldn’t see his face because I walked behind him. Based on the way he swayed and slurred his speech—it was impossible to make out what he was saying—I could tell he was way too many drinks in. Even more so than me.

I continued to squeeze through the crowd and push my way past people, eventually finding my way out of the pub through the front entrance. I pulled the gold handle on the splintered white wooden door, moved into the vestibule, then pushed the second, darker wood door to open it. Reaching into my black leather jacket’s front pocket, I pulled out my white lighter. Then I shook a cigarette from its box, flipping the trigger on the lighter as a chilling breeze picked up.

Fall. I covered the flickering flame with my hand before sucking air through the cigarette, lighting the paper. The cool air was refreshing compared to the warm summer nights, which were more of a nuisance really. Here in Edmonton we got a couple months of hot weather, then the rest were cold, with a lot of ice and snow. At least early fall was consistent, and I liked the way a brisk wind provided a refreshing jolt, shooting you back into reality when your mind wandered off into stupid places or you'd had too many pints.

Most of the other folks outside were huddled close together, covering their chests with their folded arms or rubbing their shirts and dresses, trying to maintain some heat through the flimsy fabric.

Perhaps if they didn't worry so much about how they looked in those tight shirts and skimpy dresses, they wouldn't be so cold. I took an inhale of my cigarette and scanned the rest of the crowd. Only a couple people actually had a coat; the rest were still dressed as if it were summer. It was ridiculous, but par for the course on Edmonton's main nightlife strip no matter the season.

I'd mainly come out here looking for my best friend, Skip, who had dragged me out to this bar in the first place; he had gone for a smoke earlier and hadn't come back yet. Honestly, I would have rather been at home watching TV or something, but he insisted that I come out. He promised I'd "have a good time." That had yet to happen.

I ran my eyes over the crowd back and forth, noting the large buildup of traffic on the street behind them; it

was a common sight for a Friday night on Whyte Avenue, where most of the Edmonton bar scene was centered.

Eventually I spotted Skip at the tail end of the huddled people. He was easily noticeable as the only guy who had a mohawk; with no gel, it simply appeared as strands of long black hair parted to one side with a shaved undercut. Plus, Skip also wore a hoodie vest with a tank top. He was a little more punk rock than the rest of the crowd that night.

I strolled over to him. He was chatting up a girl who could pass for a high school student. Thinking optimistically, though, I hoped she was just a freshman university hooligan out to party, not someone underage. Skip was probably nearing eight years on some of these girls, but like me, he was single. Unlike me, though, he was easily lured in by girls wearing skimpy outfits and fluttering their eyelashes.

This particular girl was a blonde, her hair bleached so bright it was almost white. Her locks draped down past her exposed shoulders. Light brown dreadlocks were mixed in in the back and her straightened bangs were combed to one side in the front. Her black intentionally-frayed-at-the-seams dress was strapless and barely went down past her ass. But I did have to give her credit for wearing star-patterned leggings to battle the cold. It was more weatherproofing than most of the women in the crowd had bothered with.

I may have better judgment than Skip in avoiding potential jailbait, but that doesn't mean I don't appreciate a bit of eye candy. *They're of age if they are at a bar, in theory,*

I thought. That makes me sound like a guy you want to bring home to mom and dad, doesn't it?

Anyway, Skip looked up at me with a crooked smirk spread across his bony face. "Logan! I'd like you to meet this fine lady here." He stepped closer to the blonde-dreadlocked girl, gently placing his arm on her back and extending his smoking hand out to me. "Janet."

"Hi." Janet smiled at me with her perfectly white teeth, which guided my eyes to her nostril piercing, while she politely extended her hand.

I nodded, smoke in my mouth, and shook her hand. "Nice to meet you, Janet. I see you met my good friend Skip."

She looked over her shoulder towards him and fiddled with her non-dreaded hair. "I did! Pretty funny guy."

I may have questioned some of Skip's taste in girls, but I wouldn't block him from getting some tail. Like any good friend, I'd lend a helping hand. I took a puff from my cigarette and exhaled. "He's a big deal, did you know that?"

"Oh?" Janet raised her recently plucked eyebrows at me, still twirling her hair around her index finger like mad.

"Yeah, he spends all day tattooing his own art on people and finds time to pursue his musical aspirations."

"Oh my god! You play music too?" She stepped back to get a better look at Skip.

Skip shrugged. "I'm a man with ambition. My buddy Logan here and I are in a prog-rock band."

“Wow, what are you guys called?”

“Raw Emotion,” Skip replied, puffing out his chest in pride.

“Wait, I’ve seen you guys play! You’re the vocalist, right?”

“That’s right. We came up with the name based on my raw desire to chat with pretty girls like you....” He winked.

Janet let out a giggle while pointing at herself with a wide smile, playfully acting like she was surprised.

There’s no way that would work if both of them were sober. I inhaled my smoke. The only reason I could come to that conclusion because it was late and everyone here was rather loud and their movements were sloppy, me included.

“Oh my god, we’ve met before....” Janet squinted.

“Have we?” Skip smirked.

In that moment a shriek from a group of girls came from down the street, causing us all to glance over.

Three girls—another blonde and two brunettes, one with full dreadlocks, all dressed in various scraps of earth-toned cloth, leather bracelets and pouches around their waists like those raver-hippie kids wear—came rushing towards us.

“Janet!” shouted the blonde. Janet ran towards her friend with a wide smile.

I took another puff from my smoke, wanting to finish it quickly. The last thing I wanted to deal with was a loud group of self-proclaimed tree-hugging bar stars whose ideologies were too heavily influenced by all the LSD and

MDMA they dropped at their raves to form any argument on actual world issues more solid than “love conquers all.” Or perhaps I was getting too old and a bit jaded and was jumping to conclusions. In all honesty, I was making these assumptions based on their age and clothing. It’s something I tend to do, for better or worse; I have a chip on my shoulder on most things with today’s society.

“Looks like our night has just started.” Skip nudged my shoulder, eyeing the girls as they examined each other’s outfits, laughing and smiling.

I shook my head. “Yours is. I’m going back in for another drink.”

Skip shrugged. “Suit yourself. If you plan on leaving, try to time it for when I pull in the catch. I may need you to separate Janet from her friends so they don’t cockblock me. You see the way that other blonde looked at me?”

I smiled and brushed my hair from my eyes. “No, can’t say I did.” I patted Skip on the arm. Either Skip was reading into things, focusing on small signals like what he perceived as the blonde’s overly protective glare, or I didn’t see it because I was in a rut with my own life and basic social cues that once caught my eye seemed to lack the significance they once had.

“Come on, man, why aren’t you down for some fun?”

“I am, just not with this.” I nodded my head to the four girls, who laughed and bopped up and down at each other like a flock of chickens. “Some lines, yeah. But girls, I just don’t think I can relate to these ones.”

“Who said anything about relating to them?” A

mischievous grin spread across Skip's face.. "I just want to score that first blonde."

"Their idiocy kills my sex drive."

Skip shook his head. "That's not the Logan I know. I've been your wingman since we were in school; I know you."

"Yeah? Then what is me?"

"You gotta get over Emily."

Seeing Skip's lips move as he spoke the word "*Emily*," hearing the name again, seemed to freeze time. Like a bomb made of sound detonating, it exploded and loosened an array of emotions and memories inside me that twirled around my head, spiralling downward into the center of my consciousness and chilling my entire body, finishing by twisting my stomach into a dozen knots of nausea.

Skip put his arm around me and shook his head. "I really didn't want to be the one to tell you yet again, but I am always here for you, man. Even if that means I have to help save you from yourself." He looked me dead in the eyes, not blinking. "It's been eighteen months since she bailed on that road trip with her fuck-bud of a friend...."

Emily. The name echoed in my mind. I heard Skip talking but my mind had relapsed back to the day she left. The same day I was ready to step up my game, listen to her again, drop the drugs, and get my career in order. I remember clearly feeling the smooth silver ring between my sweaty hands, so nervous about asking for her hand in marriage. She claimed I was a deadbeat druggie and was fed up with trying to support my quote-unquote "sorry ass." At least that's what her text said that day, which is

how our relationship of four years ended.

Skip ground his teeth; I had missed something he said while I was daydreaming. "...that douche was waiting to scoop her from you the moment she was vulnerable. I'm glad he got what was coming to him."

I took a deep inhale from my smoke, shrugging Skip off my shoulder. Exhaling, I asked, "What about Emily, man?"

"It's terrible what happened, I know. As your best friend, this is why I am telling you, eighteen months have gone by—you gotta start moving on. The 4-20 Draining is a cold case with no leads."

The 4-20 Draining. Every time I hear them, the words leave me feeling as hollow as the day I first learned about it. The police report stated that a young couple (Emily and her best friend—the fuck-bud, better known as Dwane, the asshat with a chiselled jawline) were found in a campground near Jasper, murdered, on April 20th last year.

"It just irks me," I replied. "Dwane's body was found ripped in two from the waist down, head missing, organs missing, and apparently eaten by the animals nearby." I raised my arms. "Yet no blood or footsteps found in the snow."

The deaths were the most upsetting thing that had happened in my life, next to Emily dumping me. Her body was found not too far away from Dwane's. All of her blood had been drained from her corpse, which was mutilated with dozens of giant puncture holes in a series of rings

around her flesh.

Skip shrugged. “Dude, the police consider it a cold case because of the major lack of evidence, just like the other drain cases in the past decade. They’re all a lost cause.”

I had to admit that Skip had a point. When I first found out about the bizarre death of Emily, I had done excessive online research on it. The 4-20 Draining was just one of at least five other similar cases where bodies were found with the blood drained from the corpse, some decimated like Dwane’s, and others covered in puncture hole rings like Emily’s. The police believed it to be the work of a serial killer because of the consistent killing technique, but they didn’t want to rule out other possibilities. When the cops first went public with the cases about a decade ago, looking for tips, the media jumped on the weird bandwagon and dubbed the perpetrator “The Drainer,” like he (or she) came out of a slasher movie or something. Just like the 4-20 Draining, the other drain cases were dead ends too, leaving the police stumped and me boiling with inner turmoil on who was responsible for Emily’s death.

Folding my arms, I replied, “I really tried to get as much information about Emily’s case as possible.”

“I know, man. But hey, at least the police have stopped bringing you in for questioning. That had me worried to shits.”

“Me too. Thankfully Jake and Seb were able to vouch for being with me that night.” I was grateful for the band; on that 4-20, Jake and Seb had kept me company all night as I sulked around feeling sorry for myself about Emily

dumping me.

“Look, Logan, let’s keep the mood light. It’s Friday and I only dropped this heavy topic on you to help you snap out of it.” Skip smiled, extending his hand toward the four girls. “Come on, what do you say?”

I looked at my cigarette, now just a butt, so I threw it to the ground and extinguished it with a single step of my black Dr. Martens boots. “See you inside.”

I knew that Skip was being a good friend, but the rush of memories of Emily’s death put me in even less of a mood to try and entertain the idea of finding a hookup. Besides, the thought of having to hear some girl go on and on about issues in her personal life or having to charm someone with idiotic statements that only worked on the shallow-minded, along with enduring their scandalous flirtatious behaviour, sounded exhausting. Like I said, chip on my shoulder. The price of putting up with that stuff was not worth the reward. I guess there was a chance I was still a bit cynical from the relationship with Emily.

I need another drink.

Stepping back into the pub, I realized how stuffy it actually was inside. The narrow, claustrophobia-inducing building was packed corner-to-corner with people. Every stool, table, and bench was filled with people laughing, drinking, and shouting at each other. Way in the back by the washrooms there were a couple dartboards where a group was playing a very intense drinking game; they were possibly the loudest out of everyone in the pub, yelling, swearing, and cheering at the dart game.

I walked past the tall blond bouncer at the front with a nod and squeezed by a number of people, including the red baseball-capped man from earlier.

“You messed up, bro. Shit happens, okay?” he said, placing his hand on his drunk friend’s shoulder.

The friend, now facing me, eyed the ceiling as his head swayed side-to-side, mouth dangling open. He was sloshed.

It couldn’t have been much later than midnight and already someone was so drunk they should go home. No surprise, though; they were young and dumb, and on a weekend in Edmonton, what else was there to do? It was almost a cultural standard to spend your social time compacted in a sweat-drenched building killing your liver with immense amounts of liquor. We only really had two months of the year with nice weather, so most people simply didn’t have much else to do during the fall and winter. When Edmonton got cold, it got really cold.

The bar was just as crowded as anywhere else in the pub; I had to eye every inch of it to try and find an opening where I could get the bartender’s attention. But I wanted my drink, so I just had to deal with it. I resigned myself to pushing my way through loudmouths with poor hygiene and alcohol on their breath who lacked a sense of depth perception, limiting any face-to-face interaction with them to inches apart with spit flying in your eye.

I walked closer to the back of the building to get a spot at the end of the bar where there were fewer people to get in the way. If I had to get nice and close to strangers, then

I wanted to be sure that I could minimize the number of bodies pressed against me. I squeezed between two backs, took some cash out of my pocket, and swayed slightly. I was beginning to feel the booze kick in while I pulled out a five-dollar bill and a toonie, enough to grab a pint of the house ale and leave a small tip for the bartender. It was a busy night; they deserved the cash for putting up with shitheads like this every weekend.

I leaned against the bar, holding my toonie and five-dollar bill out with my one hand, resting on the other. In case you don't know, if you want to get a bartender's attention on a busy night, get your cash out first. It shows you're ready to pay right away and are probably a little more coherent than the rest. Even if that wasn't the case in this instance, I could put on the act.

The bartender finished pouring two highballs for a couple down the bar. He brushed his long brown hair from his rugged face and exhaled, making brief eye contact with me as he took the couple's cash, running it through the till. I nodded at him, subtly shaking my five-dollar bill; he knew I didn't want to sit around at the far back—I was there on a mission.

The bartender gave the couple their change and they left, not even tipping. I shook my head in disgust.

Who doesn't tip the person providing them with beverages or food? I thought. Not only do they make terrible wages as it is, they have to cater to your requests. Don't you think they require a tip?

One rant of many that rot my head. But I do know

what it's like to live on next to no cash, busting your ass for companies and bosses that don't appreciate the work you put in, firing you because you "don't meet company standards." At least that's my reasoning, and Skip would agree. On the contrary, it's got to make a man wonder: if everyone in your life, both professionally and personally, says you're a lazy deadbeat, except for your deadbeat friends ...what does that make you?

"What'll it be?" came the bartender's voice through the noise.

"Empress Ale," I called back automatically. Even though my thoughts were buzzing around in my own misery, in this drunken state my alcoholic autopilot knew how to take care of me and get more beer.

The bartender came back with a dark golden pint of ale. The glass already had condensation all over the outside from the heat of the room.

"Five seventy-five!" the bartender shouted.

I handed the man my cash and nodded at him, turning around to survey the scene. Leaning forward and down the bar, I could see that the stool I'd previously been perched on was already taken. The rest of the pub was no better. My slit between two groups was the best and only option for the time being.

When Skip gets back here, he's going to be bringing those hippie chicks with him. The thought of hearing them talking loudly about pointless topics—coconut oil or some DJ they wanted to blow—made me shudder. I couldn't care less about the latest fad the younger generation jumped on.

Perhaps this pint will be my last.

Loud rumbling came from outside as a large white pickup driving unusually fast roared down the opposite side of the road. It was easy to see the truck—a Chevrolet of some kind—through the wide-open windows at the front of the bar. What was more interesting was seeing the driver slam on the brakes because of the traffic jam out front, followed by flashing red and blue cop lights as a siren blasted just behind the truck.

Probably some winner drinking and driving again, I thought, watching as the truck pulled up into the auto-repair shop lot across the street. The cop car turned off its siren but kept the flashers on. It was difficult to see what was really going on; the lot of the auto-repair was out of my view. If I really cared about watching a guy get a ticket from the cops I could move closer to the window, but did it really matter? *Doesn't affect my life.* I stayed put.

“Someone’s getting busted!” yelled a guy a few heads over at the bar.

I took a gulp from my drink. *Exactly what I need to shut out this noise.* I exhaled slowly from my nostrils, closing my eyes and trying to gain some center focus of my mind so my thoughts didn’t run off on tangents or into the past—into Emily.

Her blue eyes and black hair. Damn it! Skip mentioning Emily again really threw me off.

“The cop has a gun!” another man shouted.

“Oh my god!” came a chick’s valley-girl shrill. “There’s a foot in the back of the pickup!”

Those words caught most of the pub's attention, and gradually the random drunken noise turned into a shouting commentary on what people could see from the bar. At least four guys rushed out of the pub to take a closer look. The two groups of people beside me dashed from their spot to the large windows to take a look at the action, finally leaving me with some flex space.

"They're getting the guy out of the truck!" the man shouted again.

The group playing darts shrugged at each other.

"What's going on?" someone asked me.

I shrugged. "Don't really care. Something about a cop with a gun and a foot."

He gave me a confused blank stare and his buddy slapped his shoulder as he rushed by. Within moments the entire group playing darts had sprinted forward to be a part of the action. Some hands popped out of the crowd, cell phones raised, recording the situation across the street.

I eyed the bartender, who was getting some drinks for a few stragglers. He leaned over the counter, keeping his gaze fixed on the spectacle outside while listening to their orders.

It's not every day you get to see a cop bust someone who has a foot in the back of their pickup. But still, to me, it really seemed like people were overreacting. That's how most people behave: they're reactionary and will overglorify a situation. What are they really going to do to help the cop? I say let him do his job, and stop watching from

the window like it's reality TV or something.

I shook my head and took another large gulp from my drink, eying the room. Most of the back was now cleared out; I was one of the few not infatuated with the foot in the truck.

I leaned both of my forearms on the bar, holding my drink in one hand, watching the compact group of people ogling the scene out front. Several moments passed and there was no sign of Skip coming back yet; the girls and the cop scene were probably keeping him occupied.

One last smoke, I thought, taking a beer mat and putting it over my pint glass. Thankfully there was a back entrance to the pub that I could use to have a cigarette away from the crowd. I didn't consider myself addicted to smoking, but once I started drinking, the desire was ignited like a rocket. With booze in my system, I could easily go through half a pack a night—it's not that much, really.

I pushed open the door leading to the small parking lot outside, across the alley from an apartment complex.

No one else was out back there; it was a hidden gem if you didn't mind the darkness and the smell of the dumpster to the right of the door. I vastly preferred the muffled sound of Whyte Ave offered by the barrier of the building and the alley's empty space to the chaos going on out front.

I went to pull out a cigarette from the pack in my pocket when a rustling noise by the dumpster caught my ear and I turned to my right, jumping at the sight of a thin, pale gal, dressed all in black, staring at me.

“Jesus!” I shouted. *I thought I had myself together, but guess not.*

The girl stood still, her black hair covering the majority of her face, making only her ghostly white chin and pale puffy lips visible.

I lit the smoke and inhaled, eyeing the girl from head to toe. She was standing as still as a tree. Her arms must have been tucked into her black trench coat, which went down past her boots almost to the ground. It made what I could see of her face practically luminescent.

“You want a smoke?” I asked while exhaling.

The girl lifted her head. Some of her hair moved aside with the motion, leaving only the bangs that draped down just above her eyebrows. I could see a glimmer of shine from the reflection of light against her eyes, which stared right at me. Her gaze was dead-on but it seemed to look through me. Like the look in one’s eye when they were completely shitfaced—the “lights are on but no one is home” type of deal.

I stepped closer to her with caution. It was tough to see her in the dark and I knew there was a chance that she was some kind of crackhead or would act unpredictably. “You out here to get some quiet from the noise out front?” I asked. *Maybe she’s homeless... but she seems too clean.*

She nodded at me and smiled openly while tilting her head.

I took another puff of my smoke and stopped about one step away from her. “Me too. Any idea what it is all about?”

The girl looked at the cigarette in my hand. Her smile quickly turned into a frown.

“You don’t like smokes?” It was possible she was high, or maybe she was just a weirdo. Either way, my curiosity got the best of me; I was bored of the bar inside. Remember what I was saying earlier?

“You don’t say much, do you?” I asked, exhaling some smoke. A breeze picked up and blew some of the smoke from my mouth over to her face.

The girl shivered and looked away from me, sliding backward to the dumpster.

“Sorry; I guess you’re really not a fan of smoking.” I extended my hand to touch her shoulder, trying to show her some sympathy.

She glided closer to me. Well, more like she fell into my arms, but I wasn’t exactly phased by the behaviour due to the number of pints I had consumed by that point in the evening.

Still holding my smoke, I caught her as she fell, my one hand pressing against her back. She felt cold. And not the normal cold that comes along with fall—I could not feel any body heat underneath her coat where I pressed my hand against her lower back. *Must be a thick coat*, I thought. Her coat had a weird texture that felt like sort of like velvet. As my fingers ran along the fabric, I felt some sort of pattern that had a thicker, almost rough texture. The design on the coat was all black, but the difference in sheen on the line designs allowed me to see the floral, plant-stem illustrations even in the crappy alleyway

light. The flowery lines curled together in sections to form spirals at the ends.

I could pick up the soft, sweet smell of her perfume. It wasn't one that I had encountered before, probably the most natural flower scent I had smelled on a girl in my entire life. The scent was soothing, summery, like a rose or lilac.

"You okay?" I asked, lifting her narrow chin up with three of my fingers, the index and thumb still holding the smoke. I scanned her face, seeing her slanted eyebrows and wide eyes staring at my cigarette. Examining her up close, I could see her face was abnormally white. Even her plump lips were washed out. I knew some people didn't get enough sun, especially here in Edmonton, but this was a bit much.

The back door of the pub burst open and two sets of footsteps stomped onto the concrete. Before I had a chance to look back and see who was there, the girl leaned in and pressed her dry, cold lips against mine.

My senses were slightly numb so I don't recall if her lips were as cool as they seemed in retrospect. She opened her mouth, gradually running her thin tongue along the inside of my lip.

The movement wasn't smooth and fluid like I've experienced in the past, or how I would personally manoeuvre around someone's face hole. She was much more mechanical with her motions; it wasn't even the drunken, sloppy style. There was also a major lack of saliva in her mouth; what was there was just thick, slimy, and

had a stale taste.

“Hey Logan!” came Skip’s familiar voice.

A moment later I felt a prick on the inner side of my bottom lip. It caught me off-guard. The prick was sharp, causing me to twitch, and I managed to pull my face away from the girl. I looked over my shoulder; Skip had his one arm around Janet’s waist and he smirked wickedly as he eyed the girl I held.

I knew what was going through his mind; he was more pleased to see me getting some results with a girl than he was to be hitting it off with Janet. He was a real friend. At times his persistence for me to act like or do something he wanted me to got on my nerves. I’d like to think I knew what I wanted out of life and had goals; however, that wasn’t always the case. My entire past is proof that what I think doesn’t always manifest into reality.

Skip nodded at me and brought Janet closer to him. “We’re heading back. Done for the night.”

Skip was also my roommate, so it was nice to keep informed on what his evening plans were.

“Sounds good. What was the verdict with that truck?”

“I dunno, more cops showed up. They got the guy in cuffs and there was a body in the back. Lost interest after that. Higher priorities.” He winked at me.

“It was intense!” Janet’s eyes widened.

I smiled at Skip. He was pretty cut-and-dried with what he wanted, which also made him trustworthy. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

Skip and Janet waved goodbye to me and my new

companion before they marched off back to the main street leading away from Whyte Ave.

I turned my gaze back to the girl, who remained in my arms. She stared directly up at me, and it made me wonder if she'd taken her eyes off me at all during the exchange with Skip. Her sudden desire to kiss me had been a slight shock.

What is her game?

"As nice as that was, I gotta ask you, do you do that to everyone you first meet?"

The girl smiled, a quick, jerking motion that seemed just as mechanical as her kiss. She swayed from side to side slowly in my arms and gradually leaned up to kiss me again. I felt hesitant to participate.

You have to let go of Emily. Skip's words echoed in my mind. He was right; I needed to move on, and what better way than to get drunk and make out with a random girl who hung out by a dumpster?

I let my guard down and embraced the girl again. Maybe she'd be better at kissing the second time. Nope. She pressed her face against mine and moved her mouth up and down like she had the first time, and it was just as unappealing as before.

The hell with it.

I pulled the girl closer to me with both hands so she pressed against my chest while I felt her hand coil around my wrist tightly. Almost too tight, until a moment passed and I felt a piercing sensation on my wrist. I couldn't see what she was doing, but I was certain she had punctured

the skin and I tried to back away but she moved with me.

The back door opened again and the girl's grip on me loosened. I looked over to see that a couple of guys—one short, bald, and stubby and the other, tall and thin with dirty-blond hair—had come outside with cigarettes in their mouths, lighting up and eyeing the two of us.

I tried to pull my arm free from the girl to see what had pricked my wrist. It had to be her needle or something.

Is she drugging me? I thought, panicked, then shook my head. *Don't be ridiculous.*

The two guys walked away from the bar and down the alley, leaving the two of us alone.

"What was that?" I asked, attempting to raise my wrist, but she held it down.

She smiled at me while winking.

Could have been her nails. "You're not much for words, I take it..." *This is too weird, but maybe Skip is right and I should stop moping and just get laid.* It had been a while since I'd had any action with a girl. There were a couple after Emily, but it didn't change where my mind was at with her. Perhaps the third time would be the charm.

"Let's take this back to my place." I winked at her, instantly regretting what I'd said. *I am so rusty at this.* I hadn't really made much of an effort to date or try to pick up girls since Emily. And even being endowed with liquid courage, I was still not too clear on what I was doing.

The girl didn't say anything, but she kept smiling at me and I felt her grip tighten on my arm again so I made the assumption that she wanted to come with me. I tried

to guide her out from behind the dumpster, but she didn't budge.

Her grip constricted on me further and the piercing sensation I'd felt earlier stung again as her other hand wrapped around the same arm.

"The fuck," I mumbled while looking down to my wrist, but her trench coat covered everything and I couldn't see where her hands were. "You coming with me, or you going to let go of my arm?"

She smiled at me and tried to pull me towards her, but I stood my ground and tried to bring her to me instead. She wouldn't move. "All right, you going to let go?" I smiled back at her, not sure if she was joking with the tight grip on my wrist. I tugged on my arm again and the grip tightened again to the point that I felt my hand begin to go numb.

With my free hand I tried to grab on to her fingers that were clenched around my other arm, but her squishy arm underneath the coat was too tight on my wrist. Yes, squishy. Maybe it was the mixture of booze and confusion, but her arm didn't feel solid at all; it was too thin and soft.

"Cut it out!" I raised my free hand while coiling it into a fist. I wasn't a fan of getting into fights, especially with women, but at this point I wanted my arm back and this girl was kind of a freak. Just as I lunged my fist, another hand coiled around mine. It was too dark to see where it came from; at first I assumed it was her other hand, but she still had both wrapped around my one arm.

What? My mind raced as all three arms yanked me

forward, throwing me head-first against the dumpster at devastating speed. My cheek smeared against the cold metal until I collapsed to the ground.

My vision blurred as I rolled over onto my back to see her standing over me. I could only see her silhouette; none of the arms were in sight. Sirens began to echo from up the street, followed by blue and red lights flashing by that highlighted her figure, revealing dried blood and torn skin around her neck. The black velvet coat consumed the rest of her body. She glanced over at the lights and slowly shifted away from the dumpster.

“Wait, you!” I slurred, trying to sit upright. Dizzy, I collapsed onto the ground again, the back of my head colliding first with the concrete. It felt like only seconds, but in actuality it had to have been a good five or ten minutes before the back door opened up and three pairs of feet appeared in the back alley.

“Oh shit!” came the high-pitched voice of a girl.

“Man, you all right?” a guy’s voice asked.

Another guy let out a laugh. “Let’s help him up, dude.”

The three rushed over to me and took my arms, helping me up onto my feet.

“There you go, bud!” said one of them.

“Rough night?” the other asked.

My eyesight was beginning to return, but the headache and dizziness weren’t leaving. I didn’t really get a good look at the three who helped me up as I was too occupied with scanning the back alley to see if I could spot the girl. There was no one else back there besides the four of us. I

had no idea where she went.

I finally spoke. “Yep, I’m good.”

The three slowly released me to see if I could stand. I stumbled for a moment, but quickly regained balance.

“I’m good,” I repeated. “Just gotta sleep this off.”

I placed my hand on my head where my face had collided with the dumpster. It didn’t feel that painful at the moment, thanks to the numbing properties of alcohol. Tomorrow would be another story.