

## PROLOGUE

*My roommate is deformed, poor thing.*

Douglas Sinclair experiences this thought on a daily basis. He's had more than a year to get used to the roommate in question, and it doesn't seem to matter. Simply put, coming upon Art Crocket unexpectedly is alarming.

Years ago, Doug read an interview with a very tall basketball player who said people sometimes swore in shock when seeing him for the first time, especially when coming upon him unexpectedly. Doug thought it was bullshit for over a decade, then met his new roommate and realized it wasn't. Since then, he's come to realize other things as well.

In any kind of social situation, an air of persecuted caution hangs around the young giant like a thick cloud. He keeps his movements small, slow, and close to his body. He seldom talks loudly, and never shouts. He only shows enough expression to avoid a flatness that might make people uncomfortable. Even though Art's speaking voice is a low baritone, Doug harbors the suspicion that it's a falsetto he's been using for so long that he's no longer aware of doing it anymore. Only once has Doug seen Art startled into laughter. The sound was so low it made Doug's chest vibrate, and scared the *shit* out of him.

It isn't that the boy is impossibly tall, (just ridiculously tall), it's that he's impossibly *thick*. Art swears up and down that he doesn't take anything to look that way, but it's a ridiculous claim. He has to be on something: brontosaurus growth hormones, probably. To be fair, Doug has never found evidence of him needling up or popping pills around their apartment, but he must do *something*.

Although Doug is enthusiastically gay, the grossly over-muscled look doesn't appeal to him. Images celebrating it have never attracted his attention. But when Art kept insisting he was chemical free, with an oddly believable sincerity, Doug poked around on the Internet to see if the claim was even possible.

It wasn't.

Whatever Art's on must be rare, though, or incredibly dangerous, because Doug couldn't find a single un-doctored picture that even came close. In comparison to his roommate, the top

ten bodybuilders in the world look a bit...underwhelming. And, Doug has to admit, far more disgusting. Art has none of their stretch marks, finger thick veins, skin conditions, constant rivers of sweat, or beet-red faces. Well, unless he's embarrassed: the boy does mortification like a fish does water. He also doesn't waddle like a near-invalid and can effortlessly lace his fingers together behind his back. In fact, he's one of the more graceful and flexible people Doug's ever interacted with.

Which is actually part of the problem. That much mass moving with flowing grace doesn't *fit* right on a human being. The only other times Doug's seen the combination is when watching a tiger.

Again, to be fair (unlike most of us, Doug is *very* fair), Art doesn't treat people like prey animals. The only thing Doug's ever caught him lying about is the brontosaurus steroids issue, and he seems to go out of his way not to intimidate people in all the ways within his control. The boy pays his share of the rent on time. He never reacts to the constant baiting of their *miserable* excuse for a downstairs neighbor, a woman who seems determined to provoke Art into killing her simply because it would confirm her low opinion of him. He is quiet and respectful. And, once you get over the knee-jerk terror response, *fascinating* to watch when he doesn't know anyone is looking. For the same reason people go to zoos to watch tigers.

Take right now, for instance. He has his back turned to Doug, and seems to fill their kitchenette to overflowing, completely focused on cooking something and with no idea he's treating Doug to a private showing of a wildlife documentary. He's as unclothed as Doug ever sees him, shirtless, shoeless, sockless, and wearing a pair of those ridiculous shorts he must make himself. They gather elastically at the waist and midway down his thighs, and in between billow out impossibly, like cut-off parachute pants on steroids. These are perfect Art watching conditions.

Muscles twitch and shift within bowling ball-sized calves in a fair imitation of happy puppies playing under a blanket. Tremors ripple over the backs of barrel-thick thighs like gentle wind over water. The two muscle groups maintain Art's balance so perfectly he seems to float, silently, when taking the half step left or right that is all his size allows in the cramped space. It's hypnotic.

But what really hypnotizes you is that awe inspiring *back*. It has the topography of a mountain range, so many valleys and ridges that the eye gets lost in them. There's constant motion here as well, but unlike his lower half, the movement is all distinct flows of current. A flexing beneath the skin that whispers out from under the waistband on either side of his spine and fans out as it moves upward. Some of the flows slide around the sides of his back. Others parallel the spine, and upon reaching the neck, cross over to cascade downward again. A few disappear over the top of his shoulders.

And the skin this activity takes place under? If there's one thing Doug finds attractive about Art, it's the skin. The color of bronze, if a sheet of the metal could be made thin enough for bright light on one side to impart just a hint of luminosity to the other. The pores are so small, it looks like it's been painted on with liquid silk, and it is absolutely *flawless*. If you could see that skin without the distraction of the insane musculature or terrifying feline grace, man or woman, regardless of sexual orientation, would find their mouths watering.

And, Doug realizes with horror, *it's on fire*.

Part 1:

FIRST DATES, AND OTHER HAZARDS

*Have you ever been in real pain? I'm not talking about stubbing a toe or breaking a bone. This is a living thing in its own right: mean, spiteful, and hungry. A little bastard whose favorite hobby is savaging flesh with thousands of needle-sharp teeth. Which are currently buried up to the gums in my left forearm. Very enthusiastically.*

Bright oranges and yellows dance in a seamless little mountain range of flame from the crook of my elbow to the far edge of the oil-filled pan held rigidly out at arm's length, which is the farthest I can get it away from the rest of me. Because my body is not fireproof, I'm only wearing underwear, and enough of me is *already* on fire.

Backing away, as if running from my own flaming arm might somehow be one of the options, my heel snags the carpet riser separating our efficiency apartment's "kitchen" from the dining area/living room. Teetering on the edge of balance, I let go of the pan in order to grab something to keep from falling down. This is a flawed plan. It catches the attention of gravity.

And now it starts getting exciting.

The cast-iron Dutch oven blazes floorward with the subtlety of a meteor trying to bring about an extinction-level event. When it hits, fire-supercharged sheets of molten oil geyser upward. A right arm acting in the complete absence of input from an overloaded brain sacrifices its flame-free status to shield my eyes.

Along the entire length of my body there's a solid, wet, *SLAP!*

All sensation fades. Even the pain in my left arm dwindles away like water into dry earth. Apparently, sensation can overload the human body, causing it to crash just like a computer. Maybe it's a consolation prize. The body's way of saying, "Wow, we're totally screwed, sorry about that, but, uh, here's a few seconds' worth of shock induced anesthesia?"

I don't know how other people would react, but when *my* pain goes off-line, it leaves behind only puzzlement and heaviness. Cautiously, I lower flaming arms that suddenly weigh several hundred pounds each.

*Look: my legs are on fire. And...the carpet is bubbling around my feet? Huh. Bubbling carpet is a thing, I guess?*

Looking down and to the right treats me to the round-eyed, round-mouthed face of my roommate, which is normally half-lidded, slightly out-of-focus, and smiling. Doug is freaked out about something. That's a very un-Doug-like state of mind, usually. *Hopefully he isn't having another synthetic marijuana hallucination. The last time, we had to pull an all-nighter to keep him stabilized. I don't know if I can handle that on top of the whole "being on fire" thing...fire thing? Who's on fire?... Oh...right... I am.*

*Wow.*

*When did my body get so heavy?*

Adrenal glands may not be smart, but they recognize when a nice relaxing faint will get you molecularly bonded to a floor covering. So, they unceremoniously dump several quarts of lightning infused, liquefied coffee beans into my nervous system. It wakes me right up, but also rips away whatever's been gumming up my pain receptors. It's effective, like a sink-clog-dissolving chemical enema, but without the constipation relief.

Along with the rediscovery that fire hurts, I also realize a decision needs to be made about what to do next. But adrenalin makes you react instinctively, not rationally. I want to kill or run away from a mammoth, not come up with a reasoned solution. I compromise, and get mad. Really, *really* mad. I'm good at mad. In a crisis, stick with what you know.

Stomping around in an angry little circle, each jarring footfall raining flaming droplets onto the merrily bubbling carpet, I start screaming an animal bull-roar of challenge. It changes pitch with each step. "GRWAAAaaaaaaAAAARRrrrrrrr!"

Okay, so it really wasn't much of a compromise, but at least I'm about to start using my words.

"GNAAA! I bet you WANT me to stop, drop, and roll! Covering me with molten carpet is probably the next step in your PLAN! Well, that AIN'T! GONNA! HAPPEN!"

Things become very personal when I'm pissed off. To the point where it seems perfectly natural for Fire to have an arch-nemesis level vendetta against me, which it carries out with carefully planned attacks.

Doug's brain starts to catch up with unfolding events, and he chimes in. "Dude! I think you should—"

He's trying to help, I *know* that. But it doesn't keep a sudden murderous rage from filling me to the brim. A rage that doesn't give a fuck about fire and wants to beat my roommate to paste. It's going to have to do it with my reanimated corpse, though, because it's happening over my dead body.

I wrestle the gleefully evil emotion back into its cage with a very familiar effort of will, but the fire makes it harder than normal. All the screaming triggers old bad habits. I get mean and shouty.

"SHUT IT, *DOUG!* This is between ME and the FIRE!"

Doug takes a half step back. Sometimes I intimidate people. I'm working on that.

Glare refocusing on the flames now chewing their way up my torso, an idea pops in my rapidly scorching brain pan. I stomp through the bedroom toward the bathroom screaming at the top of my lungs, "Gonna DROWN your *ass*, motherfucker!"

After getting in the shower and turning both faucets to "deluge", my battle cry rings through the apartment.

"DIE!!"

The laws of the universe dictate that the first rush exiting a showerhead must be *icy cold*. It doesn't matter if the building is on fire. It doesn't matter if the shower has been constructed on the surface of the sun. It doesn't matter if the showerhead has been designed to dispense molten rock: if so, for the first few seconds, the magma will be *freezing*. Given the current situation, you won't hear any complaints from me, but it's not a surprise that as the arctic melt-water pours down, my eyelids slam shut out of reflex.

And an image is waiting for me in the darkness. A frozen picture of that wave of flaming oil, right before my arm got suicidally heroic about saving the gift of sight. Its clarity is startling. Every detail is there, all the flaming droplets and wavering sheets. The drop closest to me is at eye level, about six inches away. It tapers to a dull point and there's a tiny, distorted, upside down reflection of my face on the surface.

The wave of glowing orange is thickest at the bottom, solid and unbroken. As it stretches upward, gaps begin to appear. At the top, fluid streams and sheets give way to individual droplets. And then I notice that the gaps, where there is no flame, form a reverse image of their own.

It's a hand, pushing the fire toward me.

*Easy, Art, rein in the weirdness factor. The situation is interesting enough without any help from your imagination. Let's do something really scary, and take a look at the damage.*

My head is bowed, chin resting on chest, and looking down at the drain reveals the depth of my shock. Flames dance on the water swirling down the pipe, and on an emotional level it barely registers.

*Yup, that must be why they say you shouldn't try to put out a grease fire with water. All you do is spread it around.*

The last flame disappears, and a cocky little grin shapes itself to my mouth. *Lucky for me, it seems if you use an overwhelming volume of water, that rule doesn't apply.*

The grin dies as my gaze tracks upward. There's nothing in my experience to compare the damage with. Unlike some guys at the gym who focus so much on upper body stuff that their legs look like sticks, I've got a stocky, muscular build all the way down. My legs are substantial. *Were* substantial.

Because much of that substance, especially over the shin of the left leg, is gone. What remains is black, except for a strip of rich brown running down the middle. A sick little lurch accompanies the realization that the brown color is bone: *cooked* bone.

The other shin and both thighs have fared better, but not by much. There are chunks missing. The divots left behind are charred black, as if the flesh had been removed with a razor-edged ice-cream scoop dipped in tar.

Anything that isn't black or brown is red and melted.

I A-M F-U-C-K-E-D.

The fingerspelling hand I'm dumbly staring at is on autopilot. Two years ago, a Deaf guy walked up to me with a printed square of cardboard. He was trying to make ends meet by selling little doodads, and "any amount would be appreciated." Two bucks later I owned a little sewing

kit about half the size of a deck of cards. It was a piece of crap that fell apart after a few days, but tucked in the bottom was *another* little card with the American Sign Language alphabet printed on it. I don't talk to Deaf people, but I learned the alphabet and started spelling things to myself.

It's a good way to blow off steam in public without scaring people. Spelling out the insults takes enough concentration to distract from whatever's pissing me off. It's weird, but works better than counting to ten or taking a deep breath. I try to keep the finger wiggles out of sight, in case whoever's being the jerk understands them, but so far that's never been an issue. The card is still in my wallet.

*Um...is my mind kind of...wandering?*

With a shrill squeal of metal rings on metal rod, the curtain I don't remember pulling closed is suddenly ripped back. Doug stands wide-eyed and trembling on the other side. A look of horror, *very* out of place on a person better suited to serene smiles, spreads across his face as he takes in the damage. Our eyes meet, and I ask the question uppermost in my mind. "Do you think I need to go to the hospital?"

*"What!?"* Y-yeah man, like, ASAP. I've already called; the ambulance is on the way."

*Whoa, this must be serious: Doug took independent action!*

Don't get me wrong, my roommate's a great guy, but he's the exact opposite of a "canary in a coal mine." You know the birds they used to detect poisonous gas in mines back in the old days? Miners kept them in cages at the bottoms of shafts. Canaries are so little, and have such a high metabolism, that they would pass out before the men even started feeling lightheaded. If the bird went down, the miners knew it was time to vamoose. Sucked for the bird, though.

Well, if you kept my roommate in that cage, all the miners would be dead before Doug would think to say, "Dudes, do you smell something funny?"

*Dammit, I don't have insurance. How much does an ambulance ride cost? Hopefully they'll just give me some gauze bandages and send me home. When Doug's Gram had knee surgery they sent her home the next day, and she was eighty. I could get lucky, right? I've got to get lucky. People get naked in hospitals. If that happens I could wind up in someone's doctoral thesis.*

"Do you think I could...walk to the hospital? It's only, what, maybe eight blocks away..."

“In *January*? Are you nuts? Jesus Art, maybe you need to take another look at your legs. You really wanna try putting pants on over *that*?” He gestures vaguely at my legs without really looking at them.

*Come to think of it, my legs do hurt, kind of like bad sunburn, and when I move, they seem ...stiff.* Frustrated resignation colors my voice.

“Fine, but grab me a blanket. The landing will be freezing.”

Our three-story brownstone is divided up into four blocks of apartments. Each block of three “efficiencies” comes equipped with an extremely steep and narrow staircase, an arrangement which must violate some kind of building code. No elevators of course, and, you guessed it: top floor, Art.

We make our way past the minuscule second floor landing, Doug hovering like a gigantic mother hen, and our downstairs neighbor’s apartment door bursts open.

*Perfect.*

“Doug, is everything all—*Crocket!* What the *hell* was all that screaming and pounding? I’ve asked you over and over to keep it down. Just because you weigh more than a buffalo, it doesn’t give you the right to...”

“Whoa, Judy, cut the guy some slack. He’s just been on fire.” *My hero, Douglas Sinclair: Master of the subtle arts.*

Judy, eyes going wide, looks truly taken aback. *Hmm, maybe the straightforward approach is working for once? I’ve never had the chance to notice before, but when they’re not all squinty, Judy’s eyes are actually normal size.*

Any hopes that the Noise Nazi might be feeling basic human compassion are dashed with her next statement. “Fire? Crocket, you set my house on *fire*? Of all the irresponsible—do we need to get everyone out?” She’d turned to my roommate during the last part because, you know, it was only the adults talking.

Again, Doug comes to my rescue. “Chill, Judy, nothing caught fire except Art and a rug. Neither one is on fire now, but both of them are pretty trashed. We need to get him to the front door so he’s ready when the ambulance gets here.”

Folding her arms, Judy precedes us down the stairs in sour silence, a happy improvement over her normal sourness, which is extremely vocal. You know those miners I was talking about earlier? Judy would make a great canary.

J-U-D-Y I-S A-N A-H-O-L-E

Something occurs to me: “Hey! What’s this ‘we’ need to get him to the front door crap? I’m doing just fine on my own. No one’s carrying me!” *No one* doesn’t bother to answer.

It is hurting more, though, and my arms are starting to sting again. *Sting? When this whole thing started, wasn’t it the worst pain I’d ever felt? If it’s been downgraded to insect-bite-annoyance status, maybe I’m in a little more trouble than I thought.*

Step by increasingly painful step, we make our way down. A few stair risers above the first-floor landing brings to consciousness a noise that’s been ongoing: someone’s knocking on the front door. *The ambulance is here already? So much for getting one more chance at persuading Doug that I don’t need an expensive, non-insurance covered ride to the hospital.*

Looking up from the careful foot placement and out through a windowpane beside the front door brings the worst shock of the day. The face peering through the glass isn’t an ambulance driver’s, it’s Samantha Heath’s. *She can’t see me like this!* Before I can start turning around, it’s too late. Judy darts down the last few steps, deftly disengages the dead bolts, and lets her in.

D-I-E C-A-N-A-R-Y D-I-E

“Sam! It’s twelve degrees! Get in here before you freeze solid. Honestly, I don’t understand how you can walk around like that without getting pneumonia.”

“Thanks for letting me in, Judy, I just got home from the studio, haven’t had a chance to change yet. Some of Art Crocket’s mail got sent to my side again. Is he... Oh, hi Art—*Jesus what happened to you!*” Samantha takes a half step back through the doorway and freezes, shocked gaze riveted to my legs.

Normally I can’t look at her for more than a split second, but the emotional and physical overload keeps me numb enough to just drink in the sight. Even though a small part of my brain starts screaming *Don’t stare, idiot, she’ll think you’re a stalker!*

Samantha’s amazing, just...amazing.

She has this *energy*. You can feel it when she enters a room even with your back turned. It makes you want to be better, nobler, worthier. She's smiled at me a few times: it's like getting zapped with a lightning bolt made out of happiness. When those eyes and that smile are aimed at me, I feel special, almost valuable. Get me within ten feet and I lean toward her like a potted plant reaching for a window. Because I'm a complete idiot.

All of this would be terrifying enough, but there's more. She's nice, too, one of the most generous, cheerful, and authentic people I've ever met. Or, at least, that's my impression. I've only managed to say a total of seventeen words to her.

Seventeen.

I've counted.

The final amazing thing? She has never, not even the first time we met, looked at me with fear in her eyes. The only person who's met me since I turned fifteen who hasn't.

*It defies karmic justice for Judy to be right about anything, but she's right about the pneumonia comment. Samantha's wearing a windbreaker and snow-covered sneakers. Valuable people need to take better care of themselves for the good of the race as a whole.*

Concern swiftly replaces the shock on Samantha's face and she closes the distance between us. Her hand darts forward, then hesitates as she searches for a place that isn't burned. A moment later she's steering me by the right shoulder. *Samantha Heath is touching me!* Suddenly I'm seated on the third step up. Something fairly painful happened back there when my knees bent, but who cares, *because she's touching my shoulder and her eyes are only six inches away from mine!*

Those eyes, slightly tearful, lock on as she whispers: "Oh, Art, you poor thing! What happened to you?"

"Gablaha?" *Wow, she smells good. Wait, what did I just say?*

A crease of puzzlement appears on her forehead, directly between the electro-bolt-of-happiness zapping eyes currently pinning me to the stairs. "Wh-what? I didn't quite get that. How did this happen, Art?"

*Oh hell, no! You are blowing it. Another chance like this won't come along in a million years. Say something coherent for God's sake!*

Marshaling my concentration, maintaining eye contact, I manage one word: “Th-thirsty.”

*Yes! Word eighteen! Because “gablaha” doesn’t count. And we were actually looking at each other. That’s a first! And the word not only conveyed genuine need, because I really am thirsty all of a sudden, but also explains my incoherence and gives me an excuse not to say anything else! Perfect!*

Samantha turns her head toward Judy. A few strands of her hair brush my chin. *Could this day possibly get any better?*

“Judy, Art’s losing a lot of fluid from where...” She pauses to swallow, then continues, voice an octave higher and with just a hint of waver, “...from where the skin is gone. Can you get him a glass of water?”

There’s no response from Judy, and after a moment I swivel my eyes toward her, tearing them away from the strands of Samantha’s hair currently sending tingles through my jaw.

Glassy eyed, mouth formed into a crumpled O, Judy sways slightly on her feet, eyes locked on my legs. She must be getting her first good look, courtesy of the entryway light. She seems ready to either faint or throw up. Doug, sitting a few steps up from me, isn’t doing any better. His head is hanging between his knees, and he’s breathing in huge gulps. A string of saliva stretches all the way from his bottom lip to the stair riser he’s sitting on.

Samantha turns from Judy to look up the stairs over the top of my head. Briefly making eye contact again (yup, just as paralyzing the second time) she begins speaking. “Judy’s door is open. I’ll get you something to drink, and then I’ll be *right back*. Okay?” As soon as I nod, she bounds over me, then Doug, and vanishes up the ill-lit staircase.

Moments later she’s back, handing me a blender filled to the brim with tap water. I drink until it’s pulled from my hands, noticing only then that two-thirds of the contents have vanished.

She sits next to me, blender in hand. A wry smile surfaces momentarily before diving back under the ocean of concern. “Easy, superman, it doesn’t do you any good if you drink so much that you barf it back out. Now, tell me what happened?”

Miraculously, not only is my tongue suddenly working, it seems to be making sense: “I was cooking with, well, *trying* to cook with, hot oil. To make deep fried cheese curds. I used to love

them when I was a kid. Anyway, the oil caught fire, got all over me, and..." I gesture the length of my body, indicating the damage.

Samantha nods. "Well, maybe when you get better, we can cook some together." She reaches out to give my shoulder a sympathetic squeeze, and our eyes lock again.

For a timeless moment I float suspended in a sea of electrifying, glorious liquid light. The light from her eyes.

A crazy idea occurs to me. The kind I only normally get long after my "conversations" with her are over. *Do I dare? How can I not? The speech centers of my brain may never work in her presence again.*

Maintaining our gaze, taking a quick gulp of air, I go for it. "Samantha, this whole situation, it's made me realize something important. Something that involves both of us, and...and I need to tell you what it is."

A deadly serious, earnest look on my face, I lean in closer, then closer still, so close our foreheads almost touch, so close she quirks one eyebrow quizzically at me (although she doesn't pull away). Another quick breath and I say it.

"I am never going to cook again."

The blue and white lights of an approaching ambulance splash on the stairs above our heads as we dissolve into laughter at exactly the same moment.

Best. First. Date. *Ever.*

The EMTs are efficient but grim. Tight-lipped and in a hurry. They completely ignore me when I tell them not to bother with the stretcher, that I can climb in myself.

D-I-C-K-S

While being lifted into the ambulance, I hand off the blanket that's been draped around my shoulders to Samantha, asking her to give it back to Doug. He and Judy are huddled in the front doorway at the top of the stoop.

Samantha is the one who volunteered to walk my stretcher through the snow to the ambulance. It makes me feel fantastic. *Maybe I should set myself on fire more often?*

As the doors swing shut, I wonder about how Samantha knew, because she wouldn't have been able to see it under the blanket, that the only patch of unburned skin big enough to put her hand on was high up on my right shoulder. *Just lucky, I guess.*

The doors click shut, blocking the sight of her worried, wonderful face. An avalanche of pain slams down on top of me, and I spasm in shock. *What the Hell?*

The EMT sitting beside me doesn't immediately pick up on the full body flinch. I stare at the back of his head as he asks, "Hey, do you know where the sterile water is? I can't find it." This does nothing to convince me I'm in the hands of a highly trained professional.

"Uh, *no?*"

He turns at the sound of my voice, and there's a phone jammed awkwardly between his uplifted left shoulder and ear. It's one of those full size, wall mounted antiques, with an actual cord attaching it to the side of the ambulance. *Great, I'm in the hands of an indifferent caveman who doesn't know where the water is. Bring on the criminal neglect and leeches.*

His eyes meet mine, but not really. There's a slight glaze over them, the one people get from paying more attention to a voice in their ear than to the person in front of them.

"Hey, buddy, don't you worry. We're gonna take good care of you. What? No, not you, Sheryl, the guy."

“Who the hell are you talking with? Don’t you have a job to do?” Pain makes that come out a little fiercer than intended. I entertain dark fantasies of breaking both his arms and dragging him behind the ambulance. Realizing my brain is going places I don’t want it to, the impulse is shoved into a metal box inside my head and pushed away.

“Geez, *easy* pal, It’s not my girlfriend or nothing. See, we don’t get this kind of thing very often, so I’m on the phone with the hospital making sure I take care of you right.” His eyes, although still looking at me, become even more distant.

“You found it? Okay, right, that makes sense. Yeah, but where is it? Top left? Make sure it’s sealed, copy that. All of it? Oh...no, only two gallons. Can’t do both, then...yeah, that would be...the legs. Okay.”

Much to my relief, he hangs up the phone, turns to the front of the cab, and starts doing mysterious things with tubing, cloth, and an assortment of liquids.

Every time my heart beats, the resulting surge of blood sends a bolt of pain through my legs that seems to be getting steadily worse.

“Uh, do you have anything for pain?”

“Sorry, bud, we don’t have time right now. First priority is getting the risk of infection under control.”

He carefully places a thin blanket over my legs. He shouldn’t have bothered being gentle. It feels like a sheet of boiling water, and I make a strangled sound somewhere between a grunt and a scream.

“Okay, buddy, you’re doing fine.”

My mute glare does nothing to keep him from continuing: “Now, I’m going to put some water on the sterile cloth over your legs. It may feel a little cold.”

As he pours two gallons of water over the sheet, the boiling sensation vaporizes, replaced with superheated plasma freshly skimmed from the surface of the sun.

This time there is nothing strangled about my scream: “You LIAR! That is NOT *COLD!*”  
M-O-T-H-E-R F-U-C-K-E-R

The EMT flinches back. For some reason, although the ambulance hasn’t pulled out yet, we’re rocking back and forth on its shock absorbers. I pant for a moment.

“Now can I get something for pain?”

The phone mounted to the wall begins to ring. The rocking motion diminishes, then stops. The EMT’s eyes swivel to the phone, but he doesn’t move. His eyes turn back to me. I answer the unasked question through clenched teeth. “Go on, pick it up.”

Never taking his eyes off me, he answers. “Yeah? No, no, I think it’s okay, give me two minutes. No, I’m sure.” Replacing the phone in its cradle, he takes a deep breath. For the first time, he’s really looking at me, although he still seems distracted.

“Okay, here’s the thing. That was Rob, uh, our driver. He was asking if I was okay. I said I was. That’s right, isn’t it?” I nod curtly and he continues. “Good. He was asking if you needed to be put in...restraints, and you don’t, right? ’Cause that would take a lot of time we could be using to get you to the hospital?”

Again, I nod, this time with surprise and chagrin. Did he think I’d been about to start something with him? *Shit! I wanted to, didn’t I? I need to work harder to keep those impulses in check.* “No, no, I just screamed because of the pain. I’ll make sure it’s, uh, quieter next time.”

He nods, turns, and starts bustling around doing medical stuff. A tension I hadn’t noticed in his shoulders begins to ease as he turns back to face me again.

“Right, okay, two things: First, I’m going to put you on a saline drip, you’re losing a lot of fluids. That’s what I’m doing right now; okay, make a fist for me please. Second, I’m just going to come clean about the pain medication. I can’t give you any.”

My brows arch in surprise as he rushes on. “Yeah, something about burns and fluid loss make it a bad idea except under really controlled conditions. Okay, now you’ll feel, uh, the needle. See, this is the needle? Some people feel a pinch, some people feel a sting. I won’t try to tell you how it’s going to feel to you, but you need it. Right, it’s going in...now.” I hear him breathe a sigh of relief, and the last of the tension leaves him. “Okay, let me tape that off... good.”

The EMT exhales a short bark of a laugh. “Normally I’d just string you along, maybe let you assume that the saline drip had something in it for pain. Hopefully get a little placebo action going, but”—his eyes dart to my face and then away— “somehow I don’t think that would work on you; that it might piss you off.”

And suddenly the man becomes truly present for the first time. It's almost the reverse of the distance his eyes held as he looked at me but listened to Sheryl. Like maybe he just got finished with a phone call inside his head. One he hadn't even known he was on. One he wouldn't have liked much if he *had* known he was on it.

"That's everything I know to do, brother. No more fiddling, unless someone at the hospital tells me otherwise, or you stroke out or something. We good?"

The air between us seems to chime for a second, and the cramped, equipment filled ambulance interior feels... Brighter? Warmer? Maybe a mix of both, or maybe something else altogether, but whatever it is, it's good. I reply to his question with more friendliness than I'd expected. "Naw, we're not good, man, we're great. Hey, what's your name?"

It turns out my EMT's name is Phil, and he's a pretty nice guy. The pain is still there, but at least for a few minutes, it seems to matter less.

\*

*There is light of a sort in this room, from two sources, but it has forgotten its purpose. The only thing it makes visible now is its own existence. The first source presses in from the window. The snow-choked air outside would normally have rendered the rectangle a sucking black hole. But the light from the street lamps and foolhardy motorists below isn't truly being extinguished by the snow. It's mixing with it, weakening it to the point that in any normal room the uneasy eye might sense something beyond the glass, but perceive only darkness. Light this faint doesn't dispel dark, it serves it by transforming what should be a harmless absence into a thing. It's the true reason we cover our windows when the sun goes down: to keep it out.*

*The weakest nightlight or even a digital clock display would be enough to blind the eye to its presence. But this room doesn't contain anything as bright as that. Even the LEDs of the computer sitting on the table opposite the window are covered, meticulously, with electricians' tape.*

*The simple, functional table and matching chair are the only furnishings. The computer is the only other item. Its various cords and cables, even as tightly and efficiently secured as they are, seem almost shockingly organic against the backdrop of straight lines and empty space. The efficient keystrokes of the seated typist and the scour of snow against glass are the only sounds.*

*The second pool of light is even fainter than the first, and comes from the computer's screen. Most people never bother to learn what a brilliance setting of zero does to a monitor: instead of a true absence of light, the result is a featureless glow that's difficult to describe as anything other than "black." Normally, it isn't detectable.*

*The two faint semicircles of "light" touch, without overlapping, directly above the typist. The blackly glowing monitor remains featureless, but the forming words burn clearly in the typist's mind.*

*"Sometimes too little of a thing is worse than not having the thing at all. Slow asphyxiation from insufficient oxygen stresses organisms far more than removing the oxygen completely, and the end result is the same.*

*"Rudimentary functionality has been restored, but the collection and delivery system cannot scale. The current gains have activated heretofore-dormant imperatives. The system cannot simply maintain its current state: the mechanisms controlling maintenance result in growth. Or, more accurately, maintenance and growth are the same process, with maintenance being the 'growth' of replacements for decayed system structures. Disable growth, and current energy generation suffices for functionality, but entropy drives the system to collapse. This is not acceptable; therefore, a more active, targeted collection system will replace the current one. The passive, sessile organism must become a motile gatherer of resources. To that end, the recent improvements in viable subdivision techniques may make it possible to exploit the strong co-affinity among sub-units to gather the required resources. The primary hurdles will be coordination and control. Thankfully, as with the nature of the problem to overcome, these are two sides of the same coin: progress on one will lead directly to progress in the other. The first trial will involve distributed programming. Each sub-unit will receive a unique section of code. The group as a whole will embody the program. The hope is that this will help maintain cohesion without placing undue stress on any given node. The resultant interdependency should..."*

*The words continue burning within a dimness slowly starving the eyes of sight.*

\*

It takes us fifteen minutes to drive the eight blocks to the hospital. My home state's biggest "city" doesn't have enough snow-moving equipment to keep ahead of what, for the area, is a

modest-sized snowstorm. Of course, it doesn't help that I had my little accident just before rush hour.

Plus, some of the roads are paved-over cow paths that tend to wander a bit. Instead of taking you straight to where you need to go *to get some pain medication*.

Phil does what he can for me, turning the temperature control up as high as it will go. That water he dumped over my legs, even though it feels hot, is actually pretty cold. It had been sitting in a compartment sharing a wall with the outside of the van. During the kinds of winters we get around here, we're lucky it wasn't frozen solid. Adding to the chill, cool saline solution trickles into my veins from a bag suspended on a crossbar above my head.

The burns still feel like fiery hell, but at some level my body knows it's *cold*. I'm going to give you a tip. Listen carefully: Do not have a vigorous shivering fit when large patches of your skin are missing. It stings. One good thing though: I was worried someone would force me into nakedness in the ambulance. That would have been horrible.

The jolt of stretcher hitting slush-covered pavement forces a harsh gasp from me, and I'm outside the emergency entrance of the hospital, a place I have always tried to avoid. Several jolting gasps later, we arrive in a curtained-off section of the waiting area. Someone, a woman, I think, is shrieking on and on about how much it hurts, and how the pain is going to kill her, and how long she's had to wait, and how hungry she is, and how she's going to die *right now*, Goddammit, if she doesn't get a hamburger. I try to tune it out.

Phil makes sure the IV drip bag is positioned correctly and takes a few seconds to check the tape over the needle going into my arm. Unclipping an electronic gizmo from his belt that looks like a cross between a miniature scrape-a-shape screen and a gigantic cell phone, he rolls his eyes at me. "Art, I'm telling you, the paperwork never ends. Hey, listen, on the way in I asked around about getting you some pain meds. Like I thought, the doctor needs to see you first." He pauses for a moment before continuing. "I've got to go and restock the ambulance. You hang in there, okay?"

I give him a thumbs-up that's a bit wobbly. He shifts from one foot to the other, but doesn't leave. After a moment of indecision, he leans in and whispers: "Look, I really am sorry. I pestered the doctor about as much as I could without getting in trouble. She started asking if you were a friend of mine; at that point I had to drop it." His eyes go squinty as he clears his throat. "You...you pull through now, hear me?" I nod, but it's to the back of his head as he ducks out through the curtain.

As Phil leaves, another man, older and with a thin cap of close-cropped grizzled hair, enters: same outfit, same equipment. Like the hair, everything about this second EMT is old, gray, and faded. He approaches the head of the bed, leans in close, and starts whispering to me while pecking away at his own scrape-a-shape screen. It's an older and much bulkier version than Phil's. He never looks at me, not once, but I can see his eyes darting around the little screen. He has the thickest local accent I've heard in a long time. Usually you need to go a little farther north to get something this authentic.

“Listen, chummy, I know how thins’ is ’round here.” (The word “here” is two syllables and r-less: “hee-ah”). “Phil’s a good boy, heard him talk up Doc ’n nurse ’bout ya legs, but,” he motions to the sodden sheet covering the lower half of my body, “see’ns believ’n. With them’s cova’d, be twenty-thirty minutes for Doc gets ta you. Tisn’t *immediate* fa them, see?”

I nod my head, although the pain makes thinking so hard I’m not really sure about anything, and he continues.

“Nurse’ll come in ’bout minute from now, move ya sheet ’nuff ta see one foot.” He moves a little closer for emphasis. “Ain’t *e-nuff*, not by a long shot. Don’t think screamin’ll help neethah. You hear that lady bitch ’n moan two stalls down?”

This time I nod my understanding in the general direction of the hysterical sobbing that’s been going on nonstop since my stretcher was first wheeled into the building.

“All she got’s a frig’n piece a glass in ’er thumb. Folk go numb ta bawl’n pretty quick here, and you got Dotty, that’s ya nurse. She’s a lifah. Fine gal, but’s plenty a time ta go numb aftah twenty-three year ’n count’n.

“Now, there’s a little risk a’ infection, but what I’d do in ya shoes is show ’er the whole thing. Hurt like hell, but Dotty’s oldest, he got a leg near chewed off by a Tecumspa chain *wicked* bad ’bout three years back. She start see’n you like a son, Doc don’t stand a chance.

“Up ta you, ’a course, but’s what I’d do.” With a merry little grin and a wink at the scrape-a-shape’s screen, he exits through the curtain, whistling, just as someone on the other side opens it up.

*Who was that, a scam artist version of Santa Claus? He can’t hand out advice like that very often. They’d fire his ass. I’ll bet he broke five hospital regulations during the span of about sixty seconds. Probably starting off with, “Don’t give the patient useful advice.”*

I don’t get much of a chance to mull over the old EMT’s words. As he leaves, a woman enters who bustles with graceful, curt efficiency, spine ruler-straight. Her nametag reads Dorothy. She radiates a kind of earthen strength: nurturing but indifferent. It’s how I imagine soil might care about the plants growing on its surface.

After checking my pressure, drawing a blood sample, asking some questions (no ma’am, no insurance) and putting a weird clothespin thingy on my index finger, Dotty moves to the end of

the bed. She flicks the sheet over my left foot, off-on, with a practiced flourish, looking at what's underneath for about a nanosecond. Even that slight movement is agony. She turns to leave.

"Dotty!" I note with surprise that I'm following the old EMT's advice, ripping the wet sheet away from my legs. Then I'm too busy dealing with pain to notice anything else, except...that everything goes...white?

I don't faint, my eyes don't roll into the back of my head, but for a split second I can't see anything. Maybe my overwhelmed brain is co-opting the bits normally assigned to other senses so it can process all the pain? *Gee, brain, you shouldn't have. Thanks so much! I couldn't have handled it if you'd, for instance, ignored some of that pain in favor of the color green.*

Whatever the reason, it doesn't last long. As the world takes on form and color, Dotty is still turning toward me. She stomps over to my side, glaring. *Uh oh. Maybe not very many people call her Dotty?*

More than a little alarmed by that look, I point, gasping, "Is it supposed to look like that?" Her glower travels along the line indicated by my clothespin-tipped index finger. She sees my legs.

Anger drains away, posture sags. "Oh, you poor, poor boy." With a little shake, her back straightens again. She jabs a finger in my direction. "Don't move. I'll be right back."

While she's gone I stare at the ceiling, pulse pounding in my ears, frozen by agony. Searching for distractions makes me look back at what just happened. *I've never experienced anything like that flash of whiteness. What was it, hysterical blindness?* Examining the memory, I feel like my initial impression of total, blank whiteness may have been slightly off. *There was something else, just a hint of...another color? Behind where Dotty had been standing? Maybe I can recreate the scene if there's no visual distraction.* I close my eyes.

And my arm swings up to protect my face, eyes popping open as a full-body flinch sends red hot wires burrowing through the meat of me. *It had looked so real!*

Lurking in the dark had been an image of the oily wave of flame, just as clear as when it had swallowed me up. Like I was reliving it. *What's happening to me?* The approach of urgent voices is a welcome distraction.

“No, you need to see this now! For heaven’s sake, that woman’s thumb can wait five seconds, Marybeth.” The voices rapidly draw nearer.

“Dorothy, please don’t call me Marybeth at work, it’s not professional. It’s fine when you’re visiting Mother, and yes, I know you’ve known me my whole life, how could I forget, as often as you remind me, but— Oh. Yes, yes I see.”

I can tell the curtain has been drawn back, that the “oh” signifies yet another person seeing my burns for the first time. Not because I see her, or hear curtain rings scraping along a metal rod, but because the slight draft created by the parting curtain burns like acid when it hits my legs.

O-U-C-H

Dotty stands with a doctor, just inside the curtain. For a second they remain frozen, posture and body language as they must have been when the curtain opened. Any other time it would have been funny. The much taller doctor’s head is pulled down almost level with Dotty’s. Her body slants toward the nurse, but her face strains in the opposite direction, as if trying to escape an irresistible pull. Dotty’s not touching her; in fact the iron-spined nurse’s hands are folded primly in front of her stomach. But in every other respect it looks like Dotty is dragging the doctor along by the ear.

Giving a little wave, I whisper, “Hi, Aunt D, hi, Doc, welcome to the barbecue. Um, got any novocaine sauce?”

Things *seem* to move pretty quickly after that, but nothing really happens except a lot of bustling around. There are never fewer than two people inside the curtain ring now, doing something medical but unhelpful.

In short order: my sheet has been replaced and freshly soaked; I’m hooked up to a heart monitor; a pillow is placed under my knees; a plastic bracelet is strapped to my wrist; a blanket is placed over my soaking sheet to keep me warm; the blanket is removed to stop the agonized screaming caused by its pressure; and the original needle in my arm is swapped out for something called a “stent.” (Yes, sir, I’m sure Phil did a fine job, but this one’s permanent. No sir, not forever. No sir, I don’t know how long.)

It's like a pit stop during the Indianapolis 500 that never ends. The hospital staff is the pit crew, and I'm the car. At one point there is a *literal line of people* waiting to take blood samples. I ask one guy for a receipt. He ignores me. It's great practice for caging and disposing of homicidal urges so no one gets hurt.

But nothing ever *actually* happens. People keep mentioning something about the "tank room" but they won't tell me what it is. I manage to glean a few facts anyway. First of all, it's my eventual destination, which I know because of being told I can't have pain medication until after the first treatment "in the tank room." It would "dull my sensitivity."

I explain as patiently as I can that dulling my sensitivity actually sounds like a pretty awesome idea, and ask them to help me understand why it isn't. They ignore me. I start to think that maybe they don't know themselves. I tell them so. They ignore me again, more nervously this time. I cage and dispose of more homicidal thoughts.

*Oh boy, here's another one out for blood.* A rail-thin, skittish looking guy with enormous horn-rimmed glasses is about to draw his personal pint. *Now I know how a beer keg feels.*

"Hey, can I have that back when you're done with it?"

He jumps like he's been stung, looks at me nervously while adjusting the glasses that cover a full third of his face, and scuttles away with the latest offering for his Dark God.

Other fun facts about the mysterious tank room: This is the first time they've had a chance to use it; there's still dust from the construction process "all over the place" inside of it, and; they wonder if this will increase the risk of infection.

*This is fantastic. Apparently, I'm the guinea pig for a new procedure. No one knows what the hell they're doing. Hooray. I hope I don't have to get naked.*

At one point, we actually begin moving toward the tank room, my stretcher surrounded by its own orbital array of medical staff. As we get to the door, a harassed-looking little potbellied man jumps out in front of us, waving his hands. He has a monkey wrench in one and a cell phone in the other. A few lonely strands of black hair are plastered to an otherwise bald scalp beaded with sweat. This is when I learn my last fun fact about the tank room.

"We're not ready to begin. The theatre isn't operational. They forgot to hook up the hot water. The plumber is on the way, but the storm's slowing her down. She's talking me through

the simple work so it goes faster once she gets here.” I blink rapidly. The voice is deep, hearty, and booming. With closed eyes, you would swear it was somebody seven feet tall.

There are some truly fine people in the world, quiet heroes that never get medals or applause. There are two in that hallway. The first is a tall, pale nurse. Given her height, it’s a bit weird I didn’t notice her before she’s leaning over me to whisper, “That’s Doctor Swanson, he’s the one who will do your procedure. If anyone can explain why you can’t have something for the pain, it’s him. I’m just *sick* that you’ve had to wait all this time.”

That second hero? You guessed it: Doc Swanson. His first act of heroism involves that monkey wrench and what it symbolizes. Not many doctors would roll up their sleeves, stepping out of character just to shorten a patient’s suffering. Other doctors wouldn’t think about it in those *terms*, and sure, maybe I’m being a little unfair, but they wouldn’t *do* it, either.

Doc Swanson’s second heroic act is the way he responds to my question. *He’s honest*. Hard to understand with the lingo flinging, maybe, but honest.

“Hey, Doc? I’m dying here. Why can’t I have pain medication before you do whatever it is you do? What’s this ‘don’t reduce my sensitivity’ cra— uh, stuff?”

Eager to get back to whatever we’ve interrupted, Swanson stays beside the door, but nods that he’s heard me, maintains eye contact, and explains. “As you heal, we don’t want eschar to build. It will be removed via debridement to promote healthy tissue regeneration and preserve tactile sensitivity. Instead of being buried under keloids, your nerve endings will terminate just under the surface as they should. Other benefits include improved preservation of muscle mass and flexibility.” He pauses as if listening to an internal voice, a wry smile briefly touching his lips before continuing. “Ah, that is, without this procedure you’d barely be able to bend at the knee and ankle, or feel the surface of your legs.

“As for your question about sensitivity, you need it to guide my work. The procedure won’t succeed unless nonviable mass is removed without mistakenly removing healthy tissue as well. The only person able to feel the difference is you, and you can’t do it with a repressed pain response.” Upon seeing the understanding in my eyes, he turns away, hesitates, then turns back around to frown at the medical staff surrounding me.

“The ‘no pain medication’ order was given when I thought we’d be operating twenty minutes after I arrived. This man’s been here for over three hours. You knew where I was. Didn’t you think to consult with another doctor or get back to me?”

No one says anything for a moment. Finally, not meeting his eye, the woman I’ve come to think of as the Nurse Boss, a very capable, confident looking person, speaks up. “But you were so *adamant* about him not getting anything other than saline solution! We—”

Swanson cuts her off. “Start him on a half dose for now. I know what was said, but we haven’t any idea how long it will take to get things working. Once it is, I’ll need to prep, which takes even more time. He’s been patient long enough. We’ll just need to wait for the medication to wear off at that point.” He nods to me a final time with a hooded emotion, regret, maybe, in his eyes, then reenters the room and closes the door.

*Was that pity I just saw? My stomach sinks even lower. Shit, how bad is this going to get?*

The medical entourage reverses course. From the grumbling going on, it appears that doctors need to stop giving conflicting orders and assuming nurses can read minds. The tall woman who had informed me of my rights is not a contributor.

We arrive back at the little curtained alcove. Nurse Boss brusquely hands a clear liquid-filled bag to a trainee before leaving. Watching over the student, the tall nurse, the one who had been so helpful, nods solemnly once morphine starts dripping into the line attached to my arm.

After the student leaves, the other woman smiles down at me, whispering, “There now. We use this far too often on people who don’t really need it, but it has its place. Pain is the body’s way of telling us to slow down, rest, and heal. But it doesn’t stop shouting the message once it’s been received, and sometimes keeps us from getting any rest at all. When that happens, the pain needs to be hushed.”

She smiles again, somehow looking solemn and joyful at the same time. “There, you should start feeling that in a minute or two. They’ve given you far too much, but you’re different, and shouldn’t suffer any harm. Take care of yourself. Get better fast...but come again...if needed. *It’s so good to have someone to help.*”

I don’t notice when she leaves.

The relief, when it comes, steals my breath. One moment, agony pulses in time to my heartbeat with crimson ferocity. Then, in the space *between* heartbeats, it...drains away. I wriggle my body, just a little.

*Wow! Relaxing in the absence of something that's become so constant makes you realize how stiffly you've been holding yourself!*

One heartbeat without pain...two...three, and then it begins trickling back. Keeping it from crushing my spirit is difficult. *I guess that's all the rest I've earned, then? It sure can't be as much as I need.* The pain doesn't return quite as quickly as it went, but before long it feels as bad as ever. There may be a slight lessening, but if so, I can't tell the difference.

Then a new nurse enters the curtained alcove, and bubbling testosterone erases my awareness of pain.

Sensuality pours from her the way lava radiates light and heat. Then she takes this already potent baseline and multiplies it to the point of devastation. The slow walk, the wicked smirk, the eyes informing me I am the *only* thing she's focused on, all combine, and a galvanizing bolt of lust travels the entire length of my body.

It's so overwhelming, she's almost touching me before I realize something else: she's *tiny*. My home state isn't known for its Amazonian woman, but even for a place where five feet and no inches isn't all that rare, the woman is unusual: four foot eight, maybe four foot nine at the most.

Thinking about women in purely sexual terms is something I've spent a lot of effort trying to put behind me. Not allowing myself to do it, especially in the privacy of my own skull, is a point of pride. I want to be worthy of *love* someday, and don't want hollow objectification getting in the way. Besides, it's disrespectful and an incredible waste to discount the essential worth of half the people on the planet. I'm pretty sure you can't do that without on some level losing the ability to respect the other half of the human race right along with them. It also tends to send my heart into arrhythmia, and I forget to breathe.

But as she bends over my arm with an empty sample vial? Her body posture should be turning me into a spontaneous combustion victim. That's what would normally happen. Instead, I'm *humming* of all things, basking in her intensity like I'm fireproof.

W-O-W

She hears the humming. Suddenly, those intense eyes go absolutely flat, even though nothing else about her changes. Her hands never falter in their work with the vial. Her lips remain slightly parted in the hint of a smile. That tongue continues to rest lightly behind the seam separating her upper and lower teeth, but something vital is gone. The vial fills with my blood while we stare at each other.

*I've seen eyes do that before. Street rats walling off their emotions get that look, so only their bodies will get hurt. Why would she look at me that way? What could I do right now that would hurt her that badly? Her body language hasn't changed, either, that's just weird. Like she's inviting me to hurt her so she can get something over with.*

Under normal circumstances, the blatant sensuality and ambiguous signals would have sent me running for the hills, but I'm trapped. I resolve right then not to live down to her expectations, if I can figure out what they are.

*Um, why is my mouth stretching in a slow smile?*

"You have anything to trade for that blood?"

*Holy crap, what just came out of my mouth! Did I already blow it? I just blew it, didn't I? Yeah, it's blown.*

She doesn't reply at first to the blood comment. I wince internally at my bottomless stupidity, waiting for some kind of explosion, but her eyes blink rapidly for a moment, and that's it. Then she smirks a little more wickedly, and very slowly straightens upright. While she does, I'm not *sure*, but I think her eyes strobe rapidly between that flatness and something less guarded.

Using that same exaggerated slowness, Nurse Enigma turns, and stands right next to the bed, facing away from me without moving for what must be a full ten seconds. Once those seconds are up, she begins walking toward the curtain.

After taking four steps, the tiny woman stops, and finally replies to my question, although without looking back. Her voice is so high pitched it should be comical, but somehow isn't. The tone is calm, but the cadence is broken, something somewhere between thoughtful and baffled.

"I'll...see what I can...think...up." A swish of the curtain, and she's gone.