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"Veteran screenwriter and novelist Gould writes with infectious crackle and humor. Colorful back stories peppered throughout add tension."

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Heywood Gould Novels:

ONE DEAD DEBUTANTE (1975)
FORT APACHE, THE BRONX (1981)
GLITTERBURN (1981)
COCKTAIL (1984)
DOUBLE BANG (1988)
LEADING LADY (2008)
THE SERIAL KILLER'S DAUGHTER (2011)

Heywood Gould Screenplays:

ROLLING THUNDER (1977 movie starring William Devane and Tommy Lee Jones)

THE BOYS FROM BRAZIL (1978 movie starring Gregory Peck and Laurence Olivier)

FORT APACHE, THE BRONX (1981 movie starring Paul Newman, Edward Asner, Ken Wahl, and Danny Aiello)

STREETS OF GOLD (1986 movie starring Klaus Maria Brandauer, Wesley Snipes, and Adrian Pasdar)

COCKTAIL (1988 movie starring Tom Cruise, Bryan Brown, and Elisabeth Shue)

ONE GOOD COP (1991 movie starring Michael Keaton and Rene Russo; directed by Heywood Gould)

TRIAL BY JURY (1994 movie starring Armand Assante, Gabriel Byrne, and William Hurt; directed by Heywood Gould)

MISTRIAL (1996 movie starring Bill Pullman and Robert Loggia; directed by Heywood Gould)

DOUBLE BANG (2001 movie starring William Baldwin and Adam Baldwin; directed by Heywood Gould)

The Serial Killer's Daughter



The Serial Killer's Daughter

a novel

Heywood Gould



This is a work of fiction. The events described are imaginary. The characters and settings are fictitious. Any references to real persons or places are included only to lend authenticity to the story.

THE SERIAL KILLER'S DAUGHTER

FIRST EDITION

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I Didn't Ask For This

I'm sitting cross-legged on the shag carpet of a Motel 6 (I can't say where) pecking away in the glow of my laptop. The shades are drawn. The pencil-flash between my teeth is shining on the keys.

A minute ago I was coming back with a pizza and thought I saw one of them. It could have just been a random guy, but he was lurking between the cars and it looked like he was watching my unit.

I parked behind him. He felt my eyes and turned. Staring straight ahead, I took the gun out of the laundry bag and put it on the seat. He stood there for a second, like he was trying to decide what to do. Then, he about-faced and walked around behind the units. A minute later, a white Focus peeled out onto the freeway. I couldn't see who was driving.

So, I came in here and started writing.

It's like I'm putting a message in a bottle. If something happens they'll find the whole story on my hard drive. It's also on my USB stick, which I'll keep on a chain around my neck.

Have to hurry. The dying sun is seeping under the shades. Shadows cross-hatch the floor. Have to get it all down before the room goes black . .

Мe

I was good, but I had never been lucky. My buzzer- beater would roll off the rim. My walk-off line drive would scream over the third-base bag, but the left fielder would always make a diving catch and become the hero instead of me.

The other benchwarmers went geeky or Gothic, or just got tragic on drugs. I kept trying. I wanted to be the All- American boy. Star on the field, brain in the classroom. The dude in the flashy tux escorting the Prom Queen.

There were 1,100 in the senior class of 2003 at John C. Fremont High. Graduation day we lined up in the heat on the football field, all capped and gowned and giggly from bong hits behind the gym.

My name is Peter Vogel (in the class photo I'm the oblivion sandwich in the last row.) The kid in front of me was Felipe Velez, the star striker of the soccer team. He got a roar from his teammates and "whoo-whoos" from the hooch- ies who thought he was hot. I walked out to a pathetic smattering from my mom, my faculty advisor, and the few good souls who applauded every grad. On my heels came Jenny Voorspan, the editor of the newspaper, volunteer in the Feeding the Homeless project, scholarship to Princeton. She got a standing ovation. The kiss-ass teachers on the dais stood and cheered.

I spent the summer working at Blockbuster, getting blast- ed and watching the worst movies I could find. The Tuesday after Labor Day I started at a big UC (can't say which one). I had no plans. My ambition was to stay drunk and have meaningless sex. Girls walked by me like I was invisible.

Tutoring My Fetish

A university campus is a universe of parallel gal- axies—jock world, frat world, geeks and politi- cos. English majors whirl in aimless nebulae, disdained yet left in peace. We have a pleasant life pretend- ing to write, learning to drink and trying to hook up, which is tough when you have no money and can only talk about dead authors and old movies.

Senior year, a girl appeared in my American Lit class. She was almost as tall as me. Pale and skinny with big breasts that stirred at her slightest movement.

I tried to be cool and unimpressed around women, but couldn't stop sneaking sidelong looks at her. She had long legs that led to a tight, perfect ass. I'd seen that body type a thousand times in porno flicks and knew exactly what she looked like naked. She daydreamed in lectures, eyes half closed, mouth half open. There were coffee stains on her blouse and wisps of black hair curling out of the stubble in her armpits. At night I was tormented by a vision of her eyes widening and her mouth flopping open in astonishment as I stood over her, naked and masterful. My body would throb and it would feel as if my brains were going to burst out of my head. Next morning I would pass her in class like noth- ing had happened and shoot her a casual "hi." I got a dismissive smile in return.

And then one day she chased me down in the quad-rangle.

"Is William Dean Howells the most pointless shit in the world?"

I had read that if you masturbated thinking of the same girl every night she would feel your energy and be drawn to you. Had that happened? Her eyes were dark, almost and impossible to read.

"All writers with three names are boring," I said. "Wait until you get to Ralph Waldo Emerson."

She squinted like she didn't get the joke. "I'm an Economics major and I've been putting off taking these Lit classes, but now I need them to graduate."

"Don't worry, this is English. You don't have to know anything. Just show up and hand in a paper."

She jumped in front of me, walking backwards. "I have to get at least a B to keep my three-point-five so I can get into a decent law school. I've been watching you in class. Professor Katz always perks up when you start to talk."

"I'm an English major. I know the code."

"You get A's on all your papers. Even an A-plus." She laughed and answered the question I was about to ask. "My roommate is seeing Katz's teaching assistant. He says you're the smartest guy in the class."

"I want people to love me for my body, not my mind."

"Your body is workable." When she leaned forward I could see the imprint of her nipple on her sleeveless blouse.

"I need someone to write my papers for me," she said. "Will you do it?"

"People are getting three- or four-hundred bucks to ghost papers," I said.

"I can't pay you, I'm broke," she said. "I'll let you fuck me. That's the best I can do."

I was shocked at how casually she said it. "Let me get this straight," I said with a knowing smile that implied I fielded propositions like this all the time. "You'll let me..." I wanted to say *fuck* with the same nonchalance, but couldn't get it out "... *sleep* with you if I help you write a paper."

"Only if I get an A."

It had to be a prank. My stupid friends had put her up to it. I was supposed to start slobbering and agree to every- thing and then they'd jump out of the bushes, yelling "punk'd!"

I played along. "How do I know I can trust you? Say I write the paper and you show up with your boyfriend, who's the captain of the Lacrosse team, and say the deal is off?"

"I can see why you're an English major. Don't worry I'm not creative enough to come up with an idea like that."

"If this were a porn movie, I'd be following you into the bedroom right now," I said.

She grabbed my hand. "Life can be a porn movie some-times."

She took me to an apartment a few blocks off campus. A Subaru sat in the driveway. "My roommate is home," she said.

She led me into the garage, to a vintage Ford pickup draped with a tarp. I kept waiting for my friends to jump out at me. She lifted the tarp and we both crawled under. She pushed me back down onto the cold cement floor and unbuttoned her blouse.

I was afraid to look down or touch her, because I wanted this to last. But it didn't, and a minute later she was checking herself out in the smudgy mirror over the worktable.

"You'll have to give me a few smart things to say in class," she said. "Participation is part of the grade."

"The way you participate, it won't be a problem," I said.

She offered her hand. Her grasp was warm. She grazed the inside of my wrist with a long nail and I felt a chill to the top of my head.

"Hi, Peter," she said. "I'm Hannah."

Lovelust

Professor Katz had announced on the first day that plagiarism, copying, or ghostwriting, "are capital crimes punishable by an instant F and possible expulsion from the University." He put me to work, checking all papers for what he called "sudden outbursts of eloquence," or "suspiciously sound insights." I was his favorite, but had no qualms about betraying him.

I worked out a simple method. Hannah would write the paper and I'd smarten it up just enough to show that she'd been listening. Then I'd add some uninformed yet sincere reaction to the stories to show that she cared.

In class I passed her notes with questions for Katz. He liked it when the pretty girls played up to him.

The first assignment was an essay comparing "Daisy Miller" and "Rappaccini's Daughter," two stories about romantic young women.

"That Hawthorne is a sick bastard," Hannah said. "To write about a girl who dies in her father's garden of beauti- ful poisoned flowers. It's so unfair."

"It's an allegory," I said.

"Beatrice didn't deserve to die," she said with surprising vehemence. "I hate it when writers kill women for no reason."

"So you think the male use of the female as a symbol objectifies her and deprives her of her humanity."

She blinked. "Is that what I just said?"

"Yeah. Also that Rappacini's Daughter isn't believable and Hawthorne is just using her to express his ideas about the danger of scientific rationality. But also Beatrice is the name of Dante's heroine, so what's up with that? Then you'll say that it looked like Henry James was following Daisy Miller around, taking down everything she did and said, but he didn't seem to care about her, just wanted to show how naïve Americans were. Also, you'll say Daisy is named after a flower that dies in the winter and Beatrice dies in a garden, so both authors kill off young, beautiful women."

"Wow, I'm smarter than I thought," Hannah said.

The next week Katz e-mailed the grades. I couldn't catch her eye during class, so I slipped her a note. "What did you get?" She scribbled over it, crumpled it and threw it back. "A, I'll call you later." Then ran out a few minutes before class ended.

That night I waited for hours. My suitemates laughed at me. "She was playin' you, dude." At midnight she called my cell. "My roommate had a fight with her boyfriend, so she's staying in."

"You could come over here," I said.

"You told your roommates about me, didn't you?" she said. "Don't lie. Guys only have sex so they can brag about it to their friends."

"So that means there's no deal?"

"I didn't say that. We'll do it tomorrow."

I went out. Bars closed at one, so I had to make up for lost time. Six or maybe seven tequila shooters later, she called again.

"They made up and she's going to his house. Come over now."

I stumbled the few blocks to her house, but once I got out of the fresh air I puked the tequila and the nachos all over her bedroom.

I crawled into the bathroom to finish the job. When I came out, she had spread paper towels over the floor.

"I better go home," I said.

"It's okay, you can stay."

"But if I just sleep here that won't count as payment?" "It won't count, don't worry," she said. She sat me down on her bed and pulled my pants off. Holding my shirt at arm's length, she took it into the bathroom. I closed my eyes and got the spins so bad I had to open them and sit up. She came back and slid into bed. She was wearing a XXX basketball T-shirt with nothing underneath.

"Shouldn't get that drunk. People will take advantage of you."

She woke me early.

"You smell like throw-up. Take a shower." When I came out of the bathroom, she was bending over, making the bed.

"I think I'm ready now," I said.

She turned and looked at me. "Yes, I can see that." And sighed. "I have a class at eight-thirty."

It was fast and frenzied, like trying to stay on the bucking bronco at a country music club. When it was over, I strug-gled against the question you weren't supposed to ask, and lost.

"Did you get off?"

"Not really. I'm undersexed."

"Well, maybe, if we went a little slower."

She patted me on the cheek. "Isn't the girl supposed to say that? Don't worry, you're a wonderful lover." She jumped out of bed. "And just to prove it I'll throw in a cup of coffee for extra credit."

I was dizzy from the tequila and the sudden, unsatisfactory exertion. I put my boxers on and felt my way into the living room. Hannah's roommate came in. "Ooh, free show."

She was a trim, tan little blonde with a brash laugh. I had seen her in the bars partying with the jocks. Hannah shot her a secret giggle look, which I pretended not to see. I went into the bedroom to get dressed and heard the roommate say: "He's cute."

"Get your own nerd," Hannah said. And there were more smothered giggles.

Katz wanted a paper on every story we read, so I was at Hannah's house every night. She always had food for me, take out, or even something she had cooked. After every 'A' paper, she paid promptly and mechanically.

I tried everything. She wouldn't smoke weed, and wine made her drowsy. She didn't respond to massages. Even oral foreplay was a non-starter.

She seemed preoccupied. I decided she was thinking about an ex-boyfriend, although she never talked about him and girls usually told you the whole, boring story.

Maybe she had a lover. A hunky jock who came in and rocked her world after I had slunk away with my laptop.

I thought about her constantly. All I had to do was close my eyes and I would see her naked, crouched over me, her black, bottomless eyes boring into me. It was so intense I could even

smell her.

One night I saw a guy duck behind a tree. Was this the boyfriend waiting for me to leave? I crossed the street.

"You a friend of Hannah's?"

He was a gawky guy with hair falling over his face. He raised his hands to ward me off. His voice broke. "I don't know any Hannah."

"Then what are you doing in front of her house?"

"I don't know whose house this is." He took a lurching step toward me. "And anyway, I don't have to tell you what I'm doing here."

He was creepy, like an overwrought teenager who spent too much time in sicko chat rooms and posted cryptic hints of violence on his Facebook status. He was scrawny, too, but scary. I stepped back with a patronizing smile. "Sleep out here. I don't care."

"Go fuck yourself!" he snarled as I walked away. I gave him the finger without turning and speeded up, hoping he wouldn't come after me.

The next night after we finished working, I asked Hannah out for a drink.

"I hate bars," she said.

"Coffee then?"

"Don't drink coffee at night."

"What's the matter, don't you want to be seen in public with your nerd English tutor?"

"How'd you guess?"

"Or maybe you have a boyfriend. I saw that dude hanging around outside waiting for me to leave."

"I don't have a boyfriend," she said. "Then you have a stalker." "I don't have a stalker, either. I'm a deprived child."

At the end of the term, Katz was late posting the final grades. A week went by and I hadn't heard from her. Before winter break I got loaded at a sorority party. I was drinking Popov, the vodka that comes in a plastic bottle. I sat in a corner trying to make a compound word out of "slut" and "sorority," but nothing really scanned.

I called Hannah's cell. "This is Peter, the nerd tutor," I said to her voice mail. "I didn't get my Christmas bonus. I'm coming over to collect."

My phone rang a few seconds later. She was actually laughing.

"You don't qualify for a bonus. You've been with the firm less than a year."

"Did you get your grade?"

"Not yet."

"Where are you?"

"Far away."

"I wanna come see you."

"You're drunk," she said.

"I'll get on a plane."

"Look, go find a girl," she said.

"I found one."

"Find one in the same room. Don't scrunch your shoulders up, don't put yourself down, and don't make stupid jokes that nobody understands."

When spring term began, I checked at the English Department. She wasn't registered for any classes. I called her cell, but she didn't answer. I used my friend's phone so my name wouldn't come up on her Caller ID. Still no answer.

I waited outside her apartment one night. Before dawn, her roommate drove up with a fat guy with shoulder-length red hair. She tripped getting out of the car and blinked to get me into focus.

"Hey, Peter," she said

"Hey." I realized I didn't know her name. "I'm looking for Hannah."

"She quit school."

"But she only had one more semester."

"I know. Weird, huh?"

"Do you know where she went?"

"Sorry, Peter."

I followed her to the door. "Hey, I'm not gonna bother her." The fat guy turned and squared off on me. I could see the prickly blonde hairs on his fat red fists. "Back off, dude."

Hannah's roommate stepped between us. "It's okay." She wobbled and coughed and took a second to pull herself to- gether. "Hannah is strange, Peter. She was working in some really cheesy strip joint, pole dancing and whatever."

A few hours later, lying on my bed in a welter of Bud cans, I had a vision of Hannah, the darkness welling out of her eyes and flowing over me until I was lost, plunging deeper and deeper into her nothingness.

Maybe it was the beer, but I felt like I was hurtling through space, my life breaking into chunks of debris. I had been counting on going through the semester with her. Now I would never see her again.

Teaching For America

Graduation was a bust. There were ominous rumors of plans to disrupt the ceremonies with anti-war chants. "Mecha" and the Chicano Liberation Front talked about rushing the platform to symbolically retake California. The Rainbow Coalition wanted to launch kites. Palestinian Rights and Hillel were threatening counter demos. In the end, most of the 3,000-odd people who were graduating showed up with hangovers, wearing shorts and sneakers under their robes. The amplified echoes of the commencement speakers sounded like the lineup announcements at a ballpark. I saw my mother among the thousands of well-wishers, holding a bouquet. My father worked his way through the crowd to her. I had been drinking cognac all semester and was convinced that it made me more percep- tive. Watching the two of them greet each other with a polite hug, I thought of how these two lonely people had come together briefly and produced another lonely person, who might go on to produce yet another lonely person some day.

My parents had separated when I was seven. My father had been a draftsman at Hughes Tool. Now he dealt "Hold 'em" at Hollywood Park. He lived in a studio in Venice over an alley where homeless people squabbled day and night. I didn't see a lot of him and whenever I did I was worried by our resemblance. I was skinny and dark-haired like him. I had tried bulking up with weights and protein shakes, but my body rejected muscles like they were foreign transplants. He was an alcoholic and I wondered if my taste for booze was more genetic than literary.

He gave me an envelope with five hundreds in it. His hands were trembling and he looked down to hide his bleary eyes. My mom stood there with a long-suffering look.

"All these big corporations have booths," he said. "You oughta line something up."

"There's this program, Teaching For America," I said. "You sign up for two years and they send you to teach in inner-city schools."

He looked at me bleakly. "How much do they pay?"

"Fourteen-five to start. It goes to seventeen the next year."

"You can't live on that."

"He's not doing it for the money," my mom said, speaking slowly, as if explaining to a child. "He wants to do some- thing constructive."

He turned away from her and appealed to me. "These programs are bogus. They don't care about these people. They have Mexicans to do their jobs for half the price, with no benefits."

"That's a terrible thing to say," my mother said.

My father threw up his hands in a hopeless gesture.

Limbo, Texas

I wanted to go to Bed Stuy in Brooklyn, but they needed people in Houston. Hurricane Katrina had dumped thousands of New Orleans kids into the school system. Crime and violence had surged.

"Houston is the best place to test your commitment," the recruiter told us.

We would undergo twelve weeks of intensive training in order to be ready for the start of the school year in September. They found us cheap apartments on the fringe of the Fifth Ward, the ghetto, where we would be teaching. I was in a low-slung two-story complex that had a rickety stairway leading up to a common balcony. The apartments were like warrens, one little room leading to another—sooty blinds, rust stains in the bathtub. There were a few students, but mostly it was Mexican families, illegals jammed ten to a room. Early in the morning you could hear doors slamming and motors coughing as they went to work. An obese white lady, who wore housedresses and flopped around in mules, dealt crack at the other end of the balcony. We had five people living in four bedrooms with one bathroom. Three guys had their own rooms and two girls shared. People came and went all night long. The crackheads broke into our cars and stole our radios.

I had never been out of California in my life and was a total weather wimp. Houston was like a pizza oven. It grabbed me in a bear hug as soon as I walked out the door, squeezing the breath out of me. We put up thick shades to block the sun and keep our neighbors from looking inside. There was an ancient, shuddering air-conditioner in the living room. We kept the casement windows tightly shut to keep in the AC, but the cool air seemed to stop at my bedroom threshold. After a night of drinking, it felt as if I had a cement block on my chest.

I hit the college hangouts in Rice Village looking for a night job, but they only used waitresses and every busboy was a Mexican. After getting turned down in six bars with a Dos Equis in every one, I bitched to a manager, "If they ever close the border this city will be buried under a pile of dirty dishes."

He was a big guy with slicked-back black hair and a cut- off work shirt to display his guns. He shook my hand in a big soft grip. "I'm Steve," he said. "I need an English speaker to work the door."

"I'm Peter, and I'm not a bouncer."

"Just take money and keep out the single guys. Anything physical goes down I've got three linemen from the University of Houston."

Old campus habits died hard. Thursday was still party night, even for people who had to make it to work Friday morning. I sat on a barstool at the door taking money, checking IDs and stamping hands. Two of Steve's linemen shouldered through the crowd, silencing the rowdies. Rory, a moon-faced hulk from a ranch in Abilene loomed up behind me if anyone got out of line. They paid me fifty bucks a night, plus a burger and a going-off drink. Somebody always had some funky weed that gave me palpitations on the first puff. After hours, we'd go to all-night taco joints and watch the drunks battle in the parking lots. At four in the morning it would cool off as the breeze brought the dew from the bayous. But I'd wake at nine in a hot sweat, anxious from dreams I couldn't remember.

The Worst Night of My Life Begins

Beer seemed like a good idea on the humid days. It was cool going down, but a few hours later it started to percolate into blurry waves of steam. Beer took all the fun out of weed, like dousing a fire down to acrid smoke.

One day on the bus going to class, I noticed American flags fluttering off the office buildings. It was the July Fourth weekend. I had been in Houston for six weeks, one day following another with no sense of time passing.

A burly blond guy in an army uniform was standing out- side my building when I came home. The sun glinted off the steel frames of his glasses. He smiled pleasantly at my curious glance.

"Lost my parade," he said.

The bar was frantic that night. Steve had formed a line. They were coming at me one-by-one. Five dollars. Stamp the hand. Next . . .

High school girls, all dolled up, flirted and teased, trying to get in with phony proof. There were scuffles inside— stools toppling, glasses smashing. Cursing, red-faced drunks swung wildly as the bouncers shoved them out.

I took a few tokes and a shot of Patrón. It felt like my heart was going to explode in my chest

A face rose up. "Hi, Peter."

It took me a second. Those black eyes boring into me. She seemed out of breath, as if she'd been running. "Don't I get a kiss?"

Before I could answer, she wrapped her arms around my neck, lips cool against my throat. There were whoops and whistles. Somebody yelled, "Get a room, you're holding up the line"

She was wearing floppy jeans and a man's white shirt. She thrust a five at me. I pushed it back.

"No, no, it's okay . . . Steve, this is Hannah."

"Go on in, Hannah," Steve said.

She put her mouth to my ear. "You're not tutoring any one else, are you?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Long story."

They took her to a spot at the end of the bar, where all the friends of the staff congregated. I got distracted dealing with another rush. When I got a chance to turn back, she was hunched over the bar staring into a pink cocktail.

"No daydreamin' on my party time, dude."

First thing I saw was the blue NYFD T-shirt. He had a black NYPD cap on backwards, but didn't look like a cop or a patriot. He was big and rangy, towering over me, and I'm six-one. Tattoos crawled up his arms to his neck—knives, snakes, grinning heads. He had matted dirty blond hippie hair down to his shoulders, green eyes glittering, a thin, braided beard dropping from the cleft in his chin onto his chest. He wasn't Southern. Maybe one of those California boys

who had dropped out of high school to go surfing.

"It's couples-only tonight," I said. "No single males." "That's sexual discrimination." He wasn't drunk and he wasn't kidding.

"What if two guys come up and say they're a couple? You gonna let them in?"

I struggled to keep my voice from breaking. "Sorry, man, house rules. You can wait for the manager."

"I ain't talkin' to the manager, I'm talkin' to *you*." He smelled of soap and mouthwash. It was scarier than if he had stunk of booze.

"Couples only," I repeated, hoping I didn't have that pleading look you got with a bully.

He raised his hand so quickly I flinched. He smirked and patted my shoulder. "Okay, son." He turned with a wink at the people behind him. "I guess a good-looking dude like me can find himself a date, huh?"

The crowd parted to let him through. No props for me. Nobody thought I had backed him down.

Steve showed up with a guilty look. "Everything cool?"

Rory was suddenly back, too, and real belligerent. Pushing people away from the door, daring the college kids to start something.

Hannah was still hunched over, staring into her pink drink like she hadn't moved.

It was like nothing had happened. But when I turned, the Nightmare was back in my face. "I'm legal now, dude."

He was with one of those dolled-up high school girls. She was so loaded he had to hold her around the waist to keep her from falling. "Like you to meet my fiancée," he said with an exaggerated redneck twang.

I took his crumpled ten and tried to cover with sarcasm. "I hope you two are very happy together."

"We're plannin' on it," he said.

As soon as he got inside, he put her down and walked away. "Hey," she called. She bounced off a few people, then fell flat on her face. The two linemen carried her out by her armpits.

Next thing I knew he was at the end of the bar, standing over Hannah. He seemed to be talking to her, but I couldn't tell. She just kept staring into her drink until he stepped back into the darkness.

The Snatch

Last call was chaos. Everybody rushed the bar screaming for drinks, then spilled out into the streets looking for the next party. The Houston cops cruised by checking for drunks to "dekey." You had to be comatose to get their attention. Shrieking on two wheels out of the parking lot didn't count. Neither did mooning or baring your boobs or puking into the potted plants in the mall.

I fought against the flow, looking for Hannah. There was a line outside the ladies room. Two silhouettes were rising out of a booth.

It was the Nightmare. He had Hannah. She lunged at me, sloppy drunk and slurring. "Save me from this lady-killer, Peter. He slipped something into my drink."

"I slipped another drink into your drink, honey," the Nightmare said.

My knees were shaking, "Do you want to go with him, Hannah?" I asked.

"Well, that's the stupidest question in the world," she said. "Of course not, you silly goof." She fell on me, wrap- ping her arms around my shoulders, pressing her soft lips into my neck. "I want to go with you."

I took a breath and faced him. "It is what it is, man," I said. "You can total me, I guess, and try to drag her out, but there's people all over the place."

The Nightmare shook his head, unconcerned. "Bitch is trouble, brother. Cut her loose. I ain't never gonna fight over no bitch. I won't even get my hands dirty. It's about you and me now."

"I don't have a beef with you," I said. He looked almost sad. "You do now, baby."

Little Blue Bug

Hannah was in a drooling doze. Steve looked her over with an expert's eye. "He roofied her." I had never heard the word, but made a good guess. "Date rape drug?"

"Yeah." He shook her gently. "She'll sleep it off, but she'll be sick as a dog in the morning. Don't count on get-tin' much. Even if you didn't do it they get into this attitude where they feel like they've been violated."

I put Hannah's arm around my shoulder and picked her up. Her head lolled back. "My hero." "Do you have a car?"

"My beautiful periwinkle Bug. It's a chick car, Peter, but it's a stick. A chick stick. Do you have a chick stick?"

"That dude is a jailbird," Rory said. "See that Harley tat on his neck. That's the biker's symbol. Means you killed somebody."

"I never heard that," one of the linemen said.

"It's true," Rory said. "My uncle was a guard at Pelican Bay prison in California. The bikers run every jail they're in, he says."

"That's the Aryan Brotherhood, man."

"Same thing," Rory said. "You mess with a guy with that secret sign, you get the whole gang on your ass."

Steve pointed to a blue Volkswagen under a light. "That it?"

Hannah lifted her head. "My little blue Bug."

I propped her against the car and found the keys in her pocket. I slid her into the front seat. I had only driven a stick shift once in my life, a Honda Civic. I started the car, trying to remember the gear sequence. Push for first, pull for sec-ond, up and to the side for third, and pull for fourth.

Outside, the guys were watching me.

Be calm, I told myself. Be calm.

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