

Greg Wagner

A
Time
To
Die

This book is a work of fiction. The characters, situations, and dialogue are drawn exclusively from the author's imagination and are not to be considered real. Any resemblance is purely coincidental.

Copyright© 2016 Greg Wagner Books

www.gregwagnerbooks.com

Also By Greg Wagner

Dragons Don't Grow On Trees – *A Magical Tail*

You Lie! – *A Cautionary Tail* - Urban Fantasy

The Sisterhood Of The Rubber Ducky – A Comedy Crime Story

At The End Of Forever – A Historic Action Novel

A Cold Day In Hades – A Mythical Middle School Novel

I would like to thank (in this order) my amazing wife Roberta for always believing in me, Duck Duck Go, Wikipedia, Google Maps, YouTube and last but not least Amazon.com, because without any of the above, this novel would not have happened.

Part

I

Chapter 1

Los Angeles...the city that never sleeps.

Where the heart of the civilized world sinks into the ocean, where the pretty people come to chase their dreams, struggle, play, and eventually die, lonely, alone, and jaded.

LA is where the movers and the shakers come to ply their craft, where the stars, and the crème de la crème, come to live up in their hillside compounds, sheltered safely away from the very people who made them great.

Here live the celebrities, the demi-gods, the lofty fallen angels, the hunks, and the divas that the world used to worship, with their cat eyes, and boob lifts, driving Bimmers, and Hummers, going out each day to greet the world with a fresh coat of shiny face plastic.

So soon to be forgotten are the deeds, the stellar performances, and the bitter words said in the heat of the drunken moment. Inevitably faded into the constant background noise, cast aside like so much jetsam set adrift in a sea of obscurity, and in its place is a thick floating layer of desperation, doubt, and self loathing. If you look just close enough, past the façade, past the illusion, there, lingering beneath all the eye candy and fantasy is a faint glitter of shimmering gold, which unfortunately just flakes off like a paper-thin layer of foil veneer if touched.

Yet every day, they come in droves from all over the world, the dreamers, the rockers, the actors, and the risk-takers, scraping and scabbling up the side of that insurmountable precipice, reaching up, just as others are sliding back down.

Nobody on that hill hears the cries of the drug addicted hooker living on skid row, as her so called boyfriend beats her bloody for the third time that day, the tears of the mother, whose son was killed trying to take what he was too lazy to earn and too stupid to ask for. They also don't hear the cries of the naive

young social climber, who gets drugged and raped on her first date, by the same person who she trusted and hoped would be her salvation, only to have that same person walk away with no repercussions for his actions, solely because of who his parents are.

No one hears their cries or even cares, *that's just life.*

The mystical city of Los Angeles runs much deeper than the sculpted beaches, the rolling hills, and the beautiful people of which the tabloid tales tell. She is a myth, a legend, and an enigma. From the knife edged slums of the barrio, to the tourist-filled shops of Rodeo Drive, to the illustrious homes of Holmby Hills, with its 50,000 square foot mansions and gated cliff side estates.

This is the town that spawned skateboarding, the French Dip sandwich, the Viper Room, plastic surgery, Barbie Dolls, gangsta rap, Hot Wheels cars, bikini waxes, partial birth abortions, gum bleaching, and high tea.

It is the entertainment capital of the world, the cultural Mecca of the sun kissed actors and actresses, all vying desperately for their next big part. One great seething mass of four million plus people, all living, breathing, eating, shitting, and dying, on the same piece of cramped, barren real estate by the ocean.

LA is Americana in its most basic sense, a legend in the making, pop culture as it is happening, and the dream as it is dying.

According to the Hollywood rumor mill, the parties held at the Freiderer mansion on Mapleton Drive are never ending.

Truckloads of booze and food magically appearing at the gate behind the complex day and night, to be unloaded, cooked up and served with a smile, by faceless and nameless workers. Armed security guards constantly prowl the perimeter of the

sprawling twenty-two-acre estate, like uniformed panthers stalking for prey, absolutely guaranteeing the privacy for the select few who are invited to grace the palatial grounds with their presence.

Usually populated by the biggest of the movers and shakers that the world has to offer, this particular party is the exception to the rule. It is the official “neighborhood only” block party, and of course, all the neighbors show up, because after all, Hans Freiderer has the best parties.

LA is all about seeing and being seen.

The super private get togethers occur semi-annually; and this one is the Summer BBQ Bash.

Everyone attending the party is someone of significance, they have to be, or they wouldn't be living on one of the richest streets in the Platinum Triangle of Los Angeles County, where the starting cost of an acre of land is twenty million dollars.

Staying in theme with the down-home American summer tradition, this soirée is nothing less than top notch. Hand basted whole suckling pigs, turning slowly on a hickory pole spit. For those with a taste for “hair of the dog,” there is a full bar, with a mix master and fifty different brands of beer on tap. Five star chefs prepare tenderloin steak and prime rib hamburgers over a shaved mesquite fire, complete with all the customary fixings. In addition to the obligatory BBQ items, there is also fresh South African grilled lobster, extremely rare Russian wild beluga caviar, and coconut breaded, colossal white shrimp as long as your hand, shipped in just this morning from the Ecuadorian coast.

The Freiderer Mansion is one of the largest and most opulent estates in the neighborhood. Lake sized swimming pools and swimming pool sized water fountains, each adorned with gaggles of cheeky, frolicking, Italian marble cherubs, carved in various positions of gracefully pissing into the fountain's vitamin “C” infused crystal-clear waters. Open clamshell amphitheaters

with endless live performers, fully stocked tiki bars, gilded gazebos, and hidden grottos filled with giggling leggy supermodels of both the male and the female variety.

Everyone loves Hans Freiderer...even his ex-wife Barbara, who lives just down the street from his sprawling mansion.

Getting married at a young age, Hans and Barbie both decided early on, that Hans would never be faithful to her, so they divorced after just two short years of matrimony. The arrangement has worked out very well for Hans, who now remains notoriously single and it has also worked out well for Barbie, who as part of their divorce settlement will collect a modest five-figure, weekly alimony check, for the rest of her life or until she remarries, which she has vowed never to do.

In spite of his obvious flaws, everyone likes the twenty-seven year old, six-foot-three, blond haired billionaire. The things that you think would annoy people, just makes everybody love him all the more, like his devilishly handsome good looks, and his thick Austrian accent, *which still hasn't softened, even after living in the states for over a decade now.* Worth well over a hundred billion dollars in liquid assets alone, he is by far the richest resident of the exclusive hilltop community.

Janine Joliette-Connard, nudged her husband, and pointed knowingly, as they watched wealthy newspaper mogul Randolph Medlock and his tall, graceful, Japanese bodyguard wife Shi, walk past the table of Mr. "Bill" Ching, the multimillion-dollar Chinese restaurant chain owner, and his short, bitter, Pinay wife Ling.

Ling scoffed and said something to Shi as they walked past. Janine thought that she heard the words "*Yup-Boon-Jie,*" muttered through the smaller woman's tightly clenched teeth.

Shi stopped in her tracks and hissed at Mr. Ching's wife, then she curled her hands up into fists and stepped back into an attack pose. Mr. Ching stood up quickly and rattled off

something to his wife in Mandarin, causing her to bow her head and nod obediently, and then he turned to Randolph and his wife and put his hands up disarmingly.

“*Please, no offense*, she has problem with her head,” he smiled weakly and made a circling motion beside his ear, “she know not what she do.”

Randolph nodded curtly, and his wife relaxed, she tilted her perfectly sculpted nose up, then turned to walk away, pausing only long enough to shoot a look of barely veiled contempt for the smaller woman and her now kowtowing husband.

Janine panned the rest of the crowd curiously.

In one corner by the pool, is multi-platinum selling rapper, Punchy Furious and his posse of homies. They are accompanied by a colorful cloud of dancing big-bottomed girls, wearing nothing more than skimpy, dental floss, string bikinis, and bright red lipstick.

In another corner sits Hotelier David Merillian and his boy toy George. They are chattering away with world famous fashion designer Devon, (no last name used) and Baron Stefan Von Lichtenstein of Germany. The young Baron is rumored to not actually have any money at all, but lives with his grandfather, who made the family fortune decades ago in the petrochemical industry.

Barbie Freiderer is once again accompanied by a different bronzed, blond-haired, beefcake, muscle stud than last time, and is sitting by the waterfall, talking to Hollywood producer Ben Granger and his actress wife Jen and wealthy philanthropist Max Shelling and his wife Gigi, who all live on the other end of Mapleton Drive.

Janine and her husband live just across the street from Hans.

She really doesn't care much for any of her neighbors, who are all too cliquy for her tastes, but she has always considered it rude not to at least show up at the semi-annual events and be seen, *even if you plan on sneaking out shortly after the food is served.*

Janine's husband is Hans Freiderer's personal finance coach. His attendance is practically mandatory, and given the amount of money that is involved with the account, she wouldn't think of missing the neighborhood BBQ either.

Living at the top of the heap has its advantages and disadvantages. Isolated from the rest of the world by security gates and twenty-foot hedges, sometimes it's easy to forget that there is anyone else out there in the world.

It isn't that I mind having to share the world with others, it's having to actually rub elbows with them that bothers me. Janine smiled and thought to herself, as she looked out over the group of privileged partiers and nodded her head, *to hell with the rest of the world; life is good, damn good.*

Wilhelm Franz adjusted the focus on his pair of old army surplus binoculars and sighed. *I've been sitting here in front of this building for two hours now, and I still haven't seen a thing.*

His inside informant had told him that there was supposed be a major gathering here tonight and that if Wilhelm wanted to find out what was really going on, he should meet him in the parking lot at eight o'clock.

Eight-thirty? He looked at his watch again and shrugged, *I guess the time must have changed. I'll wait a little longer.*

Just then, an older, glossy black, Ford thunderbird breezed into the parking lot and quickly pulled into a space next to the rear entrance of the building. A large shadowy figure in a hooded cloak got out, waved a badge in front of the sensor, and

then hurried through the big metal security door. A few minutes later, more people started arriving.

The parking lot was almost full when Wilhelm got tired of waiting for his contact. He looked around carefully, stepped out of his car, and then casually walked over to the back door. After nonchalantly trying the handle and finding it locked, he looked both ways, then casually slipped a credit card out of his pocket and fished it around the latch. Another car chose that moment to pull into the parking lot, headlights glaring, slicing through the misty still darkness like laser beams from a space ship.

Wilhelm ducked back behind a clump of bushes growing near the entrance of the building and held his breath, willing himself to be invisible, even though he knew that the other person would probably still be able to see him if they looked hard enough.

A small man in a dark suit, half ran, half walked up to the door, carelessly leaving it swing wide open for a couple of seconds as he hurried off down the hallway. Wilhelm jumped out of the bushes and dove desperately for the open door, just as it slammed shut in his face with a boom of finality.

He rolled over slowly, and frowned up at the night sky from his vantage point on the ground, *and to think, I could have been a plumber.*

He stood back up and then started walking around, looking for another way in. After circling the outside of the building, he was just about to give up, when he spotted a window on the first floor that looked like it was propped open. Wilhelm reached up and felt vindicated, when he encountered very little resistance pushing it open. He looked both ways, then hoisted himself up to the sill and crawled through the opening, immediately falling four feet straight down, to land heavily on his back.

Gasping for breath, and lamenting his career choices for a second time that evening, Wilhelm picked himself up off the floor in a series of unstable jerky movements, then limped down the hallway of the darkened building, the full moon illuminating his path with its weak, white grey glow.

He wandered past empty rooms, listened at doors, peeped through windows, and searched for any sign as to where all the people had gone and at the same time; he vaguely wondered what had happened to his contact. Finally, having no luck he gave up, went back out to his car, and waited for the meeting to break up.

A dark hooded figure stood in front of the heavy red velvet curtain and looked out on the initiates assembled in the secret throne room.

He chuckled to himself and shook his head, *and to think that there are so many of the faithful still out there, in the face of all the pressure from the “big three,” who declare themselves to be the only “one true” religions.*

Now they have privately funded “In God We Trust” decals on government vehicles and towering religious monuments in public parks, praying around the flagpole, kneeling at football games, Islam-a-phobia, forgoing science in order to teach creationism, and then completely discarding all other options and persuasions of spirituality, like so much chaff among the wheat.

In spite of this, there are always those who want more, those who seek real power and real control over their destinies, *and so they turn to me.*

The man pulled his voluminous hood back to reveal a large dark bull’s head, with glowing eyes and two great twisted black horns that stuck out like deadly weapons. When he stepped out onto the stage, a low chanting started.

“Sybra ta tae, Sybra ta tae, Sybra ta tae.”

The man smiled to himself.

In the art of invocation, the chant is supposed to be essential as an ancient focus for the powers of the mind, but in reality, it is mostly symbolic. In many cases used to make the worshippers feel special. So, in the absence of anything better, he just made up his own chant.

It’s actually “Eat at Arby’s,” said backwards.

The bull headed man smiled serenely, and walked slowly across the wooden stage. He carefully selected a reed from the glowing ceremonial brazier, and reverently lit all the sacred candles on either side of the altar, then turned to the assembled, bowed deeply and sat down on the ornately carved throne.

He then raised his arms up and out. “Sybra ta tae brothers,” he paused meaningfully, “we are gathered here tonight to give honor to the great one and to ask for his blessings in our endeavors.” He lowered his arms, and then slowly and pointedly stared out at his followers.

Pathetic sheep, he thought with a sneer, they don’t even realize how stupid they look, with their hooded cloaks and delusions of grandeur.

“The great one wants you to succeed in what you desire and he will aid you when you need it most, *Sybra ta tae!*”

“*Sybra ta tae,*” the crowd’s voice echoed back at him from the stone walls of the basement.

At this point in time, the secret religious order numbers less than fifty initiates. That figure fluctuates regularly as novices enter into the mystery, and semi-regular sacrifices in turn thin their ranks. The hard-core followers believe that to sacrifice oneself, is the ultimate form of servitude to the great one, who in exchange for the suffering will grant the worthy, eternal bliss.

...and these fools are falling for it. He chuckled softly, *Look at them clamoring all over each other, lining up like sheep to forfeit their lives to a religion that hasn't been relevant for well over two thousand years.*

“I come here before you because we have a problem,” he bellowed out to the sound of obedient silence. “It has come to my attention that we have a traitor in our midst.” He panned the crowd slowly, looking for tell tales from the other members, before he continued.

“It brings me great pain to think that any one of you might plot against the great one, who is all seeing, and all knowing.”

He nodded to his assistants waiting off in the wings. Two burly men wearing ill-fitting cloaks that barely hid their massive physiques stomped out onto the stage dragging another smaller hooded figure in between them. One of the goons pulled the hood back to reveal purple and yellow bruises all over the man's face and a ball gag in his mouth.

“I int ooh any ing,” the man looked around frantically and pleaded through the gag, *“aease et e oh, oh lod, haease et e ooo.”*

“SHUT UP YOU FOOL!” the bull headed man shouted, “you should have thought about that before you plotted to betray me!”

He walked up close to the victim and gazed into eyes filled with terror, then smiled while he watched the other man squirm helplessly.

“Sybra ta tae, Sybra ta tae,” the crowd started chanting again, getting louder and louder with each round.

“Sybra ta tae, Sybra ta tae, SYBRA TA TAE, SYBRA TA TAE.”

When the chant had reached a fevered pitch, the bull headed man dipped a hand into his cloak and drew out a wavy

dagger, with symbols etched into the blade that appeared to dance, as you tried to focus on them. The exotic knife was over a foot long, black as night, and had a golden scarab fashioned into the guard of the hilt. He held the blade up and it shimmered in the dim underground room, impossibly sizzling and sucking the light out of the air around it.

The chanting was almost a shouting now, as he swung the dagger up in a swift, tight arc, severing the other man's throat in one stroke, and instantly creating a fountain of blood that splattered those standing nearby.

The bull headed man then stuck one hand out and casually collected from the flow. He brought the hand up to his mouth, and symbolically tasted the traitor's life essence, before stepping back and allowing the initiates to swarm the stage and drink from the crimson stream, as the victim collapsed heavily to the floor, still jerking from reflex.

Chapter 2

Lisa Moore looked out across the crowded dining room of “Nick’s of Bel Air” and waved the bouncer over.

“Sorry to bother you Hal,” she whispered discreetly when he walked up, “but we’ve got a live one at the main bar. I think he’s had too much to drink and he just won’t let it go.”

Hal nodded and headed in the direction of the bar with Lisa having to all but run in order to keep up with his loping long legged gait.

The customer in question was still causing a scene and had his back to them when they walked up. Hal waited patiently until the customer stopped and turned around slowly to look behind him. His head tilted up, trying to fit all of Hal’s six-foot-nine inch frame into his view, and then it kept right on tilting back, until the drunk lost his balance and fell over onto the floor.

Hal frowned, and looked down on him, “*I understand there is problem?*” he stated/asked in his thick Americanized Greek accent.

“N, no, no problem here,” the man scrambled to his feet unsteadily and started toward the door, “I was, a, just leaving.” Hal brought his massive hand down on the man’s shoulder, stopping him dead in his tracks.

“After you pay bill, no?”

“No,” the man nodded frantically, “I mean yes, I mean, I was just going to pay it now,” he said holding his wallet up and walking backwards slowly in the direction of the cashier.

They both watched the man until the cashier waved back, signaling that he had paid his tab.

“Thank you Hal,” Lisa said gratefully, “I hate it when they get like that.”

“Is no problem,” he shrugged, “is my job.”

Halirrhothius (meaning the son of Poseidon) Kiriakopoulos, a.k.a Hal, is a distant cousin of Nick's. Lisa couldn't help but think of him as a curious combination of self-educated scholar, high society gentleman, and longshoreman. Hal spent his formative years working in the Grecian shipping port of Piraeus, leaving him with the physique of a veteran linebacker. She watched his hulking shoulders as he walked back out to his station near the front door.

Located at the end of a winding cul-de-sac, the original "Nick's of Bel Air" started out during the turbulent years of prohibition.

Put into effect in January of 1920, The Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States effectively established the "prohibition of alcoholic beverages," by declaring the production, transport, and sale of alcohol illegal.

Fresh off the boat from Greece, with every penny that he ever made in a suitcase on his back, Nick Senior saw an opportunity.

He opened an illegal speakeasy club.

Where many of the "secret gin joints" of the era were run by the mob, Nick's little exclusive club stayed open by the virtue of its clientele alone, which consisted of quite a few of the higher profile celebrities, well placed politicians, and law enforcement figures of Los Angeles.

When Nick Sr. bought the grand old Victorian estate, it was abandoned and the roof leaked horribly, but he had a vision for the private booze club. It was originally purchased from the unsettled estate of an oil and gas tycoon back in the spring of 1920, when Bel Air wasn't much more than a few scattered homes on an unthinkable steep rocky cliff-side.

Nick immediately hired a crew and quickly turned the yard into a parking lot and the living room into a bar, and then went into business that same week.

The formal dining room and open balcony of the present club were added on later when prohibition was repealed in 1933 and “Nick’s of Bel Air” went legit. The club’s legality was also grandfathered in at that time, and again when zoning laws came along in the 1940’s and mansions started popping up all over the hills of Los Angeles.

The place has come a long way since the bad old days.

The grandson runs the club now.

Nick Pedropolis III is a very reasonable man and he has his head planted firmly on his shoulders. In the two years since Lisa started working for him, she has been promoted twice. This last time making her the manager of all three of the bars located throughout the Club.

She makes good money, and her job is to ensure that the alcohol flows smoothly, meaning that she is responsible for everything from the ordering and stocking, to the hiring, training, and sometimes firing, of the barmaids and tenders. Lisa is also in charge of booking the weekend entertainment for the club.

Along with being a trained Shodan 1st Degree black belt in Isshin-ryū karate, Lisa is also a classically trained concert pianist. She started taking karate when she was four and piano lessons when she was six, and while she gave up the martial arts years ago, she still loves playing music whenever she can. The original Steinway Grand piano that has been a part of the club since its prohibition days, still sits in the main dining room of Nick’s. It was professionally rebuilt and refinished years ago, and is still religiously tuned every six months.

Nick III runs a high-class establishment, and it shows. Dinner is by reservation only, with the evening meal usually selling out well before noon each day, and Friday and Saturday’s reservations, a week in advance in most cases.

Lisa smiled with satisfaction and stuck the end of her pen in her mouth. *The crowd wasn’t too bad for a Thursday night.*

Usually a little fast paced, tonight was nothing compared to how busy it gets on the weekends. Lisa walked back to the main bar and stood looking along the edge from the corner, casually keeping an eye on both sides. Somebody did a “jazz hands” gesture in her direction from halfway down the bar. She smiled when she recognized her husband sitting on one of the stools.

Lisa frowned when he walked up, “Hey, I thought you were going to be out of town until next week?”

Brock shrugged, “I managed to get off early, you aren’t disappointed are you?”

“No,” she smiled, “just surprised. You know how anal I am about things, *failing to plan, is a plan for failure*,” she said pulling the pen out of her mouth and sticking it up in the air proudly.

Brock nodded and smiled back, “...and spontaneity is the mother of chaos, but you don’t see me freaking out do you?”

“Yeah well, if you had any idea what I have to go through to keep things going here,” she wagged a finger at him knowingly, “you’d run screaming from the place.”

He shrugged, “Ok but, international sales aren’t exactly a walk in the park either. The people I have to deal with, uhh,” he waved a hand and shook his head in mock disgust, “*Philistines* every single one of them.”

Lisa looked at her watch and laughed, “I’m off in a few, you wanna stick around?”

“Nope,” he shook his head, “I was just stopping by to let you know I was in town. I’ll see you back at the apartment?”

“Ok,” she nodded reluctantly and stuck out her lower lip. “I’ll get there as soon as I can. Don’t go starting without me.”

He winked and walked out to the door.

Lisa and Brock have only been married for six short months. She is still a little leery of him, *but how can you be leery of someone who treats you so well?* Needless to say, in the back of her head, she still hears that age-old expression, *if it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is.*

Brock has been the perfect gentleman from the very beginning, unlike just about every other man that she's had a relationship with. *It's like I have "screw me over" written somewhere on my forehead, that only I can't see.* From the boy that she lost her virginity to at a party when she was eighteen and then acted like he didn't know her ten minutes later, to her last "live in" boyfriend, who basically ran through two years of her savings in the less than three months, and then ran out on her shortly afterward.

Lisa met Brock online.

As unconventional as it sounded, it was the only place where she could meet someone who didn't already know everything about her. *Notoriety does have its drawbacks.* Working at one of the most exclusive clubs on the west coast, for some reason, had a way of attracting the worst in potential mates.

Lisa wanted a family.

She really tried hard not to be desperate, but at thirty-eight, she thought that she was already pushing the baby-making age limit.

Brock answered her online ad just as she was about ready to give up. He showered her with flowers, he brought her candy, and he wasn't too pushy. He was just what she was looking for, *forty-five and single, and he actually has a job,* a big plus that is surprisingly absent from so many prospective candidates these days. His job is also the only drawback, because it involves him having to travel abroad a lot, sometimes for weeks at a time. In some ways, it's a blessing, as Lisa's job at

the club is also very time consuming, especially working evenings and weekends all the time.

Brock doesn't seem to mind though, he told her, *the time spent apart, just makes their time together all that much better.*

He's perfect, she thought, he says and does all the right things. Three months after their first date, they were married in a quiet little ceremony on the main balcony of Nick's. *Now here we are six months later,* she thought with a dreamy smile, *and for once in my life, I'm actually happy.*

Maria Estevez pulled her white Mercedes-Benz 500 series sedan into the underground parking garage of her multi-unit apartment building.

Another hard day of swimming with the sharks, she smiled and thought as she wheeled the car into her parking space and shut it off, *it feels good to be home safe again.*

The thirty-five unit apartment building is her haven and her nest egg in the hardscrabble urban jungle that is East LA. Her boyfriend Nelson, is supposed to be the fulltime maintenance person for the complex, but for some reason he never seems to be around when the work actually needs to be done.

Today was no exception.

Mr. Chavez in 6B met Maria in the hallway as she stepped off the elevator. "Hot water heater still needs fixed," he frowned at her from his half open door.

Maria cringed and instantly shifted into apology mode, "I am so sorry Mr. Chavez, I told Nelson to deal with that yesterday. I will get it fixed, even if I have to call someone in."

The older man smiled sympathetically, "I mean no offense Maria but, *que no sirve para nada,* you need to lose that boy, he's bad news."

“I’ll get the water heater fixed tomorrow Mr. Chavez,” she nodded tiredly in agreement, “I promise.”

Nelson Vasquez is the one thing from Maria’s past that she just can’t seem to shake. For some strange reason, she thought that taking him out of the gangsta life of the barrio, would give him some incentive to better himself, but all it has done is make him even more good-for-nothing.

She pulled her cell phone out and speed dialed his number, then she removed the wooden stick from her stamped leather hair barrette, allowing her long black tresses to fall down in waves about her shoulders.

“*Ola,*” she heard her boyfriend answer casually, over the sound of Chicano rap music playing loudly.

“Don’t you ola me Nelson. Where the fuck are you?”

“I’m working baby,” he said to the sound of rude male snickers in the background.

“Don’t lie to me,” she growled, “you’re hanging out with those worthless *batos* again, aren’t you?”

Instead of denying it, Nelson whined, “Oh baby, don’t be like that. They’re not worthless, just a little misunderstood.”

“*That’s bullshit and you know it.* I told you how many times before?” Maria fumed and laid into him, feeling her Chicano side come out. “I work hard every day to make things better for us and all you do is piss it away. *Well, you know what?* You got one more chance *Mr. Playa Esé Deadbeat.* If you aren’t here to fix Mr. Chavez’s water heater tomorrow, don’t even bother coming home, your shit will be out in the street.”

“*Aww come on baby...*” she heard him say as she hung up the phone and barely resisted the urge to throw it across the room. She remembered what happened the last time. Not only did she have to replace the \$500 cell phone, but she also had to have the plaster patched and repainted, where her fiery temper had left a perfect I-phone shaped hole in the drywall.

Maria grew up poor, the direct result of having parents who had been cast a bad lot in life and were convinced, *for one reason or another*, that they were stuck in that lot and had no right to even think about changing things.

The caste system at its finest, she thought ironically, *still alive and well in hometown America.*

Maria was born in the slums of East LA, where unemployment, teen pregnancy, suicide, and high school dropout rates are well over the national average, and day-to-day survival is a constant struggle. Where, as a little girl growing up, not getting sexually assaulted was a matter of knowing when, *and where* to hit your attacker in order to do the most damage, thereby hopefully discouraging any future attempts.

The streets of L.A. aren't just a fairy tale or a reality cable TV show for people like Maria, *they are the real thing.* At the age of seven, she learned how to use a knife, at the age of ten, a 9mm Glock pistol. By the time she was twelve, she had already lost two of her close friends to gang violence. By the time she was fourteen, she lost her father in the crossfire of a "drive-by" shootout between two rival gangs...*he was walking home from work that night, his only crime was being at the wrong place at the wrong time.*

Life has a strange way of throwing things at you. Sometimes it hits you too hard and you curl up and die, *but sometimes...you can absorb it and become superhuman.*

Maria was determined from very early on to do something with her life, and so far, she's done pretty good. She made it through high school ok. She graduated from college, *valedictorian of her class*, with a master's degree in business management and slowly but surely, step by step, she has worked herself into a lucrative position as a third year senior financial analyst for a midsized investment firm.

I earn my living now by helping people make financial decisions, in some cases involving hundreds of thousands of

dollars, of which I get 15% of the gross return on each investment, of course.

Maria was originally lured into the finance game, at a college job fair that she attended in her junior year. A large commercial firm came in and spoke to them as part of an aggressive recruitment drive, and for lack of any other real career options at the time, Maria gravitated to it. Once she had her degree, all she had to do was take a course, and then sit for the test and get her license.

Throughout the whole process, the recruiter from the company was in contact with her. He promised, on-the-job-training, along with big salaries and bonuses in her future career, but as soon as she went to work for them, all of those promises evaporated.

At the firm where she worked initially, favoritism was the name of the game, and the leads that came into the office were distributed on some strange arbitrary basis, relying more on popularity or perceived sleights, than on actual results bringing the money in.

After a couple of years of this, Maria became severely jaded. She still stayed in the game, and did the best that she possibly could, but she couldn't help feeling like the deck was truly stacked against her, *just like my parents told me.*

Just as despair was knocking loudly at her door, Maria met her current boss. She was introduced to him through a realtor friend, when she was looking to invest in an apartment building. By coincidence, he just happened to have a rental property for sale at the time. She didn't buy his building, but she did end up talking to him briefly about investment strategies. He gave her his card and told her to call him. They had dinner that next week and she was hired on the spot.

Since going to work for his company, Maria has had many successful clients and as a third year analyst, this year

alone she is on track to clear over two hundred thousand dollars in commissions.

Not too bad for a Cholo, half breed from the Barrio, she thought, as she plopped down on the couch and reached for the remote control to check the news.

The TV started blaring as she flipped through the channels. *The Los Angeles police department is still investigating the bizarre death of a local businessman and are offering a reward for any informa...“click,” and even though the plight of the sea otter is still unsure, there’s hope that things will continue to improve in...“click,” NOW FOR A LIMITED TIME, GET 2 GYROS FOR SIX BUCKS, THAT’S RIGHT, THAT’S TWO ALL MEAT AND PITA SANDWICHES LOADED WITH...“click,” oh yeah I saw him come right out of there and he looked like he was on something, you know, all eyes glowing and stuff. I didn’t know what else to do...“click,” Asian markets finished broadly higher today with shares in Japan leading the region, the Nikkei is up 1.39% with Hong Kong’s Hang Seng also up 0.26% and China’s Shanghai Composite is down 0.05%...*

Maria turned the sound down on the TV, put her fingers up to her temples, and massaged them for a few seconds.

I wish Nelson would have gotten with the program, Maria closed her eyes. We’ve been together forever, it seems like such a waste for it not to work out. She smiled and thought back through the years, I used to admire him at one point in time, but then she frowned and shook her head bitterly, and now I can barely stand the sight of him.

Chapter 3

Janine Joliette sat alone in the garden, drinking her morning tea and looking out over the city.

Things were already starting to heat up as the city slowly came to life again, preparing for another long day of moving and shaking. Despite the presence of the late morning sun, a layer of smog still floated persistently over the East Side, close to where Santa Monica disappears into the ocean.

The view is breathtaking from here, Janine thought, well worth the \$350,000 in real estate taxes that we pay every year.

The spacious house that Janine lives in was originally built for a popular 1940's movie star, who made it big and then blew through everything that she owned in an extended fit of whimsy. When fame left her, she summarily drank herself to death, leaving all of her *slightly worse for wear* worldly possessions, to an estranged quartet of ungrateful, adult offspring, who were only interested in how much they were going to get out of it for the least amount of effort.

An intense legal battle ensued between the siblings and when the smoke cleared, Janine and her husband were there waiting, picking up the house and grounds for just pennies on the dollar.

The estate itself is a sprawling affair; *I like it that way*, she nodded, *something about those big box super mansions that lacks personality.*

The main part of the traditional style house is two stories tall and sits sideways on the hill overlooking the city. From that eight bedroom, six thousand square foot building, wings, and enclosed walkways connect it to the rest of the grounds.

The two-acre lot is mostly level, with an all but sheer drop-off at the rear. A tall hedge of mature Lombardy Poplar trees hides the swimming pool, the tennis courts, and the twelve-

foot tall, three-foot thick, reinforced concrete wall that surrounds everything else.

In spite of everything, Janine was feeling depressed.

Here I am, pushing the far side of fifty, she thought, and what have I done?

Well you used to be a star, a voice inside her head replied stoically.

I mean lately, another voice spoke up, *how many years has it been since you quit?*

I didn't quit, the first one replied defensively, *I just got scared.*

Scared? The other voice sneered, *of what, succeeding?*

No! I mean yes! I mean I guess so. Maybe I was afraid of succeeding, so I wouldn't have to worry about failing.

...and you see what that's gotten you.

Janine shook her head sadly.

She used to be a famous performer, although from the very beginning, that's not the way that she had intended for things to work out.

Janine grew up in the upper middle class Palos Verdes neighborhood of Torrance, California. Her parents could just barely afford to live in the affluent enclave and it took nearly every penny that they made just to keep up with appearances.

Janine spent a lot of her childhood alone. She was an awkward little girl who was always too tall and too skinny. On top of that, her ankles were crooked from birth and she was hopelessly pigeon toed. She eventually grew out of it, but the damage that the affliction did in the meantime, left her socially introverted and emotionally scarred well into her late teens.

As a little girl, she was constantly singing to herself.

Along with the voices in her head, Janine used to also, hear music. Sometimes it was just songs that she'd heard somewhere before, sometimes she made them up. Everyone thought that it was cute at first, but eventually it worked on people's nerves, so she stopped doing it...*in front of them anyway.*

In her heart of hearts, Janine wanted to be a marine biologist. Living near the water was always fascinating for her. *When you consider the fact that ninety-four percent of the species on Earth live in the oceans, that leaves us land dwellers in a very small minority.*

The ocean is a maiden and a hag; it is as delicate as a transparent sea worm floating in a tidal pool, and as hard as a barnacle, clinging diligently to a ship's hull. It is a great seething organism made up of a nearly endless variety of other organisms, each one symbiotically and biologically connected to the other. The ocean doesn't understand pity or compassion, it won't spare the lives of the weak or rescue the downtrodden, but then on the other hand it also doesn't know cruelty and jealousy either and would never be found to have acted out of maliciousness or in a drunken fit of rage.

During her high school years, Janine volunteered regularly with an aquatic research group that was studying the Pacific coastline. Most her time with the group was spent in the coast's tidal pools, sifting through the shallows of the most diverse body of water on the planet.

She was happiest when she was in a pair of hip waders and a rain hat. Her father used to give her great lectures about the virtues of the working class and about how much he sacrificed every day, just to make sure that she would have a future. He also frequently stressed, *that he really wished she would chose a career that was a little more practical.*

Much to her parent's dismay, when Janine graduated from high school, she informed them that even if she had to pay for college herself, she wanted to study marine biology.

Finances at the Joliette household were slim, so Janine had to go to work in order to help pay for her lofty career choice. Determined to have her way, at the age of eighteen she took a job waitressing at the Pineapple Grove, an upscale restaurant/show club located ten minutes from her parent's house.

Waiting tables at the Grove was always fast and hectic. The hours drug on for days it seemed, but the money and the tips were good. Being an introvert by nature, every day was a challenge to Janine. She met so many new people, *which was strange*, considering the secluded life that she had been leading up until then.

Her dreams and the means to get there, were inadvertently forcing Janine out of the thick shell that she had built up over the years, *and she loved it*. At the same time that she was changing mentally, she was also changing physically.

Over that summer, *but it seemed more like overnight*, Janine went from a gangly awkward teen, to a beautiful graceful swan. Gone were the skinny legs, the "too big for her face" mouth, and the shy stammering of a self-conscious little girl, and in its place appeared a sophisticated, intelligent, well-spoken young woman.

Janine learned to how to read people and how to communicate with them effectively, when to speak and when to keep her mouth shut, what makes them tick, and what motivates them. Working at the Pineapple Grove became a case study in human nature for Janine, unknowingly preparing her for the whirlwind of a career change that was so soon to come.

Strangely enough, it was the odd occurrence of trading shifts to cover for one of the women on the day shift that would end up changing Janine's life forever.

The Saturday morning crowd was probably one of the slowest shifts of the week, which also meant that the tips were slow too. Janine was on her way back to the kitchen when she noticed Mr. Goldstein, the owner of the Pineapple Grove, sitting at a table in the corner of the upstairs dining room with a younger blond haired man.

As she walked past, she heard the man scoff and laugh loudly, "*Ha, are you kidding me?*"

Mr. Goldstein frowned back at him, "I'm telling you I don't know what else to do. I try my best to get some decent talent in here, but all I end up with are temperamental wannabe divas and their blood sucking agents."

The man laughed again, "...and I'm telling you, you don't even have to deal with that. Why, I bet you can't swing a dead cat in this town, without hitting somebody with talent, take that girl over there for instance." He pointed at Janine from across the empty dining room. "*You there,*" he called after her, waving her over to the table with a sideways nod of his head, "*come over here.*"

She looked behind her first, to make sure that he was talking to her, before pointing shyly at her chest.

"*Yes you,*" he insisted, "come here."

Mr. Goldstein shrugged at her sympathetically, and nodded.

The other man smiled as she walked up to their table, "What is your name young lady?"

Janine pushed her glasses up on her nose shyly and half stuttered, "Ja, Janine sir."

"Can you sing?"

"I don't know," she shrugged, "sort of."

“*You see,*” he put his hand out and smiled at Mr. Goldstein, as if her answer alone had proven his point, then he turned back to her, “Would you sing something for me Janine?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she looked at Mr. Goldstein pleadingly.

The restaurant’s owner smiled softly and rolled his eyes as if to say, *just humor this clown and then we’ll leave you alone*, but instead he nodded and said out loud, “Go ahead Janine, it’s ok.”

Janine pursed her lips and closed her eyes in concentration. She imagined herself all alone on a stage, standing up tall and stately in a long glittery dress, and then she started humming a slow, haunting melody. After a few bars of this, she sang some of the words that were floating around in her head.

“Oh, what is this feelin, this set my heart a reelin, this crazy, crazy feeling inside?”

Where can I go? Cause baby I know, I just can’t hide it.

It’s a longing inside, but what can I do? It’s the I got it bad and that ain’t good blues.”

When she was done, both of the men at the table sat slack jawed for a few seconds, clearly still mesmerized by her performance.

The younger man was the first to come to his senses as he glanced sideways at the owner and exclaimed. “You see, *you see?*”

“Oh balderdash,” Mr. Goldstein frowned accusingly, “she’s a ringer, and you planted her here to make your point.”

“No honestly,” he insisted, “Janine have we ever met before?”

“No sir,” she shook her head and answered innocently.

“You see?” He stuck his tongue out playfully at the owner, then turned back to her, and asked softly, “what was that you were singing Janine?”

“Oh it was nothing, just a song that I made up in my head.”

“You wrote that song?” he asked doubtfully.

“Well I didn’t actually write it,” she corrected him, but then she saw him nod and roll his eyes, until she pointed at her head and continued, “but I have it all up here.”

“Oh you do, do you?” he smirked, “and you could do that again?”

“Oh sure,” Janine laughed, “I have hundreds of them,” but then she paused meaningfully and pointed at her head again, “*up here of course.*”

It wasn’t until later that she found out, that the man was none other than Larry Barry, a small label record producer, songwriter and the regular piano player for the Pineapple Grove.

Lisa Moore stood alone on her tiny balcony looking out over the city of Los Angeles. Darkness had fallen on the hills and the skyline twinkled and sparkled magically as it lay out before her.

Off to the right, she could see the lights of the Central Business District, with the colossal behemoths of the US Bank Tower, the Aon Center, Two California Plaza, and the Wells Fargo Building, all lined up glistening and reaching upward like so many glowing and shimmering phalluses in the midnight black background of the darkened sky. Off to the left, the Hollywood sign sits in the dark, only visible against the backdrop of the city’s lights from Griffith Park. By contrast, in the distance, the Long Beach Naval Base is lit up like a hundred, 10,000-watt, lighthouse beacons in a raging storm, while the light pollution from the flashing marquees and animated signs of

Hollywood Boulevard and the Sunset Strip alone, could probably be seen with the naked eye from another solar system.

Far below where she stood, a steady stream of bright glowing ants marched out the crisscrossed paths of I-405, I-210, CA 110 and the dreaded widow maker that is US-101, weaving like bioluminescent snakes through the city and surrounding neighborhoods. Further up in the hills, faintly tracing out the serpentine roads and terraces of Mulholland Drive, and Benedict Canyon lays the exclusive West Los Angeles neighborhoods, where the stars fall from the sky on a daily basis.

The view was oddly soothing, *it's hard to be lonely with so many people around you*, Lisa thought, *even if you don't know any of them*. Brock was away on business for a few days and she was flying solo, *again*.

Lisa has always been a loner.

She was born quite literally with a silver spoon in her mouth. *Although if her parents had known how toxic silver was as a utensil metal, they would have opted for stainless steel*. Lisa's father was a high profile criminal lawyer, and he only handled the cases of the rich and famous. *If you had to ask his hourly rate, you couldn't afford him*.

Jonathan Mitchell's job was stressful, so stressful that he up and died of a massive coronary at the ripe young age of forty-nine.

Brought up in the Beverly Hills area of Los Angeles, Lisa never really fit in with the social climbers. Having a strong resemblance to a real life Barbie Doll didn't help matters any. Naturally blonde, blue-eyed, and tall, just made the other girls in her class even more vindictive and jealous. *Money does have its benefits*, she thought, *but it only goes so far, and in most cases, enough is just never enough*. *In this town, the name of the game is trying to outdo your neighbor and the only thing positive about that, is that Beverly Hills doesn't have any bad schools*.

Lisa graduated from the prestigious Beverly Hills Preparatory School. Growing up in the lap of luxury she never went hungry, having a chef on the premises around the clock, made it so that she could have “Peking Pork Chops,” or any other gourmet dish prepared for her any time, day, or night, if she wanted.

She also never had to worry about where her clothes came from, and she certainly never had to shop at Wal-Mart. All of her outfits were custom tailored to fit. *Oh sure, they weren't all Choo, Wang, Versace, or Dior, but they were always designed to exact specifications by a more than competent and reputable private dressmaker.*

Lisa was in her junior year in high school, when her father had his heart attack while sitting on the toilet. She was at home that afternoon and tried to perform CPR on him, but having no formal training, her father never regained consciousness. She can still see his naked body, lying on the bathroom floor in a puddle of shit and piss.

Her father had taken out quite a bit of life insurance, but without a steady supply and conservation, even a modest amount of money runs out. Lisa's mother fell into a deep depression shortly after her husband's death and shipped Lisa off to spend that summer with her aunt.

That's where Lisa met Ivan Svartsky, a young hoodlum that lived next door.

One day not long after she arrived, Lisa was sitting in the garden, when she heard someone scrabbling over the ten-foot high stone wall that was the boundary for her aunt's property. She watched curiously, as a young man in a worn, green, army surplus jacket crawled over the top of the wall, and then fell the full height to land flat on his back at her feet.

“*Are you ok?*” she asked, leaning over him and stifling a giggle.

The young man looked up helplessly, “I think I broke my dignity.”

“Your dignity,” she laughed out loud, “are you sure you had any to begin with?”

“Oh funny,” he frowned, “I’m dying and you’re making jokes.”

Lisa put her hands on her hips, “Well nobody told you to just drop in, did they?”

“Touché,” the young man said, sitting up and rubbing his back. He stuck his hand out, then thought better of it, and wiped it off on his pants leg before offering it again.

“Ivan Svartsky,” he said with a twinkle in his eye, “evil genius extraordinaire, at your service.” He did a little bow and took her hand, kissing it lightly, his long brown hair falling down into his face at the gesture.

She blushed and held the kissed hand to her chest for a second, and then came back to her senses, “Lisa Mitchell, hopeless dilettante,” she said giving him her best formal curtsy and southern accent, “it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance sir.”

They both laughed.

Lisa talked to Ivan for hours that day. It was strange for her, because all that most people ever wanted to talk about was themselves. Ivan didn’t, *he talked about everything but himself*. They discussed the half-life of a neutrino, the flight of the bumblebee, they questioned why stars twinkle in the night sky, and they hotly debated the existence of magic in the world.

It was wonderful!

When the sun set that evening, they made plans to meet again the next morning. Lisa figured that what she was doing was wrong, but her aunt didn’t seem to care and probably wouldn’t have noticed anyway, as she was an unusually self

absorbed person that was already starting on her afternoon cocktails, by seven in the morning each day.

The next day Ivan showed up wearing a black leather jacket with shiny metal buckles and zippers all over it. He shushed her as soon as he hit the ground.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He looked both ways and then whispered conspiringly, “I have a surprise for you.”

“Cool,” she said, “but why the secrecy?”

He just buttoned his jacket up higher and smiled, “You’ll see,” he started to climb the wall again, but stopped halfway and turned back. “*Come on,*” he called over his shoulder impatiently, before quickly climbing the rest of the way over and dropping out of sight.

“*Wait, where are you going?*” Lisa asked the wall, before stomping her foot impetuously and then climbing up and following after him.

She was worried at first and already contemplating all the trouble that she was going to be in, as she landed on the other side of the wall and saw Ivan half-sitting, half leaning on the seat of a big, flat black motorcycle. It had bright shiny chrome exhaust pipes, big tires, and a paint job that looked like it was done with a spray bomb. When she walked up, Ivan spun around and handed her a helmet.

“Where did you get all this?” she inquired innocently, waving her hand around in a circle.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said as he swung his leg over the seat and prepared to start the motorcycle.

“*Wait, where are we going?*”

“You sure ask a lot of questions.” Ivan sighed and shook his head, “we’re going crazy, all right?”

While she rolled her eyes again, he fiddled with something under the gas tank and then turned back to her with an intense look on his face. “Come on Lisa, live a little, it won’t hurt you...*much, probably.*” He lowered his head after saying that, but then smiled up at her again, this time showing his near perfect white teeth.

She put her hand on her hip and looked at the sky for a few seconds, then made a face and started strapping the helmet on. By the time she was ready, Ivan already had the motorcycle started and was revving the engine up to keep it running. She hopped on the back and put her arms around his waist, bouncing up and down with excitement.

It felt really strange.

Lisa usually followed the rules growing up, mainly because it was too much hassle to go against the system and deal with the subsequent penalties, but also because she didn’t want to cause trouble for her parents who had enough on their plates as it was.

This was the first time that she ever had physical contact with a boy her age and her stomach was already churning, but the vibration of the motorcycle felt really good between her legs as Ivan twisted the throttle and they tore off, spinning stones all over the road in their wake.

They rode through the suburbs and the city until they came to the foothills, and then kept going until they were out in the middle of nowhere. The thrill of going fast felt like a drug to Lisa and the more they rode, the more she wanted.

“*Go faster,*” she shrieked over the roar of the engine. Instead, Ivan slowed down, pulled off the asphalt, and then started down a steep canyon path. When they reached the bottom, he shut the engine off.

“What are you doing?” she looked around and asked nervously, suddenly realizing that she hardly knew this strange young man.

Ivan took off his helmet and showed his teeth again. “Finally,” he said putting his hands up menacingly and growling, “and here’s where I get to eat you, HA HA HA!”

Lisa’s years of martial arts training kicked in and she instinctively kned him in the crotch. Ivan dropped like a rock and rolled back and forth on the ground moaning and groaning.

“*Oh my god, I was just kidding,*” he whined in a breathless and unusually high-pitched voice from his supine position in the dirt. “I don’t even eat meat you know, I’m a vegetarian,” he stated proudly, but then he appeared to change his mind, “well, I mean, unless you count eggs, dairy, and seafood, *oh and of course chicken,* which isn’t really a meat I don’t think, more like a condiment or something.” He finished the statement by waving his hand airily.

Lisa looked down at Ivan lying helpless on the ground and started giggling, suddenly a strange urge came over her, and she bent down and kissed him hard on the mouth.

The kiss seemed to go on forever, and when she finally surfaced again; it was to a look of total surprise from Ivan. “*Whoa!*” he shook his head back and forth. “Where did that come from? I mean I thought we were just friends.”

She stood back up and started brushing herself off. “We are,” she looked him squarely in the eye and then laughed, “and let’s make sure we keep it that way, right?”

Ivan frowned in confusion, and then stood back up shakily.

Lisa crossed her arms, looked down her nose at him, and then frowned and tapped her forearm impatiently, “I believe you said you had something you wanted to show me” then she narrowed her eyes, “and it better not be your dick.”

Still in a daze, Ivan asked blankly, “What?” and then he appeared to remember why he brought her here in the first place. “Oh yeah, check this out.” He unzipped his leather jacket, slid a

hand inside, and then brought it back out holding what looked like a bunch of large, red, sticks about the size of a candle.

"Oh my god!" Lisa squealed in surprise, "Where did you get dynamite?"

"I have my sources," Ivan smirked and stuck a finger up, "but the real question is, what do you wanna blow up with them?"

Lisa grinned, then looked around and pointed at a cluster of towering Saguaro cacti growing a few yards away, "How about those?"

By the time they were done having fun, the giant cacti patch had been reduced to clumps of sopping wet mush and Lisa's ears were ringing to beat the band. She giggled, then jumped and turned around at a noise. They both sobered up quickly when they saw the red and blue flashing lights of a police cruiser as it was making its way slowly down the entrance to the canyon.

"Shit," Ivan yelled, and ran for the motorcycle, *"we need to get out of here right now!"* He fumbled the keys into the ignition, while Lisa hopped on the back. When the engine roared to life, Ivan let the clutch fly, and the motorcycle careened back and forth spinning wildly all the way up the other side of the canyon until he could get traction again. Once they hit solid pavement, they left the patrol car far behind, with Lisa's heart beating a million miles a minute all the way home.

The next month or so went by like this for the two of them, until one day Ivan was supposed to meet her, and he didn't show up. Two more days passed and there was still no word. Finally, Lisa took it upon herself to go over to his house and ask about him. His mother appeared irate when she answered the door.

"What do you want?" she asked curtly, looking down her nose at Lisa.

“Is Ivan home?”

“He’s gone, go away,” she frowned and turned to leave.

“Wait!” Lisa insisted, “Where did he go?”

Ivan’s mother looked ready to slam the door in her face, but then she smiled humorlessly and opened it a little wider. “If you must know, Ivan has been out of jail on probation, except that he got into trouble again for stealing a motorcycle and now he has to serve out his full twenty year sentence,” she paused and tilted her head to the side, “are you happy?”

Lisa just shook her head sadly and turned around without answering. She didn’t even bother to ask what Ivan had done to go to jail in the first place, but instead she walked back to her aunt’s house in a numb daze.

Not long after that, the new school year started and Lisa moved back home.

She never heard from Ivan again.

If she appeared detached and solitary during her remedial years, her senior year of high school was even worse. She missed her father, she missed Ivan, and most of all she missed being connected with someone, *anyone* who cared about her. Her mother was too caught up in her own misery, to even notice that Lisa was suffering, so she just kept it to herself. Instead, she threw herself into her schoolwork and tried her best to be perfect at everything, probably on a subconscious level, attempting to overcome the helpless, guilty feeling of not being able to do anything for her father when he needed her most.

If money was in short supply in the Mitchell residence in the years following her father’s death, things changed even more dramatically when Lisa graduated from high school and moved out on her own.

She had to adjust her tastes considerably.

Living a champagne lifestyle, on a beer budget, has its way of catching up with you, she thought with a wry smile, fortunately I'm a fast learner.

Right out of high school, Lisa went to college on a full scholarship, and earned an MBA. Little did she know at the time, that it was probably one of the most worthless degrees that she could have ever received. *It did land me a few jobs in the business though, and that eventually led me to the position I have now.*

The only thing that sucks about her job is the fact that she still doesn't have a life. Her career is just so all encompassing that there really isn't much time for anything else, *eat, sleep, work, then repeat.* Lisa frowned, *I make good money, but at what point is the money enough, and which is more important, your career or your life?*

To her it sounded like the choice that an armed robber might give you, *but it's true,* she thought, *how much of my life have I thrown away in order to get where I am today, and am I really happy?*

Lisa's analytical side kicked in.

Happy: *Webster's Dictionary defines happy as, feeling pleasure and enjoyment because of your life situation: showing or causing feelings of pleasure and enjoyment: pleased or glad about a particular situation, event, etc.*

While slightly vague, the definition pretty much described how Lisa felt, *but I still feel like I'm missing something.*

She turned around and walked back into the empty house, her footsteps echoing hollowly around the living room. *I'm probably just depressed, maybe doing some housework will snap me out of it.*

Being at work all the time, didn't leave much time for cleaning either. *It isn't like we make much of a mess, it's just that*

things have a way of piling up after a while. She walked over to the antique roll top desk and pushed the lid up to open it. Stacks of papers fell forward as she did this and she had to jump to catch them before they spilled out onto the floor.

It looks like here's as good a place as any to start, she smiled and went to work.

Once Lisa had cleared off the top of the desk, then she started attacking the little cubbyhole shelves that lined the back. One of the holes had three unopened letters in it. She pulled the letters out and opened them up without thinking. One was a bill, and another was the application for car registration of a vehicle that she didn't recognize. She flipped the application over and looked at the name and address.

Oops, oh crap, I just opened someone else's mail. The name on the document was Bruce Connard, and he apparently lives in Beverly Hills. She frowned; *Hmmm, I wonder how we got his stuff?*

Momentarily confused, Lisa shook her head and stuffed the letters back in the cubbyhole, making a mental note to ask Brock about them later. She moved on to cleaning the drawers out, and when she was done, she got ready for bed.

All alone, she stretched out on the king sized mattress for a minute before curling up into a little ball, wrapping her arms around her legs and holding herself tightly, as she felt the sudden urge to cry.

It's funny how your life falls into a routine after such a short period of time. Lisa stifled a sob; *Most of learning is just developing habits that produce desirable results through spaced repetition anyway.*

Sometimes it's good, because then you don't have to think, and sometimes it's bad too, because then you have a tendency to stop thinking about the things that really matter. Then one day, before you know it, your life has passed you by

and you missed it all, because you were on cruise control and just weren't paying attention.
