

Carmen
By Vern Seward

Chapter 1

I should have known what she was when I first saw her. It was the eyes..., you know what I mean? You can always tell by the eyes. It's not like what you see in the movies where they can make their eyes so alluring that you can't help but look into them. Or they have green pupils, or no pupils at all, just solid black orbs for eyes like in the sci-fi or horror flicks. No, they look normal. It's *how* they look at you, like they see you, but don't. Or maybe they see something else, something less than their equal. I don't know. It's hard to put into words, but once you've seen how their eyes see you, you'll never forget it.

There was something else about that woman too. Her brow was straight. Her nose had a slightly arched bridge and not overly broad. The shape of her eyes were somewhat almond, suggesting Asian heritage, but with the long, full lashes of a Hispanic. High cheek bones and a mouth with lips that aren't full, but present, all on a canvas of olive skin. She was not an extraordinary beauty, that would have attracted too much and maybe the wrong kind of attention. Still, she was not hard to look at. It's as though she had selected the bits and pieces of her countenance from a catalog with a goal to focus attention on her eyes.

Yeah, I should have known what she was. Or maybe I've spent far too much time reading these stupid comics. I'm starting to think that anything out of the ordinary has to have some abnormal origin. In my world a string of green stop lights isn't coincidence, but the machinations of some innate and blossoming power in me where I can force traffic lights to do my bidding. A car that I dodged just in time isn't due to blind luck, but due to my enhanced ability to sense and evade danger. And women don't see me because I am invisible to them and those that do must have something wrong with them, or something weird about them. I'm not a man to those that do see me, I'm prey, an unsuspecting mouse in the eyes of a huge owl, and she saw me. So, yeah, I should have known what she was.

I met her at a Sci-Fi Book Fair. In hindsight I suppose that's a logical place for someone like her to prowl. Guys like me with no social life to speak of would be easy pickings. There had been rumors out on the Net about folks missing after Comic Conventions and Sci-Fi fairs. No one paid much notice. The stories sounded too much like urban legends: mysterious women, people vanishing, weird lights, strange smells. Hell, that's stock and trade for conventions like these. People dress up in all manner of costumes to make themselves look like their imaginary heroes. Not just the nerdy types either. I've seen guys who could really be Superman or Wolverine. Their costumes looked so authentic you'd half expect them to take off and fly or extrude blades from their knuckles. In a jungle of heroes, aliens, elves, and anime wannabes, no one would notice someone like her, even with those eyes.

I know because I hadn't noticed her, not until she approached me at one of the booths that sold vintage comics. I was looking for an Iron Man first issue (I like Iron Man) when she sidled up next to me, acting as if she were looking for a comic too. That's when I notice the scent. It's something else that's hard to describe. It wasn't heavy, in fact I only caught whiffs of it whenever she moved. It was as if someone sprayed a delicate perfume on a bit of salami. I know, weird, right? Maybe I was just hungry. It had that floral essence that seems to be popular these days, but there was a tiny hint of processed meat. Like maybe she spent time in a delicatessen.

Sensing someone near me, I looked up and was captured by her eyes. She smiled, at least I think she did, and simply said hello. On the extraordinarily rare occasions where a pretty woman has addressed me I've never managed to say anything like I've imagined I would say. My mind goes blank, my mouth gets dry and I look slack-faced as though I'm coming off a high. This time was no different. Instead of a smooth line like, "Well, hello beautiful. How about you and me find a quiet place and bare our souls over coffee or, maybe, a more adult beverage?", I only managed to grunt hello in return.

She made some vapid comment about the condition of the comics for sale. I think my reply was equally vapid, I really don't remember. All I can recall is that we talked about nothing for a few minutes, then planned to meet somewhere for drinks.

Drinks!

Me!

With a beautiful woman!!

Who had funky eyes!

Why wouldn't I go? It wasn't like I had a little black book filled with the phone numbers of my sexual conquests. If I had such a book its pages would be blank, all but one. Maryellen Jensen. After the play I had a bit part in during my senior year in high school Maryellen came backstage to personally congratulate me for my brief performance. She had eyes too, but hers were full of teenage longing. Maybe even love. We hid among old costumes and let our hormones rule. We were both virgins, we had no real idea what we were doing, only that we needed to do it. It happened too quickly. And then she was gone. I never saw Maryellen again. I had heard rumors that her family moved out of town. No one knew where. Maybe I should have looked harder for her, but I didn't.

Since then my luck with women has been abysmal. I believe it's my fault. I think too much, which leads me to say too much. And in the end I send any woman thinking of giving me a chance running in the opposite direction. I've pretty much given up. If I were religious I'd apply for the priesthood. Instead of the Bible I read science fiction and comics, and dream of being someone I'm not, doing things my body and spirit aren't capable of. And I dream my dreams alone.

Yet there I was meeting a great looking woman for drinks and... what? What did I think would happen after we ordered our alcohol? Find a room somewhere? The thought of baring my body in front of anyone, least of all a good looking woman, scares me. I'm just not much to look at. I mean, I could probably workout more. Ok, I could probably work out. Period. I'm not flabby, you understand, but I shouldn't challenge my grandma to an arm wrestling match either. (She's pretty feisty for a woman pushing 90.)

Butter Muscles. That's what my cousin Skippy called me. He was naturally athletic and he's the only person I've ever known to actually use those barbell sets you can find in nearly every basement, back porch or garage in America. Skippy never had problems finding gorgeous girls to have sex with. He was big and ruggedly handsome, and he was a nice guy. What girl wouldn't

give it up to him? He was also my best friend and he tried to get me into shape and coach me in my early efforts at gaining a girlfriend. Try as he might, Skippy's patience was no match for my laziness and low self-esteem. Skippy continued getting the girls and I continued reading and dreaming of getting the girls.

So, now, there I would be, alone with a woman who could easily get someone far better looking than me, and I had absolutely nothing to offer. No rock-hard abs, no sexual experience..., hell, I hadn't even shaved for three days. Yet she didn't seem to care. That really should have been the second red flag. Why would a woman who looked as nice as she care to meet up with a hygienically challenged, butter-muscled nerd like me? In public!

Ok, ok, I'm not hideous, but as I've said, I'm no prize either. She had initiated the conversation and suggested that we meet, and she did so with a hint of ... lust? Longing? All it takes is a hint of either to get my engine running. Still, if it was longing I had sensed, it definitely wasn't the kind I felt from Maryellen whose need was driven by infatuation and hormones. This woman's need came from something else, more primal. Loneliness maybe? In the end it didn't matter. Her need paired my terminally unrequited need for intimacy, physical or otherwise, with someone of the opposite sex. It was a chance even I couldn't ignore. So, I went to meet her.

Chapter 2

The place was called Jimmy Jam's and it is a place most people wouldn't look at twice in passing. I had to use the GPS on my phone to find it, and even then I wasn't sure if the joint was a tavern, restaurant, lounge, or something else entirely. It was dark inside even though there was enough light in the twilight sky to penetrate well into most buildings with windows. The walls and ceiling were all painted black and what few light fixtures there were offered feeble illumination. There was a bar, one of those old massive oak types with a brass foot rail, except this bar and the foot rail had seen much better days. I suppose the same could be said for the bartender. He was a wiry guy with a long face made longer by a wispy salt and pepper goatee and thin gray hair pulled back into a stringy ponytail. He wore a leather motorcycle vest adorned with lots of metal studs and chains, so much so that he jingled softly when he moved, which he seemed to do constantly. In a surprisingly rich voice he asked me what I wanted. I'm not much of a drinker so I don't frequent bars and have no idea what I should be ordering in a place like this. I took a quick look around and saw that beer seemed to be the beverage of choice for most patrons, so I asked for one.

"What kind?"

Kind? They have kinds of beer? He pointed up to a chalkboard over the bar on which, in a scrawl any doctor would have been proud of, was a list of at least twenty types of beer. Stouts, lagers, IPAs. There were beers made with pumpkin, spices, even a blueberry beer! I know there are different brands of beer, but this was a whole new world. The bartender jingled his impatience so I picked a stout and hoped for the best.

As I waited for my drink I took a look around again, this time to find her. My eyes had adjusted to the dark and I could make out much more than I did when I first walked in. The booths along the wall opposite the bar extended towards a dully lit exit sign in the back. She was in the last booth facing the door I came in. She had likely seen me walk in, making a fool of myself at the bar. Still, when our eyes met she smiled and gave a little wave. I couldn't help but smile back and

waved in kind, which likely made me look more feminine than I'd like. Even at that distance and in such low light her eyes were immediately noticeable. It was as if they possessed a subtle, but definite inner illumination. They didn't glow, they just stood out ever so slightly more than her other features, except maybe her smile, which was pleasant and quite feminine, but had the barest hint of an innate assuredness that bordered on frightening. It reminded me of the Cheshire Cat in Alice Through the Looking Glass, a smile that was only lukewarm, that seemed to be cooled by whatever lay behind it.

Mister Jingles delivered the beer with a thump along with a receipt which I paid. I took a draw of the dark, foamy liquid in the sizable mug before me. It was bitter and sweet and cold and delicious, and for the first time since meeting her I was focused on something else entirely.

I like stouts.

I took another pull from the mug, wiped my mouth on my shirt sleeve, and walked back to the booth. As I walked I could feel the cool stout make its way down my throat and into my stomach. There it kindled a warmth that spread throughout my body. By the time I got to the booth my brow and underarms were damp. The truth is I couldn't tell if it was the beer hitting an empty stomach or the thought of me in a rather intimate setting with a beautiful woman that created the warmth I was experiencing. But along with the warmth, I was feeling a bit more sure of myself. When I got close enough for her to hear me without shouting, I said, "I'm glad you're here. I wasn't sure you'd show."

After I said it I immediately wished I hadn't said the last part. It sounded so very lame, like I'm used to women not showing up on dates, which I wasn't because I didn't go on dates. Still, it sounded pathetic.

"Actually," she said with a smile, "I was thinking the same thing about you. That you wouldn't come. I mean, why would you? You don't know me."

I sat on the bench in the booth opposite her. With the cold stout in front of me, a radiant warmth flowing through me, and those eyes before me, all I could do was grin a big stupid grin. My mind, which had been racing through all of the possible outcomes of our meeting before I stepped into the bar, now seemed to be idling. I had nothing to say.

Of course, now I can think of a million things to ask her. Who was she? Where did she come from? Why in the hell was she talking to me? All would have been valid questions to offer at that moment, but the only thing I offered was that godawful grin. I suppose that since I wasn't saying anything, she must have felt obligated to fill in the void.

"Hi," she offered her hand. "I'm Carmen."

Still grinning, I took her hand over my stout. "I'm Paul. Very nice to meet you."

I shook her hand and released it, but she didn't release, not at first. She held on, palm to palm, then slowly loosened her grip and let her fingers slide pass mine. Her skin was soft and supple, but I could feel the underlying muscles that hinted at strength. Her fingers slid until only the tips of our middle fingers were touching. I dared not move and we stayed that way for a second or so more before she finally broke contact.

"I like your hands," she said.

By then I had stopped grinning. My throat was desert dry. I took a gulp of stout, suppressed a burp, and said, "I like your hands too." Then added, "Do you play the piano?"

Chapter 3

Sometimes I have no idea where the shit that burbles out of my mouth comes from. Why on earth did I ask her if she played the piano? Was it because her hands had strength, or because she had smooth fingers? Maybe it was because she had fingers instead of claws or tentacles? What?

I suppose I could have said something even more stupid like compliment her on the color of her nail polish.

Wait... Did she wear nail polish?

I don't remember. She did have nails though, not especially long, but they were strong and rounded, and clean. Odd that I remember them being clean, but can't recall if they were colored.

I did that once, compliment a woman on her nails. I was on a rare date, the woman..., Susan..., Sue, I think her name was, had just finished chowing down a thirty dollar steak dinner like she hadn't eaten in weeks. I think I had fish. Sue actually pushed her chair back from the table and patted an ample area where her abs should have been. "Tasty," she said and finished the merlot in her glass.

I had planned that date a week in advance, reserved a table in a nice but not-too-expensive steakhouse, bought a new shirt, and I even made several attempts to workout. When I picked her up, however, my date looked like she'd just rolled out of bed five minutes before I arrived. Her dress was clean but ruffled; it was likely in the dryer minutes earlier. Her curly hair was smushed in the back and on one side. She wore no makeup, which I really didn't care about, but the lack of it combined with the other details contributed to her unkempt appearance, and pretty much said to me that I wasn't worth the effort. Great confidence builder. Still, I tried to make the best of it.

She spoke very little throughout the evening answering my questions with sentences that curtailed further chatting on the subject matter at the moment, and she seemed completely disinterested in me. I think she asked how old I was and if I had any brothers. So, my nail polish compliment was my last desperate attempt at conversation, which failed. I think she smiled and thanked me, then eyed my picked over fish. I had it boxed and took it home after dropping off Sue. She actually asked me if we were going out again. "I don't think so," I told her. She didn't look too disappointed.

Carmen, on the other hand, acted as if my question warranted a reasonable response. "No," she replied to my piano query, her smile somewhat diminished. "I've always wanted to play, I

just never took the time to learn." She paused as if contemplating, then asked if I played an instrument.

"Nope. And I can't sing either. I think I'm tone deaf."

"You have a great voice. I bet you could sing if you put your mind to it."

And on the conversation went, sliding from one topic to another as easily as day slips into night and back again. This was a novelty to me. Carmen seemed to want to know me. She asked about my family and friends. She wanted to know more about my job, which even bores me to tears at times, but she hardly blinked as I explained the intricacies of computer server administration.

It seemed to be all about me, and that was new, exhilarating, and worrisome because whenever I asked about her background she'd answer, but with little detail. And we somehow wound up back talking about me. I started to feel like I was being manipulated, but not so much so that I wanted to stop the conversation. Hell, I hadn't spoken so much to a single woman...ever. If she wanted to know my life's story I was very willing to give it to her. And why not? I'm no rock climbing, village saving adventurer, but I have a life worth talking about. I think.

The conversation had been meandering for about an hour when Mr. Jingles offered to refresh my drink. That's when I noticed she hadn't been drinking. Not even a glass of water. Of course I offered to buy her something, but she politely refused claiming a sensitive stomach. Along with another stout for me, I had the bartender bring her water anyway.

I can understand what she may be dealing with stomach-wise, my gut has given me fits as far back as I can remember. Indigestion, gas, "...that burning sensation," were all too familiar to me. I had it checked once. The doctor said it was because I internalize stress, and I have poor eating habits. He gave me a prescription for a case of liquid antacid and told me to chug a half a bottle whenever I got serious flareups, which was often back then. God! I hated that stuff, but it worked. Now my gut turns sour not nearly as often, and there is less stress in my life, or maybe I should say there *was* less stress in my life.

Maybe that's why her stomach was messed up. Maybe she was like me in a way and internalizes her stress. But what the hell did she have to be stressed about? She looked great, dressed well, seemed confident, maybe even a bit over confident, which tends not to be a bedfellow of stress. And she seemed to be enjoying my company as much as I enjoyed hers.

That was another odd thing, when I was in that bar talking to her my stomach felt fine, and that's when I should have been stressed out the most. It was like I had known her for a long time, like we were old friends catching up on each other's lives. I felt at ease, even if I was not entirely in control of the situation.

And as odd as that was, what happened next was even odder.

She got up, walked around to my side of the booth and slid in beside me. All the while she held my gaze with those almost luminous eyes.

When she sat I got a cloud of whatever perfume she was wearing and I noticed it was different. The meaty component had disappeared. I don't know why.

I hadn't noticed the phone in her hand when she changed seats, but as she sat she turned on the device and brought up a photo. "This is where I was last weekend," she said, smiling.

It was a landscape shot, sun setting, puffy clouds shaded crimson, white and blue. There was a large body of water in the photo too. It could have been an ocean or a large lake. I know a little something about photography and this was not a snapshot typical of vacationers, this photo had good composition, exposure, focus. In short, it looked postcard perfect.

She swiped her finger across the screen to reveal another shot, which was of a beach and it was equally impressive. Before I could comment she swiped again, then again. Photo after perfect photo moved across the small screen. Quaint nooks, musicians playing and singing, seabirds hanging in a blue backdrop. Each photo would have made any travel blogger proud. "Where is this," I finally asked?

"Dunedin," she replied instantly. "Dunedin, Florida. I was in Tampa for a conference and saw it in a hotel brochure, so I decided to check it out. I'm glad I did."

She continued to flip through the photos, commenting every so often on shots she thought needed explanation, but she could have kept quiet and I would have enjoyed the show. "I don't know where Dunedin is," I admitted after the show was over.

"I doubt you would. It's a little place, barely worth noticing."

"But you seemed to have captured everything that would make it worth noticing. You've done a really nice job shooting these. What kind of camera did you use?" I do know a bit about cameras too, enough to know that the type would make little difference in the hands of a knowledgeable photographer, which she apparently was.

"Oh, I took these with my phone."

"No way!" I was truly surprised. "This phone?" I asked pointing to the device we'd viewed the photos on.

"One and the same," she replied with a smile that expressed true pleasure with my compliment of her photo taking chops. She was silent for a moment, then said, "Maybe we can go some time. To Dunedin, I mean."

I actually felt my eyes widen and jaw drop. I must have looked like one of those big Japanese goldfish frozen in mid-gulp because she quickly added, "I don't mean now. Just, you know..., I thought that maybe...", and her sentence trailed to silence.

I had, by then, managed to shut my trap, but I believe there was still a lot more of my eye-whites showing than normal. "Umm, s-sure!" I stammered, not knowing what else to say.

I know. Inside of three hours I met an attractive woman, had drinks with her, and now we're planning road trips together. And this from a guy whose last date, which had been quite a while

ago I might add, went away sobbing because of something I said. Or was it something I didn't say? I never could figure that one out.

Road trips? I love them! I don't take nearly enough of them, and we certainly didn't take many when I was a kid, though I do remember one. If the here and now is the sun then this memory has a plutonian size and orbit, making it tough to resolve, but I do remember sitting in the back of my father's car and seeing the tops of trees, signs, lampposts, and stoplights go by. And I recall stepping out onto a rutted gravel driveway and facing a field of corn. There's not much more to the memory, and the only other road trips I recollect are those taken since becoming an adult (which some may argue hasn't happened yet). I just don't go anywhere, except to the occasional comic convention.

Yet I'd just assented to drive to Dunedin with this woman sometime in the future, which meant there was a future with her; at least there seemed to be from her perspective.

Maybe that's how it's supposed to work. Maybe if the planets are properly aligned you find someone for whom you feel unusually drawn to, and that attraction is, in itself a scary force due to its overwhelming and unpredictable nature. You can't control it. The best you can do is to hang on and hope that the attraction is mutual.

Chapter 4

We continued chatting, side by side, nearly shoulder to shoulder, now that she sat on my side of the booth and made no effort to return to her side. Being that close to her allowed me to see her in detail. My photographer's eye easily picked up the highlights in her hair, the arch of her nose, the pencil point skin mole just below her right eye. I saw the way the corners of her eyes crinkled when she smiled and laughed, which happened often during our conversation.

I mentioned her perfume before. Sitting so close to her one would think that you'd get a constant reminder, like being surrounded by a light fog, but not with her. I did catch a whiff of the slightly herbal and entirely pleasant scent when she sat next to me, but the air between us was largely clear of it. There were occasional hint of it when she moved, but that was it.

I found myself not wanting to speak, only wanting to listen to her. Though she adeptly avoided any conversation about her past she literally overflowed on nearly any subject: politics, philosophy, art (we stayed in the realm of modern media, movies mostly). She enjoys mysteries, intelligent comedies and the occasional chick flick. I can live with that.

Mr. Jingles stopped by again and this time she agreed to a glass of merlot. I ordered another stout (three is my limit) and the conversation lapsed into queer silence. It was comfortable, at least it was for me. I didn't feel the need to fill the void with words, and she had certainly held up her end of the conversation so far. A break on her side was well deserved. So we waited for our drinks to arrive and listened to the noise of the bar. The steady drone of multiple conversations took on a strange rhythm, seeming to align with the beat of the music playing from a jukebox, or maybe it was the other way around. Every now and then the drone was punctuated with a burst of laughter. Glasses tinkling, chairs scraping the tile floor, a cough, a greeting, all merged into a stew of sound that was pleasant. I closed my eyes letting the rhythm take me and I began to sway a bit to the beat.

"You hear it too?" she asked, startling me from my reverie. "I'm sorry," she quickly added. "I've ruined your groove."

"No. Nothing to apologize for. You just surprised me." I closed my eyes for a second and found the beat again, then opened them and answered her question. "Yes, I hear it. It's not the music that's playing. It's something else entirely."

"It's the rhythm of this place. It's why I come here. It's different each time, but it's the same somehow." She looked at me quizzically. "Does that make any sense?"

I closed my eyes again and found the beat. The background music had changed, but the rhythm of the bar had not. I smiled and nodded. "Yeah. It makes perfect sense."

I started to sway again and when I opened my eyes and looked at her I found she was swaying too, in sync with me. Our shoulders touched as we moved in syncopation with the beat of the bar, eyes closed, smiling. At least I was.

"Here we are," said Mr. Jingles, popping us out of our booth dance. "A merlot for the lady, a stout for the gentleman." He smiled revealing a full set of teeth with one top incisor framed in gold. After placing the drinks on the table he turned to leave, hesitated for a second, then walked away. Carmen and I looked at each other, silently wondering what Mr. Jingles had on his mind. We shrugged.

I picked up my stout and raised it slightly, she took up her merlot and we touched glasses. "I'm not sure what to toast to," I said. She only smiled. "I know," I said. "To new friends."

"To new friends," she repeated and we touched glasses again with a light ting contributing to the syncopated susurrations of the bar.

I took a sip, so did she from her glass, then she closed her eyes again and started to sway.

"Would you like to dance?" The question sounded as if it came from someone else, but I had asked it. How I managed to was beyond me. She opened her eyes slowly, her smile broadened, she looked at me with those luminous eyes and said, "Yes."

My mind went numb. It was as if I was possessed by a confident manly spirit. We slid out of the booth, I took her left hand into my right, my left hand came to rest on the small of her back. Her right hand rested on my left arm above the elbow. We both closed our eyes, found the beat and started to move. The part of me that would normally be yelling questions and filling me with doubt shrunk and I let the Cassanova spirit that had me rule the moment.

I don't dance, at least I didn't think I could, but there I was, moving, leading her, dancing with her. In public. And I didn't care. The music we heard had us: the feel of her body against mine, her breath, her hair lightly brushing my cheek, I was drowning in a flood of sensations that I had not known existed until then. It was overwhelming and I never wanted it to stop. Carmen had rested her head on my chest and I immediately felt the need to protect her, take care of her. Something inside me, something long dormant was awakening. It grew as we danced. It pushed out doubt and replaced it with a confidence one finds in proving a fact. In those moments,

moving to a rhythm no one else seemed to hear, I felt like I could do anything, be anything. I felt whole, unafraid. I felt like a man.

It seemed like up to that point I had been pretending to be a man. I did what I needed to do to get by and it had been enough for me, but there, at that moment, it wasn't enough anymore. It wasn't that I wanted someone to be dependent on me. I would have gotten a puppy if that's all it was. What I felt was a belonging, like a puzzle piece placed in the right spot. Maybe other people go through life always feeling like they belong; they think no more of it than they might consider the marvel of sunshine, but for me it was a new experience. No one says they want to be a nerd, an outcast, and alone when they grow up, but somehow many people wind up being just that. And once you are in that state it's hard to see another way of being. Dancing with Carmen opened a doorway to a new world, one where I felt strength and assuredness flowing from within. It was like I had put on one of the silly superhero costumes people wear at the comic convention, but somehow this costume was real and I wasn't a mild mannered reporter for some fictitious newspaper, I was his alter-ego, the strange being from another world with powers far beyond those of mortal men.

We danced, slowly for several minutes oblivious to our surroundings except the rhythm of the bar. We breathed each other's breath, felt each other's pulse and soon the rhythm of the bar was replaced by a beat that was unique to us, a syncopation derived from the blood coursing through our veins and the air rushing in and out of our lungs. It was an alignment of thought and emotion, so much so that I couldn't tell if what was going on in my head was my own creation or something she had somehow implanted there and had taken root. And it didn't matter, not to me, not in that moment.

I wanted to kiss her, but not as an expression of passion or love, I wanted to somehow complete the merging, to lose myself in her and to have her lost in me. She pulled her head back from my chest and looked up at me with those mesmerizing eyes. I started to move my lips towards hers.

She backed away.

Chapter 5

Suddenly I felt as if every pair of eyes in the bar were on me. I felt naked and ridiculous. Doubt rushed back into my mind as if to the rescue. Why would this beauty kiss me? I was sure that behind those many eyes in the bar the same question had been asked, and now answered. Of course she wouldn't kiss him. Someone like her kissing something like him? Ha!

I blinked, feeling the connection between us had broken. Then all I heard was the drone of bar noise, a peel of laughter (at me perhaps), and pop music from the jukebox. I started to sweat, my palms moistened, my underarms felt like a rain forest. I stepped back from her, smiling awkwardly. "That was...umm, nice," I offered, avoiding her eyes, and moved to retreat to the relative isolation of the booth again. She held onto my right hand, squeezed it firmly, then let go and sat opposite me.

She wasn't smiling, her lips had all but disappeared. A thin straight line had replaced the smile and her eyebrows knotted slightly. She studied her merlot, but it was obvious her mind was not on the drink.

I reached over and touched her hand. She pulled back from my touch, ever so slightly. A less observant person would have missed it. "Did I do something wrong?" I asked. I was sure I caused the moment to disintegrate, but I couldn't discern when or how.

I'm a fairly intelligent guy, but when it comes to deciphering the subtle cues that pass between people in a relationship I'll be the first to admit to how clueless I am. I never seem to pick up relational innuendo, and I almost never "get it". A woman could be flirting with me and everyone in the room will notice it but me. If she smiles at me I don't assume it's because she likes what she sees, I think she's just being nice, like the smile you give to someone you make eye contact with as you pass on the street. It's a nicety, nothing more. A woman would have to club me over the head before I'd notice her interest, and then I'd question it. Carmen had pretty much clubbed me, knocked me out, and dragged me to her cave.

But now she appeared to be kicking me out and I don't know why.

At my question she sighed and shook her head. "No," she said finally. "You didn't do anything wrong. It's me."

I argued internally as to the validity of her answer. How could it have been her? All she has been all evening was fantastic. She did everything right and it all felt natural to me, until it didn't anymore. The many voices of doubt were efficiently demolishing the structure of confidence I had constructed within me earlier. It was too good to be true. I was wrong to allow myself to be that open. Who the hell did I think I was dancing like that? She was probably embarrassed, too embarrassed to continue. And kiss her? What the hell was I thinking?

I looked up from my internal turmoil and met her eyes.

"It wasn't you," she insistently said as if she read my thoughts. "I've got a lot of baggage, things I need to deal with before I can get close to anyone. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have approached you. It's just that, well, you looked like someone I wanted to meet."

I gave her a halfhearted smile, but in my head all I heard was, "LIAR!!!"

When I looked into her eyes then I only saw the calculating coldness of a predator. I wasn't anything more than an emotional meal, a rabbit in the jaws of a jackal. I should have paid attention to the warning signs and ran when the first red flag popped up. She just needed to make herself feel good. Maybe she had just come out of a bad relationship, one where she got the crappy end, and she just needed to make sure that she still had it, whatever "it" is. Guys like me fall for it every time.

Yeah, I really should have known what she was from the start.

We sat there in the booth for a while, not saying anything. My stout had lost its allure. What was cold, brisk and flavorful was now tepid and bland. I sipped at it because I didn't know what else to do.

Finally, and with purpose, she took out her wallet.

Even with all the self doubt there has always been a bit of chivalry in me. " I got this," I told her of the bill. She hesitated then reached over and took my hand, squeezed it, and said, "You're a great guy."

Then she got up and walked out of the bar.

I watched her walk away, and each movement was recorded indelibly in my mind. The sway of her hips, the fall of her hair, her purposeful stride all replay whenever I close my eyes. And they all lead up to the final moment when she reached the door. Before she opened it she turned her head and looked at me, her eyes glowing, her smile, though diminished, had returned. Then she opened the door and was gone.

I sat there, numb and dumb. Even the voices in my head were quiet. No thoughts, no movement..., hell, I hardly took a breath.

Mr. Jingles appeared. "Need anything else?" he asked almost harshly.

I looked up at him. The concern that wasn't in his voice was on his thin face. I shook my head. He left and soon returned with the check, which he placed where my stout glass had been. I looked at it, then realized there was something in my hand, the hand she had held. A slip of paper with a phone number.

Mr. Jingles had been standing there when I made the discovery. I looked up at him and he smiled, gold-rimmed tooth sparkling. He picked up the check and said, "On the house." He then patted me on the shoulder and walked away.

End