

Long thin shadows reached deep into the room. The page before me took on an orange tint like the glow of a distant fire. I looked up from my reading and gazed out the window. It had gotten much later than I'd thought. The sun hung low over the horizon, and the vast cityscape before me shimmered like a forest set ablaze. Shards of light bounced off the facades of nearby buildings, glimmered for an instant, then faded like so many dying embers. Lines of air traffic glistened in the distance as commuters made their way home from work. But this was no ordinary night, so I had to make haste.

Across the room Mother lay propped up in her bed, dozing with her half-finished meal before her, still clutching a fork. Her long wiry hair, once jet black but now smoky gray, cascaded down her neck. Her slow shallow breaths were hardly audible over the din of the portable holovision beside her, where tiny images twirled and spun. She had eaten more than usual tonight, much to my relief. If it were not for my daily visits she would hardly touch her food. It seemed as if my mere presence were her sole reason for survival. Still, her once-supple figure had grown frail and thin, and her pale skin hung loosely over her brittle frame. The bones of her skull seemed to peer from beneath her face like a macabre mask, a constant reminder that death was stalking her in slow, measured steps.

I walked over beside her quietly so as not to disturb her rest. I reached out to remove the fork from her hand, then stopped, fearing my touch might stir her from her slumber. *Perhaps it would just be best to turn off the nightly news instead,* I thought. But as I went for the control knob an image caught my attention: A fisherman was displaying his catch while officials waved Geiger counters over it. My heart sank, as I began to listen to the broadcast.

"In fact, other fishermen in the area have also reported an increase in the number of radioactive fish turning up in their catches, much to the dismay of environmental officials. Those who've been here long enough are well aware of the history of this place, like this native who agreed to be interviewed."

An elderly man sat smoking a pipe aboard his modest vessel, speaking in his tribal tongue while subtitles below spelled out his words. Time had etched deep wrinkles in his weathered face. His hand trembled as he motioned toward the horizon, and his speech was slow and methodical.

"Years ago, before the Warming, there were secret facilities not far from here — nuclear labs. Some of the waste leaked into the rivers, so we never fished or hunted near them. After all the ice melted, the flood made this bay and most of the bad spots were under the water, so it was better. The warmer water gave us more fish, so we didn't worry. Then a few people got sick, and they gave us these things to check if the fish were okay to eat or if the radiation was too high. For a long time, only the fish in the south end of the bay were bad. So we stayed farther north. But now even the fish up near the islands are no good, and we have to throw them back — more and more lately. It's hard to catch enough to make a living. I hope they can do something about it."

The image dissolved to an aerial shot of a chain of rocky islands, and a voice-over continued the disturbing story. "The islands he was referring to are the remote archipelago of Novaya Zemlya, long used as an atomic test site by the former Soviet Union. Huge amounts of radioactive waste were stored on this once frozen outpost, and the Barents and Kara Seas surrounding it were used as a dumping ground for the Russian nuclear industry. The permafrost in this region used to reach half a meter deep, so it was believed to be a safe place to harbor such a danger. But global warming brought drastic changes throughout the Arctic, and areas once locked in by glacial ice are now open seas. Steps were taken long ago to protect the hazardous materials from the corrosive effects of seawater by encasing much of the waste in a plastic-like polymer designed to last hundreds of years. However, engineers now fear that the continual bombardment for decades by high levels of radiation has weakened the molecular structure of this polyester sealant, allowing deadly radionuclides to leach into the surrounding environment."

A seabird swooped down over the water and retrieved a fish, then fed it to its babies on a windy cliff face. "At this point the extent of the contamination remains

unknown, but an effort is now underway to determine how widespread it may be by collecting samples from the local fish, bird, and marine mammal populations. Until the study's findings are released, one can only hope that creatures such as these have not nested here at their own peril."

I abruptly switched off the unit. *Why is it, I thought, that whenever one problem facing our planet is solved another one arises to take its place? How long will I have to labor to undo the damage caused by the shortsightedness of previous generations?*

Once again I gazed down at my sleeping mother, wondering how anyone living during the time of her youth could have failed to foresee the dire consequences of their actions. Exasperated, I stormed out of the room.

I whisked through the ward and past the reception area with just a nod. I had no time to spare and was now in no mood for small talk, but since the sole nurse at the desk was on the phone, I was able to forgo the usual pleasantries. The elevator doors opened the moment I pressed the call button, and I quickly ducked inside. The steady rhythm of respirators and cardiac monitors fell silent as the doors drew closed. I took a deep breath and exhaled, savoring the brief moment of peace as I descended toward the transit center. The instant I arrived a wall of sound assailed me as the doors opened to reveal a swarm of people buzzing like angry bees. I scanned the room, found my gate, and headed through the throng to catch the train I needed.

The boarding area consisted of a series of automated sliding glass doors punctuated by white columns. Near the tops of the columns a hologram roared to life as each train approached, and a tone sounded. As every announcement was made, the image of a woman signed the identical information for the deaf, and all eyes followed her as eager commuters shuffled to the front of the line. Luck was with me this evening as the Eastbound Colfax was just now arriving. Though the seats were full, I didn't mind standing, having sat for hours reading to Mother. With a lurch the car moved ahead, and I was on my way at last.

I glanced around at my fellow riders. An unruly child across from me was in full witch's regalia and obviously very excited this evening — what child wouldn't be on Halloween night? She refused to sit quietly and stood on the seat banging on the transport window.

We passed a billboard depicting an Asian woman holding a bowl of rice with the full moon over her shoulder. "Luna Rice," it read, "A bounty from heaven."

*Quite a clever slogan for a product grown on the moon, I thought.*

The little girl turned to her mother and said, "Moon!" then pointed to the moon and star pattern on her costume. She screamed the word again, but her mother seemed not the least concerned at the noise she was making. As she signed MOON to her daughter while nodding her head, I took a closer look and noticed a hearing aid partially concealed by her hair, and it all made sense. Suddenly she realized her daughter's antics had caught the attention of the entire cabin. She smiled and tried to calm her child, who was now flailing her with her magic wand as she chanted the word over and over. I couldn't help but laugh.

An elderly woman with thick, wire-framed glasses reached behind her ear to adjust the volume on her own hearing aid. She made no effort to conceal her disability and appeared delighted to be witnessing such a spectacle. The child's mother began to cover her daughter's mouth and sign QUIET now that she understood the noise she must be making. She looked at the other passengers and smiled while shaking her head, then discreetly brushed her hair back over her ears as if trying to hide her handicap.

I looked at these women seated across from one another, and something occurred to me. We all were bearing the scars of our passage into this new world differently. Some were wearing them proudly, like a badge, while others were carrying them like a great burden.

It seemed silly to me for anyone to be ashamed of being deaf. The waves of tropical diseases that had migrated north during the Warming had decimated the population, and I felt lucky to be alive. Though the high fevers had destroyed the hearing of many who survived, the adoption of sign language afterwards had also proved to be an unexpected blessing. It evolved into an international language for all the world's peoples. After millennia of war and misunderstanding, we could finally communicate with one another and work together at last. The deaf had helped us achieve something that the hearing world, with all its prejudices, never knew: a global society without borders.

As the girl began rummaging through her bag of candy, I noticed the printing on it. "City Park Haunted Halloween: an annual tradition."

*Oh no, I thought, that's where I'm headed! I'm never going to find the solitude I'm seeking with screaming children like that around...what to do? There's got to be another spot where I can see the sky, but where?*

I hadn't been in Denver long enough to really know my way around yet, and if I didn't come up with a plan soon it would be too late. Just then, the train came to its next stop, High Street/Cheesman Park. I hadn't been there before, but I wasn't sure where else to go, so I headed off the transport in hopes it would be a suitable location. After only a couple of blocks I came upon a lush stand of trees rising like an oasis within the vast urban landscape and breathed a sigh of relief. The sun was just about to set, and the frenzy of the city faded behind me as I strolled into the woods.

I rounded a bend in the path toward a clearing, and the open sky unfurled before me. A few faint stars had already begun cautiously peering through the veil of the atmosphere. I could feel them reaching out to me, like Persephone's trembling hand on the eve of her descent into the Underworld. Dusk's rosy aura caressed the western horizon as I scanned my surroundings in search of a spot to settle down. I headed toward a nearby neoclassical pavilion with several stone benches before it. Other than a woman walking her dog, the park seemed completely deserted. *Perfect*, I decided.

I sat down and gazed toward the heavens as darkness slowly swallowed the remains of the day. I pondered how for eons people had looked to the stars with awe and wonder. Ancients had carved calendars in stone and erected monuments to mark their motion. Seafarers had sailed across mighty oceans with them showing the way. How sad that these same constellations, which had guided the growth of our civilization, had to be dimmed so that it could continue. I let out a deep breath and savored the last glimpse of starlight I would enjoy for some time.

After a while I grew weary of sitting, so I leaned back on one of the pavilion's columns to take in the view. Distant traffic noise soon became muffled beneath the song of stirring crickets, and I knew the moment was swift approaching when the sky would be set aglow. As I glanced down at my watch to check how much time I had left, I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye. Just across the clearing, a man was jogging in my direction, wiping the sweat from his brow with his forearm. His muscles glistened in the twilight; even from a distance I could tell that he was in incredible shape. The moment he dropped his arm and caught sight of me our eyes locked, and time seem to stretch out as far as the horizon.

In that brief but endless instant an incredible exchange of information took place. Immediately we recognized our mutual attraction. It was as if a brilliant flash of light obscured everything around us, allowing us only to see one another. As he slowed the pace of his run, my heart pounded in my chest. A wave of excitement surged through my veins, then washed over my skin like icy water. His face was just as stunning as his physique: His heavy shadow and powerful gaze conveyed a masculine charm I could feel even from far off. I held my breath as he began to smile, then quickly looked away.

*Oh no, I thought, this is the worst possible time for something like this to happen.*

With my solitude shattered it occurred to me that my presence here alone in a park at dusk might be perceived as an invitation rather than an escape. I knew I could not look back without encouraging him to approach. I struggled not to, forcing my attention on the horizon instead. But despite my efforts to ignore him, I could feel his persistent gaze burning into my flesh. I was overcome by a sudden urge to flee, yet my feet were frozen. I searched frantically for a place to hide only to realize that would send an even stronger signal for him to follow. My breathing became shallow and rapid. Tiny beads of sweat formed on my brow. Like a lonely foal that had wandered from the herd, I stood helpless as he prepared to pounce...or so I thought.

Perhaps my paranoia was completely unfounded. Maybe he'd already run off, and the feeling of being stared at was just my imagination. The suspense became overwhelming. I had to know if it was real. I let out a deep breath and glanced back in the direction where I'd first seen the handsome stranger. Once again our eyes met, and I was imprisoned by his penetrating gaze. Much closer now, he had propped up his foot on a nearby bench to tie his shoe. The hair on his muscular thighs formed a pattern that pointed directly to his crotch, and his shorts had to strain to contain his manhood. How could I possibly look away? His smile assured me that my efforts to hide my interest in him were useless. He stood up and straightened his clothes, nodded, and said, "Good evening."

I was dumbfounded. Thoughts raced through my mind. *How could I explain that I had not come here to cruise? Would he believe me? Do I want him to?*

As he moved closer and I could see him better, I was even more astounded at how sexy he was. It was hard to believe this was really happening! I had stumbled across the exact type of man I found attractive, who was also interested in me, yet I was totally unprepared. So there I stood silently, like an awkward schoolboy, not knowing what to do.

Smiling, he walked right up to me and said, "Nice night."

"I...I just came here to say goodbye."

He looked puzzled. "Leaving town?"

"No — not me...the stars. Goodbye to the stars, I mean."

"Oh, that's right, tonight's the fireworks." At last he turned his gaze away from me and toward the heavens, much to my relief.

"Actually, there's no fire involved. It's a lot like the northern lights, which is why it's called the Aurora."

He shrugged. "Sure looks like fireworks when it gets going. Dunno why they do that here, though. They really only need the light up north."

"It has to be the whole sky for it to work. Same reason you can't light up just part of a neon sign or a fluorescent bulb. The gas will only glow when the current is carried throughout its entirety...same is true for our ionosphere."

"You sure seem to know a lot about this stuff." His ignorance made him far less intimidating despite his good looks.

"I'm an electromagnetic engineer."

"Really! I'm impressed. Brains *and* beauty, huh?" He arched his brows and looked me up and down again. "Well, you got my respect. Takes a pretty bright guy to light up the sky."

"It wasn't just me — a whole team of people put the system together. My work was more in the conceptual stage. It started out as a way to fortify the ozone layer until I applied some of Tesla's theories to the project. If we illuminated the atmosphere, we could grow more food in the polar regions all year round. What choice did we have? We let the ecosystem fall apart, so we have to fix it if we want to survive. It's sad it had to come to this. On this day every year the awe and mystery of the night sky are lost to us for months on end."

"Funny how you view it as a loss. I always thought of it as a triumph. Look — there it goes..."

Mists of iridescent color began to flow across the sky like waves washing up on a sandy beach. They quickly became more vivid as the satellites powered up. Soon, wisps of light danced in every direction.

"Incredible, isn't it?" he said looking up, but all I could do was stare at his powerful profile. His strong jaw line framed a classically handsome face, and his thick wavy hair moved gently in the evening breeze. Above him the lights from the Aurora swirled. *I wish this moment could last forever*, I thought. Then, in a brilliant flash, the entire sky lit up in that familiar bluish-white glow, brighter than a full moon. The stars were lost behind the veil of light, but I could now see him clearer than ever.

His eyes were a deep chestnut brown, and they glistened under the Aurora like semi-precious stones. His lips were full and ruby red, and his skin an earthy olive. Tufts of hair poked out beneath his shirt from his chiseled chest below. Judging by the size of his arms and shoulders, this guy had spent a lot of time at the gym. I felt so scrawny next to him. Now only inches away, he turned back to look at me in the light. I was sure he'd lose interest.

"Oh, wow, you have beautiful eyes."

"I do?" I've always been self-conscious about my eyes, so dark that the pupil is barely distinguishable from the iris — a product of my mother's Latina heritage, no doubt. As a child I had felt cheated because all the other kids got to have colored eyes, but mine were just *plain* black.

"They're so dark and mysterious — like a cave longing to be explored." He put his hand to my cheek and gently ran his fingers over my temples, then around my mouth. I could feel the heat of his body pressing up against mine. He moved his hand to the back of my neck and kissed me deeply, teasing me with his tongue. It left me breathless. "Oh man, you are *so* sexy," he said, brushing my hair away from my forehead.

"Really?"

"Feel this," he whispered as he rubbed his crotch against my thigh. I could feel his burgeoning erection through his shorts as my own began to stir. "See what you're doing to me?"

Just then the hot and heavy spell was broken by the sound of a barking dog elsewhere in the park. "Maybe this isn't the best place for this," I said, backing away.

"You're right. Sorry I got so carried away. Didn't expect to find someone like you tonight! I usually run on the track at the gym, but it gets a little old after a while. Sure glad I picked tonight for a change of pace."

"So, you don't come here often looking for this sort of thing?"

"Hardly! Do I look like the kind of guy who needs to go to a park to find sex?"

I looked down and shrugged. "I guess I do..."

"No! Not at all. I didn't mean it that way." I was pleasantly surprised by his sudden humility. "I never pick up guys at a park. Not to say I've never done that, but...honestly I was just jogging by and saw you. Never seen you around before. If I had, I would have introduced myself."

"Well, why don't you introduce yourself now, then?"

"Gosh, where are my manners? I'm Angelo." He gave me a firm, confident handshake.

"I'm Miguel."

"Well, I'd tell you it's nice to meet you, but I think you already know that."

I laughed. I was really starting to like this guy.

"I'm kind of new in town and I was just looking for a spot with a good view of the sky and ended up here. I didn't know it was *that* kind of a park."

"It's not — usually. Maybe it's not the park, though. Maybe it's us." He smiled coyly and drew a little closer. "Listen, I need to be somewhere later, but I haven't had dinner yet — would you care to join me?"

"Gosh — yes — but...I need to feed my cat before it gets too late." *Oh no, why did I say that? He must really think I'm a lonely and pathetic geek now.* "I just...wasn't planning on..."

"No big deal. How long could that take? Live near here?" Thank God, he took it in stride. I thought I'd blown my chance!

"Not far, but it can take a while if the trains aren't timed right."

"I have a car — happy to give you a lift." My heart sank, and he could tell something was wrong.

"Look, if you don't feel comfortable getting into a car with me that's okay. It's not like you know me..." He looked down in disappointment.

"I'm...I'm kind of afraid of flying."

"You're kidding! I'm a flight instructor. That's what *I* do. You couldn't ask for a safer driver than me." I wasn't sure whether to believe him, despite his confident grin. "No, really — take a look at the car I brought. It's a training vehicle. I have to give someone a lesson when they get off work tonight — that's why I'm kind of in a hurry."

I was torn. As much as I hated to fly, if I said no it might put him off. Maybe it was his longing look as he waited for my answer, but somehow I felt I could trust him. "Well, maybe just this once."

"All right!" He patted my on the back and headed for the parking area. I trailed behind to check out the rear view. The fabric of his shorts rippled over his firm, round buttocks as he walked, and the muscles of his calves flexed with each step. His back had a broad v-taper you could just wrap your arms around. If he did have a bad side I sure couldn't find it.

He opened the hatch so I could climb in. "Don't mind the controls," he said pointing to the panel in what was usually just a passenger compartment, "I'll disable them after I start up." I nervously strapped myself into what looked just like a driver's seat beside him. With a turn of the key the jets roared to life. Three holograms appeared before me, one showing what was behind us, another what was below us, and the third a three-dimensional graphic representation of our overall position. Sensing my obvious discomfort, he placed his hand on my thigh and said, "You okay?"

"I preferred it when cars stayed on the ground, thank you."

"No way you could remember that! How old are you?"

"Thirty-five." I had to answer honestly, or my recollection would not make sense. *I couldn't be that much older than him,* I thought. Hopefully it wouldn't matter.

"Jeez, you look ten years younger. So they must have still had land cars when you were a kid, then?"

"Yeah, and I remember how many people crashed and burned in these flying machines when they first came out, too."

"Well, nowadays every model comes with a gravitational gyroscope that keeps the vehicle airborne and upright under most conditions. They save a lot of lives and make them much easier to control. I'm surprised an engineer like you wouldn't know about something like that."

"I'm an electromagnetic engineer, *not* an aerospace technician."

"Oh...that's different?"

"Yes." *How dare he compare me to someone so common!*

"Well, if you decide you ever want to learn how to drive one of these things, I know a good teacher." His face lit up with a smile as he put me in my place. "So...where to?"

"Oh — I live in Deseret Towers."

He raised his eyebrows. "Nice place. I take it electromagnetic engineering pays well."

"It can."

He pulled back on the controls, and the vehicle rapidly gained altitude while the green expanse of Cheesman Park grew smaller beneath us. As he merged into the cross-town traffic, he picked up the conversation again. "So, exactly what do electromagnetic engineers do, then? Other than light up the sky, I mean..."

I sighed, hoping he would understand my explanation. "We study the way energy fields interact with the physical world and find useful applications for them."

"You mean radio...radar...stuff like that?"

"Those have already been discovered. I'm working to develop new technologies."

"Such as..."

"Well, right now I'm working on a scalar platform to launch cargo and possibly passengers into orbit."

He looked confused. "A *scalar* platform?"

"Scalar electromagnetics uses high energy fields to overcome the force of gravity, among other things. It could provide a propulsion system which uses no jet fuel, if perfected."

"Really," he replied, taking a sudden interest. "So you could make cars that fly that way?"

"I suppose if you could miniaturize the equipment and provide an adequate power source it might be possible—"

"Then maybe we could work together someday." He smiled and rubbed my leg.

Now I was wondering just what I had gotten myself into with this guy...I hoped he was kidding. By then the spires of Deseret Towers were looming ever larger ahead, a landmark of style in the Denver skyline. Modeled after a cluster of quartz, its mirrored and beveled surfaces reflected the adjacent buildings in an almost surreal way. Swerving past the Federal Dome, Angelo headed directly to the parking bay entrance in the main tower without even asking directions.

"Been here before?" I asked.

"A couple times. Which space is yours?"

"That one." I pointed, then let out a sigh of relief at having arrived safely. I was usually tense after flying, but this time I felt strangely at ease, haunted by the feeling of having known this guy much longer than the brief time since we'd met. He seemed to exude a sense of calm self-assuredness without even speaking. I led him to the elevator and hit the button for the ground floor.

"Wow, you live on the Plaza," he remarked at the glowing "P" I'd just pressed.

"I don't like heights. That's why I don't like to fly."

"Yeah, but everyone wants to live on the Plaza."

*No wonder, I thought, now that old city streets have been transformed into lushly landscaped pedestrian parkways while air traffic buzzes overhead.* "Well, they have their reasons, and I have mine."

The elevator doors slid open with a rush of air. Before I could even get my key in my lock, I could hear my cat begging for her dinner. When the door opened, her sapphire eyes glared at my newfound friend with suspicion. "Sedna," I announced, "This is Angelo. Say hello."

"Hi there, beautiful," he said reaching out. "How'd you get such a pretty name?"

"She's named after the Arctic sea goddess," I explained, rummaging for her food. "She came to me as a stray while I was doing field work up in Athabasca, so it seemed like a good thing to call her."

"Think you left the HV on," he said, glancing across the room.

"I keep it on the nature channel. The holograms keep her amused while I'm away."

"Nice place, by the way. Can I use your bathroom?"

"Sure, it's down the hall."

He continued talking from the open bathroom door. "Athabasca, huh? I hear it's nice up there."

"Very."

"Field work...is that like a force field?"

"No, it means I was *in the field* installing an electromagnetic irrigation system."

"That also have something to do with this Tesla guy?"

*How would he know that?* "Yes, actually. He discovered that a high energy field could draw moisture directly out of the air, bypassing the need for drilling or plumbing to deliver water to the crops."

"Is that what this is for?" He returned clutching one of my Tesla trophies, plucked off the bathroom shelves.

I chuckled. "Yes, but I never liked the design of those things. I guess the waterfall represents his pioneering work harnessing hydroelectric power, but it just looks like something that belongs in a bathroom to me."

He read the inscription: "For outstanding work developing Telsa's technologies, Miguel Margolis." He looked puzzled. "*Margolis?*"

"I have a mixed ancestry."

"Seems you took the best from both sides." He set the trophy down and pulled me closer. "I can't believe what beautiful skin you have," he said, running his hand along my smooth sinewy forearm. "It's naturally like this, right? You don't even have to shave it?"

"No, that's just me." I shrugged, astounded that he would find something like that attractive. I'd always felt somewhat ashamed at my lack of body hair. Growing up, I watched the other boys mature around me but I never became as manly as many of them did.

He moved his hands over my flesh with a look of utter fascination. "Do you know how many guys wish they could look as buffed as you do?"

"I...I never really thought about it."

"Are you like this everywhere?" He unbuttoned my shirt. Other than a few stray hairs around my nipples and below my navel I was completely smooth. He ran his fingers up and down my toned torso. "Oh yea — just the way I like it." He wrapped his arms around me and gazed right into my eyes. "I'm so glad I found you." He kissed me deeply, then paused to look at me again, as if to confirm I was really there, then continued in earnest.

I seemed to lose myself cradled in his powerful arms. Our tongues danced an erotic ballet as the world around us faded from view. We stood locked in an embrace until the cat came up and rubbed my leg, vying for my attention. She stood at our feet, still licking the remains of her meal from her whiskers.

"Do you think she likes me?" he asked.

"Who cares? I do!" I pulled him into the bedroom, slipping off his shirt. His chiseled torso was covered with a fine coating of hair, and his nipples stood out begging for attention. I nibbled as he moaned and arched his back while I deftly removed his shorts. The head of his cock glistened like a ripe plum against his muscular thigh. The intoxicating aroma of manhood assailed my senses, and I inhaled deeply. Then he suddenly rolled me over and pulled off my pants to reveal my own insistent erection. Soon we had explored every inch of our personal landscapes and settled on a course of action. He teased me with his tongue as he unfurled a condom, then gazed deep into my eyes, and took aim. I could feel his strength penetrate the depth of my being as he eased his way in. An incredible sense of oneness overcame me as waves of pleasure surged through my body. We quickly found a rhythm we could not resist. Soon his brow furrowed, and his lips began to quiver.

"Oh God, I can't hold it — it's too good."

With that signal I let go, and in one ecstatic instant our desire crystallized into white liquid heat. He collapsed atop me, and I watched the room around me spin as I came back down to earth. I felt as if I had left my body for an instant, propelled outside of space-time by the power of pure passion.

Angelo rested his head on my chest and gently stroked my cheek with his hand. He touched me tenderly, then looked at me without saying a word. He gazed intently, as if staring into my soul, longing for something. I was too astonished to speak. He brushed my hair away from my face, moving closer. He opened his mouth, but hesitated as if he weren't sure what to say. Our lips touched, and he offered me a gentle kiss, then squeezed me tightly. As our breathing slowed, I felt our feelings for each other blossom, but the moment was too fragile for words. So we lay there together in silence, afraid to break the spell.

I guess we dozed off because the cat startled us when she jumped up on the bed.

"Oh, no — what time is it?" he gasped.

I glanced at the bedside clock. "Half past eight."

He suddenly sat up. "Shit! I have to be somewhere at nine. I really hate to do this, but I have to go." He rushed to get dressed.

"Don't you want to take a shower?"

"Wish I had time, but I have to get across town. Looks like I won't even have a chance to eat till later. Can I take a rain check on dinner?"

"Sure." I smiled, figuring that would never happen.

Sensing my reaction, he stopped and sat down on the bed next to me. "Listen, if I had known I'd meet the most incredible man in Denver today I would have cleared my calendar, but I can't get out of this. I promise I'll make it up to you another time." He sure sounded sincere.

"It's okay. I understand." I wanted to believe him. Still, I kept thinking, *this is turning into one of those don't worry, I'll call you scenarios.* "Do you...want my number?"

"What for? I know where you live. I sure hope you like me, because I'm gonna be your new stalker."

I smiled, walking him to the door.

"I'm sorry I have to leave like this, but I gotta go."

Suddenly I felt so vulnerable, standing there naked with him about to walk out of my life. I couldn't even look him in the eye to say goodbye.

"Hey," he said, cupping my chin with his hand to force me to look at him. He paused for an instant as if he were going to speak, but kissed me deeply instead. "Don't say goodbye, just say goodnight."

"Goodnight."

"I'll see you later," he said with one hand on the doorknob, then closed it behind him.

I listened as the elevator whisked him away and stared silently at the door, certain that I would never see him again.

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