

Chapter 1

LOVE AND COFFEE

The first time I remember seeing her was on a rainy, dark morning in January of 2004.

When my son from San Francisco visits me, he always says that Portland smells like coffee and everyone wears black and gray. It was on one of those black and gray mornings that Erika made her first appearance. It was raining steadily when she entered the coffee shop wearing a tan raincoat. The hood was pulled over her head obscuring most of her face as she entered. She got in line to get her coffee and tried to shake off her umbrella while holding onto her large purse. I took note of her entrance but became very interested in watching her when she pulled back her hood revealing her beautiful face.

She gave everyone she encountered a kind smile and seemed to be a very warm presence. I wondered if this was the first time she had stopped by this coffee shop in the morning. I would have surely noticed her, even in my semi-alert state early in the morning, as I ingested my first caffeine jolt.

Erika is a tall, slender woman with large light-blue eyes. Her face is surrounded by long, thick black hair, which hangs below her shoulders. Her hair forms a perfect frame for her face. I guessed she is about five foot nine or ten and I pegged her age at somewhere in her thirties.

She is a beautiful woman, but what makes her extra attractive is the way her face lights up when she talks. As she talks, her face is very animated and her eyes twinkle. It is a stunning combination. I found that I could not take my eyes off her from the first time I saw her. It wasn't just that she was a beautiful woman...there was something else drawing me to her that I couldn't quantify.

I was sitting by the window in the Starbucks across the street from the office building where I worked. I was half-reading my morning paper and half-watching the scene outside the window as people rushed to get out of the rain and make it to work on time.

It is a habit I had developed each morning recently. I couldn't stand to spend the rainy, dark winter mornings alone in my house as I prepared to go to work. I headed into downtown Portland, where I worked on 6th Avenue, each morning about 6:15 a.m., sometimes earlier. Since my wife's sudden death a couple of years ago at the hands of a drunk driver, I couldn't sleep very well anymore. I no longer enjoyed being in my house alone. Whenever I got up, I generally took my morning shower and headed out regardless of the time.

I found the coffee shop on the corner of the block by my office was ideal. It was an all-glass cube with windows from the roof line to the sidewalk. There were tables and chairs and even overstuffed chairs positioned near the large windows. I found comfort in sitting there drinking my morning coffee and easing into the day. It was entertaining to have a front-row seat to the morning street scene as I watched humanity pass by the windows. I always felt happy when I was downtown. Unfortunately I lived in the suburbs.

After getting her coffee and a muffin, she sat across the room from me on the opposite wall. I felt a little guilty as I continued to watch her. I couldn't stop looking at her. I noticed what long, graceful fingers she had as she delicately tore off small pieces of her muffin. I tried not to stare, but suddenly she was by far the most interesting thing in this coffee shop.

A few minutes later this beautiful, tall woman began to gather her belongings and head out the door. I got caught looking and she flashed a brief smile at me as she exited the coffee shop and walked back into the rain. I would think that she was used to being noticed. My office was a left turn out of the coffee shop door. She turned right and headed down 6th Avenue.

I took note of her entry each time she came into Starbucks. Some mornings she came and sometimes she didn't come in while I was there. I thought she was a pretty woman, one of many

attractive women that can be observed downtown each day. But I found myself being disappointed on mornings when she didn't make an appearance.

There are many, many people you see in your work environment each day. They are familiar faces but you never know their names. You see them on the elevator and recognize them as someone who works in your building. You see them on the bus riding to work. You see them at the lunch-spots downtown or at coffee shops. This woman was becoming one of those familiar faces and I would likely never know her name or her story.

This morning ritual continued for the first few weeks of January with little variation to the seemingly scripted series of events which occurred in the confines of the coffee shop. Then an unusual set of circumstances broke this routine. It seemed to be random events which would normally never happen. A few minutes difference either way, then the chain of events would have had a different outcome. The timing had to be perfect or Erika and I would never have interacted. It was good luck for me. It was a turn of events which would alter my outlook on life after all that had gone on in the last two years for me. Was it just random? Some would say, fate was "taking a hand" in our destinies. I don't know what it was, but it was extremely coincidental.

One morning late in January, I was finally making a long-delayed trip to the dentist for a cleaning and check-up. I scheduled it for the first thing in the morning. My dentist's office was near my house. I would go there first and then drive into the city. It was a very rainy, blustery morning and we were in the midst of an unusually strong storm. The day was the kind of windy, rainy day where you have to battle with your umbrella as the gusts tried to turn it inside out.

It did not occur to me that by getting to downtown around 9:30 all of the usual parking spaces and lots would be full. I had never encountered this problem because I always came so early. All of the lots around my office building had "Lot Full" signs blocking the driveways. I was beginning to get frustrated and wondered where I would end up parking. I finally found a parking lot a couple of blocks off Broadway. It was not an enclosed lot but wide open to the pounding rain. I was in for a wet walk of about five blocks to my office.

As I pulled into the lot, I noticed a woman struggling to get a large box out of the back of her car. She was completely covered by her raincoat and hood. The woman was also struggling to hold her umbrella over her head. I was certain it was a woman since there was a beautiful, slim pair of legs and red high heels below the raincoat. She looked like she needed help.

As I exited my car I couldn't quite get there fast enough to help her. Before I could help, she dropped her large purse spilling its contents out onto the rainy pavement. I now ran quickly to assist her. I extended my umbrella over her head and said, "Let me help."

She lifted her head and when I could see inside the hood of the raincoat, my eyes met two large blue eyes and the beautiful face of the woman from the coffee shop. My face must have registered surprise.

"What a nightmare morning," she said.

I suggested that I take the box and that she concentrate on recovering the contents of her purse and holding the umbrella.

"Thank you so much," she said. "You are going to get wet."

"I think it is probably too late for that. Let me help you get this hauled to your destination."

"Oh no..." she started to say.

I interrupted and said, "I work over on 6th Avenue, where are you going? Let's just get out of this rain."

She said, "I work on 6th Avenue also, just a few blocks over at the investment firm on the third floor."

I said, "You take your purse and the umbrella, I will get the box while you lead the way."

"Thanks so much," she said.

We were walking silently trying to manage our bundles without getting even wetter than we were already. I finally asked a question and of course I already knew the answer, "I think I see you in the coffee shop on some mornings. Do you go to the Starbucks on 6th Avenue?"

I was hoping she wouldn't say, "Oh yeah, you are that kind of creepy guy who is always staring at me."

Instead she said, "Oh yes, that is where I have seen you. I thought you looked familiar."

"How did you get caught in all of this?"

"I usually come before 7 and never have any trouble finding parking, but today was a total nightmare," she said. "I had to go pick this stuff up at the copying center for a presentation later today. I ended up parking in that lot a few blocks away and then discovered I couldn't get it all hauled to my building. I guess I pictured pulling into the covered lot by my building and then getting a hand-truck or something to haul it to my office. That plan didn't work."

"I am never here this late either and got caught with the parking problem too. I went to the dentist this morning before I came," I said.

"Wow, the dentist and now this," the woman said, "your day is off to a great start."

Then she added, "Turn here" as she pointed to the walkway of her building. "You don't have to do this..."

"We are almost there...I assume," I said.

"Yes, we are. Let me grab the elevator."

I entered the office behind her. It was a non-descript series of cubicles like most of the other offices downtown. She had a window seat facing my office building. I realized my hair was dripping on to the box.

"Just set it here. Perfect. You are so kind. You poor man, let me get some paper towels to dry you off." She scurried off towards the women's bathroom and quickly returned with a fist full of paper towels. "I am so sorry and it was so, so nice of you to rescue me. It was a dumb thing I was trying to do."

I noticed her nameplate on the cubicle read "Erika Stevens."

"Really it was no big deal, glad I could help. You must be Erika," I said pointing to her nameplate.

"Yes and I owe you a coffee, at least, when I see you some morning," Erika said.

"I am Tom Walker and it is very nice to meet you Erika. It was my pleasure to help."

"Where do you work?" she asked.

"Right there," I said, pointing out her window. "The 13th floor."

"I love that building," Erika said, "wow, the 13th floor; does it bring you bad luck?"

"There is only so much I can blame on my location in the building. The rest of my problems are probably self-inflicted," I said, attempting to make a joke.

She laughed and thanked me again.

I said, "I guess I better get going. Good luck on the presentation today."

"Thanks again," she said, "I definitely owe you a favor."

With that, I walked out of the building trying to readjust my wet coat and hair. I thought I must have looked pretty bad. She certainly didn't. Erika. Nice name. She was even more stunning up close and personal. As I walked down 6th Avenue with the rain pounding on my umbrella, I mused about the strange turn of events. I was amazed to find the "coffee shop woman" under the raincoat hood in our chance encounter.

I was now curious as to what would happen the next morning in the coffee shop. It was kind of a silly thing. I wanted to arrive early to the coffee shop. I didn't know what I expected to happen or what coming early would do. Maybe it was the chance to have some interaction with someone new and interesting. That had not happened for a really long time. I am not sure I even wanted it to happen. I might get to talk with Erika and see how the rest of her day went. Then, it would probably be the end of "our moment."

I sat on the usual side of the coffee shop the next morning but moved one table closer to the door. Around 7 a.m. Erika came through the door. She smiled when we made eye contact.

"Hi," she said, "have you had your coffee yet?"

"I will have one of whatever you are having," I said as a way of short-circuiting the extensive list of options. I had already been there for half-an-hour and had enough caffeine to keep me bouncing off the walls all day. She placed the order and then came to the table.

"Please join me," I said gesturing towards a chair. "How did the rest of yesterday go, Erika?"

"Pretty well... Tom, right?" I nodded. Then she added, "Thanks to you."

"You are very kind," I said, "but I think helping you with a big box in the rainstorm is the least I could do."

"Well, you saved my day and I really appreciate it. Did you get dried out okay?"

"Oh, yeah, I have lived in Oregon long enough that I will not rust," I said. "Go ahead and sit down and I will pick up our order. Did your presentation go well?"

"Yes, it did. I did it with two other people but I was the one who was compiling it. I was getting it put together over the weekend. I decided to do the materials at the copying place in the condo building so I could run back and forth with changes. That was a convenient plan until I had to haul the stuff to the office in the rain yesterday."

"Oh, so that is what happened," I said as I brought our coffee to the table with a muffin for Erika. "Where is your building?"

"I have a condo over in the Pearl District and there is a Kinko's on the ground floor."

"Now I am really impressed that you have a condo there," I said, "I have always wanted to live over there. I love that neighborhood. I run at lunchtime and I always run through that area just because I like it so much."

"Really? You probably run by my building. It is the one on 11th Street by the Jameson Square Plaza Fountain. Do you know it?"

"Oh, yeah, I know the area. I love the plaza and there are so many great galleries and restaurants."

Erika said, "So you run each day?"

"Yeah, I have a group of buddies that I run with to try to stay in-shape and prevent further deterioration," I said.

She laughed and said, "Good for you. I need to do something and quit being such a slacker."

Right, I thought, you really need to do something about slovenly appearance. "It is a nice break in the day," I said, "and it gets you outside and reduces stress too."

"I presume you don't live downtown," Erika asked.

"No, I live in Beaverton but would like to be downtown. I am a downtown kind of person."

"So you're a commuter," Erika said. "Are you married and have kids in the suburbs?"

"No, I am not married. My wife died a couple of years ago and my two children are both adults living other places."

"I am sorry about your wife. I guess I was being snoopy."

"No problem. Thank you. What about you?" I asked.

"No, I am single," Erika simply said.

"How is that possible?"

"I was divorced a couple of years ago and I have spent the last two years working on my MBA," she said. "It seemed like a good time in my life to take the plunge and get it done."

"Sorry, that was a stupid question. It was none of my business. My social skills are a little rusty I think," I said.

"Not at all. How did you lose your wife?" Erika asked with a concerned look on her face.

"In a car accident, she was hit by a drunk driver. She was a real estate agent and on the way to an appointment when this guy ran a red light and hit her."

"Oh my gosh, Tom, I am so, so sorry. That is terrible."

"Yeah, it was quite a shock. So I have been getting used to a new life as a single person. That is something I never anticipated."

"I can relate to that," she said, "it was very disappointing that my marriage didn't work out and I wasn't expecting to be single either. I guess I thought I would live happily-ever-after or something..."

It was mesmerizing to talk to her at close-range. When she turned her beautiful blue eyes on me it was impossible to not be fascinated by her every word.

"Life does take some unexpected turns for sure. I am sorry things didn't work out for you Erika." She looked at her watch and said, "Yikes, I better go."

"Thanks for the coffee and the conversation. It was a pleasure to meet you," I said.

"Thanks again for being my hero and rescuing me. I will see you again I am sure."

"Join me for morning coffee and conversation any time. I enjoyed talking with you."

"Have a good day," Erika said and she was out the door.

Erika definitely brightened a room when she entered and she certainly brightened my day.

The next morning I was at my station in the coffee shop at my usual time, but there was no Erika that day. I thought it was odd that I was suddenly so enamored with her and looked forward to seeing her. I don't know what I expected would happen. I tried to put her out of my mind and thought my close encounter with Erika was probably over.

However, the following morning she came into the coffee shop earlier than I had seen her before. I nodded to her and smiled when she entered. I decided to not take the initiative and not seem overly aggressive towards her. These strange rituals are hard to understand or interpret.

Erika smiled, said hello, and got in line to order her coffee. She waited to pick up her order and then, to my surprise, she approached my table.

"Do you mind some company?" she said. "I don't want to bug you if you need some solitude."

"No, no, I would love to have you join me." I continued, "If there is one thing I have, it is a lot of solitude. It is nice to have some conversation with a nice person."

"I try to be a nice person and I am not a stalker," Erika said.

"Good. That is a load off my mind. That is something I have to be cautious about. I come in the coffee shop each morning and there are always hordes of young women staring at me and stalking me."

She laughed. Then I added, "I assure you that I am not on some watch-list nor do I do weird things on the internet or stalk beautiful young women in coffee shops or parking lots."

"I know you didn't sabotage me in the parking lot so we could meet," she said, "I seem to not need any help sabotaging my own life."

"It is a jungle out there isn't it? Being single presents all kinds of craziness that used to not be an issue. Have you had trouble adjusting to all of that or have you liked the freedom?" I said.

"I have had trouble with that and I have not wanted to get back into the dating games. I have really not enjoyed being alone," Erika said.

"You never know, sometimes with a divorce, it can be a good thing to get away and be alone again," I said.

"True, but my ex is an okay guy, it just wasn't working out," Erika said. "What about you? I bet it has been tough to suddenly find yourself single. Where are your kids?"

"It is something I never expected to happen to me, for sure. My son lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and is a lawyer. My daughter is married with two children and lives in Denver with her husband who works for the federal government."

"So you really are alone then? But you have grandchildren?"

"Yeah, two girls."

"Show me pictures," Erika said.

"I don't really have any with me," I said.

"What kind of grandparent doesn't carry pictures of their grandkids?" she teased.

"One who doesn't like to sit on a big lump of a wallet all day," I said.

"You need to bring pictures to show me," Erika said.

So it began. There was an amazing connection between us immediately. It seemed like we already knew one another. We fell into the routine of regularly talking each morning. Erika rode the cross-town street car from near her condo to the downtown core, a trip of just a couple of miles. She would occasionally miss a morning because she got a late start or missed the early street car.

We discovered that we both had a love of the restaurant scene in Portland which had all kinds of affordable cool, little places to eat. We also discovered that we both loved movies. She said she had not gone to the cinema much lately because she didn't like to go to movies alone and she had been busy with school. I told her I went alone all of the time because there wasn't much of an option. I told her of some of my favorite movies of the last couple of years and also my favorite places to go to movies in Portland.

We also talked about music. One morning we exchanged I Pods and looked over one another's music collection. "You have some great stuff on here," she said, "You like so many of the same bands that I do."

"What did you expect Frank Sinatra and Ricky Nelson?" I said.

"Who is Ricky Nelson?" she asked.

"Never mind," I said.

Then one morning I decided to take a chance and propose going to lunch sometime. I had noticed one of her little quirks over the course of these morning rendezvous. I loved the way she ate a muffin. I had never seen anyone do it quite the way she did. Erika ate it a small pinch at a time. She would delicately unwrap the paper from the muffin. Then, with her long fingers, take small pinches of the muffin and put it in her mouth until it was gone. It would take me hours to eat a muffin that way.

As she began this ritual I started smiling.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing, I just like the way you eat muffins," I said.

"Are you making fun of me?"

"No, not at all. I think it is charming and adorable."

"Now you are embarrassing me, what am I doing wrong?"

"Nothing, please don't change, I think it is great."

Then I changed the subject, "Would you be interested in meeting for lunch sometime and trying out some of these places we have been talking about? There are some places I would like to show you."

"I thought you ran at lunch time," Erika said.

"Well, I will skip a day," I said.

"I don't want to be a bad influence on you," she said. "But sure that would be fun. Usually mid-week is okay for me but we can check with each other in the morning to see if there are any schedule problems."

So, about the first part of February, Erika and I began to meet once a week for lunch and saw each other most mornings in the coffee shop. One morning a coffee shop employee began tacking up pink and red hearts and "Happy Valentine's Day" signs.

As I noticed this I said to Erika, "Oh, no it's Valentine's Day again."

She said, "Oh, yeah I almost forgot. Don't you like Valentine's Day?"

"I guess I used to like it. I have not enjoyed the last couple of years. Being single and not connected on Valentine's Day is not fun."

"I agree," Erika said, "it seems manipulative. Just because the greeting card company or someone decided this was the designated day to show that you love someone, suddenly you have all of this pressure on you."

"What have you done the last few Valentine's Days?" I asked.

"Well, all of my girlfriends were out with their boyfriends, husbands or whatever. They said I should get out with someone. Somebody has a friend who would be just right for me, blah, blah, blah... Just because it is February 14th I have to get someone...quickly. So I have been home doing homework mostly. What about you?"

"Last year I went wandering into one of my favorite restaurants by myself to get dinner and I had trouble getting a table. I thought, what is going on here? Then I noticed all of these couples and realized it was Valentine's Day. How pathetic is that?"

Erika smiled and said, "I feel your pain."

"Then two years ago," I continued, "it was a few weeks after my wife's funeral so that was not a really great time. I went to my beach house and noticed the beach was covered with couples walking, holding hands or with their arms around each other. That really helped a bunch. Just what I needed, being reminded how much I missed my wife?"

"Aw, that is so sad," Erika said. Then she brightened. "Wait a minute; did you say that you have a beach house?"

"Yeah."

"Shut up!" she said, "Now I am the one who is jealous of where you live."

"I don't live there but I have thought about it. If you are going to become a recluse why don't you just do it right. Live on the beach stop shaving and bathing...just drop out."

"I don't think you could become a recluse. You would break quickly. You couldn't go 48 hours without going to a restaurant or a movie," she said.

"I guess you have me figured out huh?" I said.

"So where is your beach house?"

"Lincoln City" I said.

"That is so awesome, do you go there often?"

"Not as often as I would like, but chicks dig the beach house."

"Oh," Erika said, "do you take all of your girlfriends to the beach house?"

"Well, just a few obstacles there. I haven't had a girlfriend for about 30 years and I married into the beach house. It was my wife's. She inherited it from her parents when they died."

Erika laughed. "That is very cool to have a beach house. Is it right on the beach?"

"Yeah, it's an awesome location."

"I am very impressed. I have a proposal for you." Erika said suddenly. Then she backed off, "no never mind, it would be dumb."

"Whoa, you can't do that to me. This exciting young woman says she has a proposal for me and then says 'never mind.' It's too late you are not going to get away with that one. I am listening..."

"Okay, but if you don't want to do this it is okay."

"Erika, the odds are greatly in your favor that I will want to do anything you suggest."

"Well, since you and I are both depressed by Valentine's Day and are tired of being alone....how about if we meet somewhere for dinner on the 14th. We can just be two friends going to dinner together in a non-Valentine's date. Would you like to do that?"

"I would love to do that. Gee, let me think I could go home by myself or go out to dinner with you. Hmm....that is a tough one. I accept your proposal."

She laughed and extended her hand for me to shake. "It's a deal. We will go on a non-Valentine's Day, non-date together. That will be fun."

"Should we just meet on top of the Empire State Building on Valentine's Day if we still feel the same way we do now?"

"What?" she said.

"Never mind, it is a movie thing." I said. "It is on. It would be my pleasure. Are you sure you are comfortable going with me at night? So far you have only seen me in public places in the daylight."

"Actually I have done some checking into your background Mr. Walker. There are some disturbing things," Erika said with a wry smile on her face.

"You did a background check on me. Oh no, I am really planning to pay that Visa down as soon as possible."

She laughed.

"What do you mean you are checking on me?"

"Well, I ran into someone I knew from college who works with you. I hadn't seen her for a while and when I asked where she works, she works in your building and on your floor."

"Yikes, I hope it is one of the people I am nice to," I said.

"She had some interesting things to say about you and was very complimentary."

"Who?"

"It is no one who works directly for you."

"That figures," I said.

"No, it is Rachel Sizemore. Do you know her?"

"Oh, yeah I do. You went to college with her?"

"I did," Erika said, "She said you are a real sweetheart and everyone loves you. She told me about when your wife died and how nice you are."

"Wow, really. I need to be nicer to Rachel."

"Apparently, she thinks you were pretty nice to her already," Erika said.

"Was anything else revealed in your investigation?" I asked.

"No, all of the credit reports, FBI checks, terrorist watch lists, sexual predator lists came back clean so I guess we can go to dinner."

"Wow, dating in the 21st Century-- this is going to be tough."

"No silly man," Erika said, "I just ran into Rachel and she gave me a very glowing report. She only confirmed my suspicions."

"Nice. How do I know I am safe with you?"

"I guess you will just have to take a walk on the wild side and throw caution to the wind."

Chapter 2

THE PEARL

The Pearl District is an area located just north of downtown Portland. It is an area which formerly had consisted of warehouses, light industrial facilities and railroad yards. It is now noted for its art galleries, upscale businesses and residences. The area has been undergoing significant urban renewal since the late 1990s and now is one of the hottest, hip neighborhoods in Portland.

It now consists of mostly high-rise condominiums and warehouse-to-loft conversions. An old brewery building was converted to a great venue for live theatre and the neighborhood is the home to one of Portland's most famous icons—Powell's City of Books. Powell's is a massive, multi-storied bookstore that covers a whole block in the Pearl District.

The story goes that a local gallery owner coined the name *Pearl District* suggesting that its industrial buildings were like crusty oysters, and that the galleries and artists' lofts contained within were like pearls. It became the Pearl District according to local folklore.

Now chic galleries and restaurants abound. Erika's condo building faces the Jameson Square and fountain which simulates a tidal pool that is periodically filled by artificial waterfalls and then drained into grating. It is a popular spot on beautiful summer days when the fountain is full of waders, both large and small. But those days were months away on Valentine's Day.

It had rained earlier in the day but it was dry for our Valentine's outing. The restaurant where Erika wanted to meet was actually on the ground floor of her condo tower. As I walked down 11th Street I could see the window gleaming in the soft darkness which was descending on the city. The wet streets and sidewalks were shiny from the rain. Then I saw her.

Illuminated in the restaurant window sat Erika. All of the surroundings were shades of gray but she sat in the window and shown like a pearl inside the oyster. Tonight she looked very different. She wore a bright pink sweater, black skirt and black boots. The bright color was very flattering. Erika seemed to have a slightly anxious look on her face as she waited for me. What a change a year or two have made I thought to myself. Now this gorgeous, fun woman was waiting for me and we would spend the evening together. When her eyes met mine, she broke into a warm smile.

"Sorry, I am late," I said.

"You are not late. I had a little shorter trip than you had. I just got on the elevator and pushed '1,'" Erika said.

"By the way, this is for you" I said as I handed her a single red rose.

"Aw, you are so, so sweet. You didn't have to..." Erika said.

I came to know that her beautiful eyes softened and got moist when something really touched or pleased her. I was having that effect on her now as she smiled at me.

"It's Valentine's Day and this red rose seemed like it needed to go to someone like you," I said, "I couldn't resist."

"This was our non-date so you didn't need to do this," Erika said.

"I know. This is a non-flower; does that make you feel better?" I said.

"You have already made me feel very nice, thank you so much."

"You look very nice Erika," I said.

"Aren't you the charmer tonight?" she said.

"I can be quite devastating when I have been awake for several hours. You always see me when I have been awake for about 45 minutes. Sorry, I didn't mean to overdo it..."

“Don’t misunderstand, you have nothing to apologize for, you are off to a very good start. I would give you a perfect-ten for your first five minutes. I haven’t been treated this nice for a long time,” Erika said.

“I will see what I can do to correct past errors in judgment by others who didn’t know how to act,” I said.

“Wow, where have you been hiding?” Erika said.

“I was thinking as I was walking up the street, how my fortunes have suddenly taken a nice turn,” I said. “I have gone from lonely, depressed and sad to looking forward to spending a nice evening out with my new friend.”

“Let’s try to help one another get happy again. You make me smile and it is nice to be having fun again,” Erika said.

“I couldn’t agree more on all counts. Suddenly, I am feeling better about Valentine’s Day again,” I said.

We were interrupted by the waiter. It was time to order at this charming little Asian restaurant.

“I will defer to you, this is your restaurant. That is very cool to have your own restaurant,” I said.

Erika was up to the job and ordered a few dishes we could share and an appetizer she especially liked. “Is that okay?” she asked.

“You go girl, I am with you,” I said.

There were a few moments of silence after the waiter retreated and then Erika touched my right hand which was lying on the table. “Is that your wedding ring?”

Surprised by the question I said, “Yeah it is. I contemplated not wearing it any longer, but I didn’t want to do that. I decided to move it to the other hand. I guess that is kind of dumb, it really doesn’t make any difference which hand it is on. Nobody really noticed that I don’t have a ring on my left hand anymore.”

“I am so touched that you did that,” Erika said, “it touches me deeply that you are that loyal and loving. Someone did notice.”

“Thanks. I guess it wasn’t my choice to not have her any longer.”

Erika lightly touched her eyes with her fingers and said “you are going to make me cry.”

“I am sorry...” I started to say.

She cut me off and said, “Stop being sorry, just talk with me about anything you want. Geez, how did I find the sweetest man in the world? You know I continued wearing my wedding ring for a while after my divorce. That is kind of weird, but I wanted to be just left alone. I didn’t want anyone to know I was single again. I wasn’t ready for that. I even had one guy in my MBA class say, ‘I can see you are married but are you happy?’ Can you imagine that? That is the kind of stuff I didn’t want to deal with.”

“First of all, you should know that you understandably caused a bigger stir by becoming single again than I did. I can understand how a guy would notice something like that. Rings are kind of losing their significance now in many ways,” I theorized. “I don’t know if you don’t have a ring on because you are single, or you are living with your boyfriend or you are gay or whatever. All I know is that when I removed the wedding ring from my left hand it was met with a huge collective yawn by the female population of the planet.”

“I doubt that,” Erika said. “There would be lots of women who would love to have you.”

“If you could supply names and phone numbers it would be helpful,” I said.

“How about 503-555-2784?”

“What?” I said.

“That is the cell phone of a woman named Erika Stevens.”

“Whoa, that is the greatest pick up line of all time,” I said.

Erika blushed and said, “That wasn’t intended to be a pick-up line...”

“No don’t spoil it. I am savoring the moment when a hot young woman used a pick-up line on me. What did you mean?”

“What I said. You said give me the name and phone number of a woman who would be interested in me and I gave you one.”

I was still trying to regain my footing when she added, “Tom, what if you and I become very good friends? What if you and I starting having nothing but fun together? What if you and I were companions to one another to go out and start enjoying the things we both love? We are both tired of being lonely. We could have fun and not have to worry about all of the dating games. Is that something you would be interested in doing with me?”

“You are proposing a platonic relationship kind of, where we will be just good friends and go do things together, but as friends, right?”

“Yeah, if you don’t want to, I would understand...” Erika said.

“Of course, I would like to be with you Erika. It makes me very happy to be with you and I look forward to seeing you each day,” I said. “It would be wonderful to have you as my friend and companion.”

“That would be awesome.” Erika said.

“Are you sure you want to do this? I don’t want to make a pest of myself, but I will likely want to be with you a lot.”

Erika said, “We both will always have the right of refusal, if we are busy with family or other friends or just don’t feel like hanging out with one another some time.”

The waiter then brought our food. I raised my wine glass and said, “Here is to Tom and Erika and all of the good times which are ahead for us.”

Erika smiled and touched her glass to mine. “To us,” she said.

As we settled in to distribute the dishes we were sharing, we began to notice a crowd gathering on the sidewalk in front of the building across the street. We both took note of it but were busy sharing our food with one another.

The conversation settled into an exchange of information to fill in the holes in our biographical puzzles. Erika’s mother lived in the area and had apparently been divorced by her father when Erika and her brother were fairly young. Erika remained close with her mother and her brother. Her brother and his family lived in the Sacramento area. Erika was born in Medford in southern Oregon and moved with her mother and brother to Portland after the divorce. She had lived in Portland ever since. Erika’s mother, with her two children in tow, was apparently brought to Portland and placed under the protective wing of their grandparents. When Erika’s grandparents died, there was apparently a fair amount of money left to her mother and to Erika as well. This provided a security blanket for Erika and her mother, especially as divorced women.

I told Erika that my father had passed away and that my mother still lived in the Metro area. I confided that I was frustrated with my mother since my father’s death. My mother had seemed to become very scattered and was always meddling in the details of my life. Not an easy thing to deal with considering what had been going on in my life for the last two years. I don’t know if my father had been able keep her focused and was able to deal with her strange behavior. Or maybe she became that way since my father’s death. But either way, she was a handful to deal with right now. I told Erika of my only sibling—a brother who lived near Cleveland, Ohio with his wife and three teenage-children.

Meanwhile, the crowd was getting bigger in front of the building across the street.

I gestured towards the street and said, “What do you think that is all about?”

“It is like a Valentine’s party that has spilled onto the street or something.”

“New Year’s Eve parties can spill onto the street but usually Valentine’s Day parties are not that raucous,” I said. “Besides, this is the Pearl, not East LA or something.”

Either way, Erika and I had a front row perch by the window which was directly facing the gathering mob. Suddenly, Erika said, "Oh my God, no way." Her eyes widened as she looked down the street directly over my shoulder. I turned to see a young man wearing a suit of armor approaching on a large white horse. I turned and looked at Erika. We both thought we must be hallucinating.

The knight in shining armor on the white horse stopped in front of the crowd across the street. They began cheering wildly and then became very quiet. The knight got off of his horse and knelt on one knee in front of a blushing young woman at the front of the crowd. He produced a small box, which apparently contained an engagement ring, and was talking to the embarrassed maiden. We could not hear any of the exchange, but apparently she said yes. The group observing them began to cheer wildly. All of this drama had attracted the attention of everyone in our restaurant. Our fellow-diners broke into applause after the knight was apparently successful.

"Aw, that is so awesome. How romantic..." Erika said.

"I will have to remember this one, except I don't think I could get off a horse in a suit of armor. Actually, I don't think I could get on a horse in a suit of armor either," I said.

Erika was laughing and still watching the unfolding scene out our window.

"Boy, that guy really laid himself on the line, what if she had said no?" I wondered.

"What about her? What if a guy you didn't want to marry, rode up on a white horse with a crowd of people watching?" Erika countered.

"Ah, Valentine's Day in Portland. There is nothing like our quirky little city to produce the bizarre. Have you ever seen the people at the Blazer games in the Rose Garden who propose while being shown on the Jumbotron screen?

Erika said, "I have never been to a Blazer game."

"What!" I said. "That is one thing we will have to fix. Anyway, I saw one guy propose to a girl as it was being shown on the big screen in front of 20,000 people during a timeout. She said no. The whole crowd starting booing and she had to leave the Rose Garden. "

"Gutsy chick," Erika said.

"I think she should have said yes, watched the rest of the game and dumped him later in a more private ceremony," I said.

Erika began to laugh, "And by all means finish watching the game, right?"

"Exactly. Then there is one of the most romantic gestures our unique city offers-- being married in the Church of Elvis."

"What?" Erika said.

"No way, you really have lived a sheltered life," I said. "You can be married in the 24-hour Church of Elvis over on Couch in Old Town. For real."

Erika was laughing hysterically.

"I can check into the details of it if you are interested. The last time I checked, I think you could get married for \$25 or do a two-fer for \$20."

"The last time you checked?" Erika said, "You are the only person I know who has checked the price list at the Church of Elvis."

"I had suggested to my wife one time that we do a renewal of vows there. For \$5 you can get a non-legal wedding with a trip around the block, a 'just married' sign and cans. I think it costs more to get 'Elvis' to sing."

"I am sure it does," Erika said. "What did Liz think of this wonderful idea?"

"She never wanted to do it," I said sarcastically. "Maybe next year on Valentine's Day we could do the non-legal; non-binding wedding and we could pool our money and have Elvis sing."

"Wow, tempting," Erika said tongue-in-cheek as she continued to snicker. "I will think it over and get back to you," she said winking at me, "I can truly say that you are the first man who has invited me to go to the Church of Elvis with him."

"See I am taking a chance to make a *romantic* proposal to you like that. You know Erika, a man really exposes himself to pain and vulnerability when he steps out there in pursuit of the woman he loves," I said.

"Oh, really? Apparently, I am about to be enlightened in the mysteries of the male psyche," she continued to laugh.

"A man is like a banana..." I began.

"I have always thought so," Erika said.

"No, I don't mean that..." I said.

She interrupted, speaking to herself, "some are actually more like pickles, but all of them think they are bananas..."

"That is not what I am talking about. Behave. I am trying to give you a metaphor..."

Erika said, "I really hate to think about where this is going."

"No, I heard this metaphor in a movie once and..."

"Oh, this is a serious metaphor, it must be true then..."

"As I was saying before I was interrupted" I said as Erika giggled with her hand over her mouth.

"A man is like a banana, he has a tough outer protective skin..."

Erika was laughing uncontrollably now. "Sorry," she said mockingly, "I know this is a serious matter."

"A man has a tough outer protective skin like a banana. But for the woman he loves, he will peel away that protective skin to expose his soft, squishy insides because he is willing to take that risk for her."

"Aw how sweet," she said mockingly, "that is mostly a crock...but I know there must be a point in there somewhere. Are you telling me you are willing to make yourself vulnerable as we begin our new friendship and relationship?"

"Yes."

"The way you got around to that simple sentence was much more entertaining and I am not sure what piece of fruit I am and I hate to think how I somehow interact with the banana...but thank you I guess. I trust you too and am happy to expose my... what was it... 'soft, squishy insides' to you." Then she started laughing again.

"Did I get it?" Erika asked.

"It sounds kind of dumb when you recap it?"

"Were you under the impression it sounded good when you explained it?" Erika said amid her giggles.

"Okay, maybe it didn't come out right," I said.

"You are so cute and so funny. Don't stop being you," Erika said.

"Was that a compliment?" I said.

"Sure. You are a hoot on a date."

"Not bad for a guy who hasn't been on a date for...30 years or so," I said.

"30 years?" Erika said. "It has been 30 years since you were on a date?"

"Well, yeah. I got married and most wives take a dim view of their husbands continuing to date after the wedding."

"Wow that is like the 70s."

"Thanks for that. I meant to ask you if anything changed while I was away," I said.

"How would I know? I didn't know what it was like in the 70s since I might not have even been born yet."

"Oh" I groaned and grabbed my chest. "You have wounded me to the heart. Nice thing to say."

She said, "So, how old are you Tom?"

"Uh, well, I am 53," I said.

"I just turned 30," Erika said.

I was shocked by that answer, I really thought her to be older than that. I must have shown surprise on my face.

"Wow, I guess I thought we were a little closer in age than that," I said. "I don't know why but I guess I thought you were a little older....I mean that in a good way..."

"Does our age difference bother you?" Erika asked.

"Well, no, but does it bother you?" I responded.

"We have just been talking about how much we are enjoying being with one another. Then we reveal our ages. Should that mean that we now can't enjoy being together after all?" Erika asked.

"No," I said. "I enjoy being with you more than any other person for a long, long time. I still feel the same way. However, it would be more fun to be the younger one than the older one. Are you okay with that and don't feel like you are hanging out with some old guy?"

"You don't seem that way to me at all," Erika said. "What you perceive yourself to be, is not how I see you through my eyes, okay? I want to be with you and I want to be happy again. Being with you makes me happy."

"Erika, it is remarkable the way you and I have such a connection," I said. "I want to be your friend and your companion. I am tired of being sad. I have felt like I have been lost in the gloom and couldn't find my way out. You seem to be the light shining through all the clouds."

This same conversation would be had in various forms over the coming year. The assurances and the anxieties would be the same each time. All other issues aside, the important thing was that Erika wanted to be with me and I couldn't remember the last time I felt this happy.

Erika concluded by saying, "I don't want you to be sad any more. I don't want you to be alone."

"Thank you Erika. I am excited about the possibilities of all the things we can do together. There are a lot of things I want to show you and do with you."

"I can't wait," Erika said. "Perhaps I should start by showing you my condo. Would you be interested?"

"You know I was not being patronizing when I said I had always dreamed of living in a Pearl District condo." I said. "I actually went on kind of a home-tour here with my wife and some other realtors. I loved it. I could never get Liz to go for it. But it has always been my fantasy."

"Let's go," she said.

Erika gave me a short primer on how to enter her building. I would go to the key pad and hit the buttons "9-1-2" and it would buzz a phone in her condo. She could either talk and buzz me in, or just buzz me in. Erika showed me that she had a security card she could swipe to activate the elevator which would take her to the 9th floor.

"What happens if you forget your card?" I asked.

"I think you are screwed," she said, "I don't want to know what happens so I always, always have it with me." We got on the elevator and ascended to the 9th floor. I entered condo "912" for the first time. There would be many times to come and it would be ground-zero for my life for the next year. It was impossible, in these early moments of our relationship, to imagine what lay ahead for both of us.

I had not been this excited about anything for a very long time. We opened the door to a beautifully decorated, compactly-designed condo.

"This is awesome. You know what? This looks like Erika's condo."

"What do you mean?" she said.

"It is beautifully done with a real eye for detail. It is you and that is a compliment by the way. I love it Erika."

Erika seemed so pleased with my reaction which was genuine. She had decorated the living room with earth-tone-colored walls. Her furniture and accents were chocolate brown and turquoise which had a great impact. The small kitchen was separated from the living room only by a bar with stools. Then there was the balcony. It was small but just big enough for a couple of chairs and a table.

The view was breath-taking. There was the city, the lights twinkling in the moist air on this February evening. "Oh, Erika, this is incredible. You have chosen well and you are an awesome decorator. Well done."

"Thank you so much. I love it and have really put a lot into it."

"It shows."

She took me into the bedroom which had the earth tones again with red accents scattered around the room and a red comforter on her bed. It was great. There was a small master bath off of the bedroom. Down the hall was a small "guest room" which was just big enough for a double bed. It would become an important room to me.

After the tour was completed I said, "You have blown me away. Very, very nice. I am so jealous but you are very deserving."

"Thank you," she said. As we made our way to the door Erika turned and hugged me for the first time. It was unexpected and wonderful.

"Erika, this is one of my best Valentine's Days, or any day for that matter," I said.

"I feel the same way," Erika said. "Thanks for being my friend. I look forward to many more wonderful times that lay ahead for us."

"Me too. Thanks for being my friend. You are something very special."

She hugged me again and said, "see you tomorrow."

I left apartment 912 floating on air. It was a feeling I would have often during the next year.

Chapter 8

SICK DAY

Erika usually projects a very calm demeanor. Her slender body and always neat appearance tells you this woman has got her act together. Nothing is left to chance.

Erika's hair and makeup are always beautifully done. She also has a very polished and calm manner when dealing with people. Erika's sleek appearance and ultra-cool persona took a dent during the famous breakdown of both her car and her calm exterior. Now just ten days later, that carefully put-together image was about to take another hit.

It had been an ugly week of relentless rain. Generally, the rain and gloomy weather in the Northwest doesn't bother me, in fact I like it most of the time. But it seems like there comes a time about April or May when you start waving the white flag and wondering if you will ever see the sun again. Such was the week which would end in a much unexpected way.

It had also been a week of frustration at work. Everything seemed to be going wrong. Erika seemed to be having a similar week and had to cancel our weekly lunch because of the crush of meetings extending into her lunch hour. I saw her only briefly a few mornings at the coffee shop. She promised we would do better and make up for it this weekend. The last time I saw her was Thursday morning and the plan was that I would come by her condo Friday night and we would do a quiet dinner at a quiet restaurant and catch up. I was anxious to see her Friday but she never showed up Friday morning at the coffee shop.

I sent a couple of e-mail messages to her during the day but they were not answered. That is very unusual for her. I called her cell phone and left a message. I thought she must be into something intense and I didn't want to bug her or be a pest.

I would just try to chill-out and not be my usual over-anxious self. I would meet her at her condo after work to begin our Friday night. I walked to the main entrance and buzzed her unit number. There was no answer. I wondered if she had to work late. She would have definitely called if that were the case. Maybe it was an ugly day since she was not communicating and now not answering. I buzzed one more time.

I heard something that sounded like Erika, she called my name and I confirmed that I had arrived. She said, "Oh no, I am so sorry" and then there was nothing else, but she did buzz me in. As I took the elevator up I wondered what the heck was going on up there. Is she okay?

She opened the door just a crack which caused me to catch myself so I wouldn't crash into her and the door. "I am so sorry, I have been sick all day and I can't go anywhere. I don't want you to come in and get sick with whatever I have."

"What is wrong with you?" I asked.

"I don't know, a horrible cold or something, I came home from work this morning and have been sleeping ever since. Sorry."

"Come on, let me in, I will take care of you."

"No," she said, "really. I am not going to be any fun tonight and I don't want you to get sick. We can reschedule. Sorry I didn't let you know."

"It is okay, just please let me in for a minute," I pleaded. "I just want to help you and then if you want me to leave, I will."

Without saying anything, she just released the door, walked away, and collapsed on her couch pulling an afghan over her.

"I was getting a little worried about you, since you were not answering your phone or e-mails." Both Erika and I had Blackberrys and used these hand-helds as our primary communication device when we were not together.

"I know," she said talking with her eyes closed, "I turned everything off and just came home because I couldn't function anymore." She remained on the couch with her eyes closed. I am sure I was irritating because I just kept peppering her with questions.

"Do you have any medicine, have you eaten anything, and what can I do?"

She just shook her head and I am sure she wished I would just go away. There was a Bi-Rite Drug in one of the buildings across the street and a good take-out Thai place a block up the street.

"Let me go get you some stuff and then will you buzz me back in?"

"No, you don't have to do that."

"Someone needs to take care of you."

I think she realized I wasn't going to yield and would just keep yapping away. I am sure her honest answer, to what can I do for you would be—"go away!"

Erika said, "Just get my key out of my purse and use the card to swipe at the security thing." I spotted her purse on the kitchen table. She always had a big purse in a variety of colors and styles to provide an accent color to her clothes. I think she was a big purse kind of gal. I have never had any luck finding things in women's purses. It always frustrated Liz when she would tell me to get something out of her purse and I could never find it and finally had to surrender.

Geez, Erika's purse was enormous. It was like a portable 7-11 in there. Does this woman really need all of this crap to function? No wonder she has great muscle tone in her arms. The pressure was on. I had to find the keys because I think if I had asked her one more question she would have thrown me out. I finally found them.

I said, "I will be right back." She didn't respond or move a muscle and had her eyes closed. I scurried around the neighborhood and got some nighttime and daytime cold medicine and threw in a box of tissues for good measure. There were bunches of tulips and daffodils for \$5 near the door and I snagged one of those also. Then I went down the street and got some take-out of Tom Yum soup from the Thai place, enough for her and maybe me, if I didn't get tossed out when I got back to the condo.

As I approached the main entrance, I was hoping that I could do the right things to regain admission. Having to buzz Erica again would be bad. It worked like a charm and I heard the door click. When I re-entered she had obviously not moved. I went into the kitchen and got a bowl for some soup and got a bottle of water out of her refrigerator. I unwrapped the night-time cold medicine. I put the tulips in the sink for now. I moved my supplies on to her coffee table. Now I had to convince Erika to submit to my attempts at nursing without annoying her.

I knelt down by her and touched her face and said, "Would you like a little soup?" I rubbed her cheek until she opened her eyes. She raised her head and nodded. As she tried to open and focus her eyes she said, "What is all of this?"

"I just got some things that might help you feel better."

Erika weakly smiled and said, "Nice date. I don't want you to see me looking like this. This must be what you really wanted to do tonight."

Actually, I was enjoying helping her. I was hoping she would let me. She took a chug of water and sipped some soup. "I don't deserve you," she said.

"What happened to you girl?"

"I don't know," she said, "I just feel better resting with my eyes closed. My head really hurts and feels like it is totally clogged up." She took one more sip of soup and said, "That was good but I think I am done. Thank you," as she touched my face.

"Would it help with the congestion to take some of this night time stuff?"

She nodded and grabbed the bottle. Before I could get the measuring cup in position she chugged a lot of the contents of the bottle. “Whoa, Erika, slow down, you will not wake up until next Wednesday,” I said.

“I usually need a lot of this crap to make it work,” Erika said.

She then slumped over again on the couch. I cleared the coffee table and had some soup myself while standing at the kitchen counter watching her. When my limited domestic chores were done I returned to the living room.

Erika was wearing sweats and baggy white socks and had her hair pulled back in a pony tail. The afghan was loosely covering her. Most women, especially the Erikas of the world, who always care very much what they look like, would be humiliated to be seen like this. I thought she looked great. I felt like maybe I was being a pervert or voyeur watching her sleep. But the feelings inside were complete adulation.

There she was, my wonderful friend, the woman I was falling deeply in love with, but I could not tell her. She wanted me to be her friend, to not put labels on our relationship and just go with the flow. I was doing that but I was pretending. I did not want to be that vulnerable. Maybe I was psychologically damaged from the events of the past couple of years and now I was obsessing about Erika. But I was going with the flow. I had come to the realization that I loved Erika and hoped someday she would feel that way about me. I didn't know if that were possible or if she ever would. But if all she wanted me to be was her friend, I would do that for now until she agreed to be something different. I would take whatever she would give me.

As the nighttime shadows started to fill the condo, I got up from the chair and watched the sun setting behind the west hills through her view window by the balcony. Today we were supposed to have “sun breaks.” That usually meant you might actually glimpse the big ball in the sky through the dense overcast for a couple of minutes if today were your lucky day. I always wondered, “Why do the sun breaks come only as the sun goes down?” That is kind of a rip-off.

There was an orange glow which constituted the sun's brief peak at Portland today. The city lights were coming on and this beautiful city was switching into the Friday night mode as the lights shined through the mist as far as the eye could see.

I turned on a lamp on a table far enough away so it would not disturb Erika. Then I couldn't resist. I went to the couch and lifted her limp head, slid into a sitting position and put her head on my lap. She briefly stirred, smiled and squeezed my hand. Then she continued to doze. I was careful to not disturb her but I wanted to hold her. Fortunately, this woman took enough night time cold medicine to put down an elephant.

I studied her face as she lay sleeping on my lap. I had never really looked at her this way before. I am used to seeing her beautiful, big blue eyes and her thick, long black hair dominating her face. Now the blues eyes were powered down for the night and her hair was pulled away from her face. Her skin was absolutely flawless. There were no wrinkles or creases anywhere. There was little or no makeup on her face, yet it was so beautiful. I touched her full lips with my fingertip and she was so soft.

“Oh Erika, what am I going to do about you? I want you so badly,” I whispered. “Who are you, how have you so smitten me that I can't think of anything else?” Yet I did not feel frustration. I wanted more from our “friendship” but all I had to do was to think back about a year ago, or even a few months ago, when there was no Erika in my life. The world was a cold, lonely place.

She was so warm and soft against me. Why can't I have her? Other men my age marry younger women. I went on a cruise one time and there appeared to be all kinds of men my age with women her age. Surely, if I give her time it could work out, couldn't it? Let's see when I am 75, she would be 40? No, that can't be right. Oh, yeah, I blew the math. When I am 75, she would be roughly 50, probably, the age I am now. That would be OK wouldn't it? Other people do it. Why can't I be

with Erika? Plus when I got to that point I would have had 20 some years loving this wonderful creature and being loved by her.

My mind was going funny directions. So, I am 23 years older than Erika. That means when I was graduating from college, someone could have walked up to me with a newborn baby girl and said, "Meet the love of your life." No, that is not a good way to think about it-- that is too weird. But it is like Erika tells me, "age is just a number that is only significant if we think it is significant." Forget the age difference. I am gazing at the beautiful face of a woman I love with all of my heart. That is all that matters. How rare is that in today's world?

I want to love and nurture her and make sure she has a happy life. I want to make her happy. That is all I want. I couldn't resist a few more tender touches of her beautiful face before this moment would end. I loved to hold her and just look at her without any restraints. This night certainly took a different turn than I expected. In the future, I would recall this night and wish I could have it back. It was a moment in time when all was well with me and Erika and I was caring for her on a rainy, cool night when she was sick. It was a profound moment for me and one I would recall with great tenderness and yearning.

I gently lifted her head and said, "Come on sweetheart, let's get you to bed." I put my arm around her waist and guided her into her bedroom. She was very groggy and said nothing. I pulled the covers back with one hand and gently lowered her to the bed. I swung her legs around onto the bed and pulled the covers up to her chin. I couldn't resist just one more thing. I put my face next to her face and kissed her and said, "Good night my love."

I left her door ajar and decided to sleep on the couch. I removed my shoes and pullover sweater and crawled under the afghan which was still on the couch. The couch was still warm from Erika's body and I could smell her on the pillow. Eventually I drifted off to sleep.

I slept really soundly apparently. My first indication that I survived the night was Erika sitting on the edge of the couch and touching my face and saying, "Are you okay, you sweet man?"

I said, "Oh hi, are you okay?"

"I am better," she said, "what happened here last night; it is all a blur to me. How did you end up spending the night? I can only remember a few things from last night. Oh no, how could I let this happen, oh, my God, I must have been a great sight last night. Swollen eyes, puffy skin, and snotty nose. Oh no... did I snore, did I snort? I was so congested. I must have been disgusting. I am so, so embarrassed. I have never been so humiliated."

I was struggling to catch up with her. "Wait, don't you remember letting me in?"

"Yes, and I told you to not come since I couldn't go out with you."

"Well, yeah, but I wanted to help you, you were in a bad way. I got you some soup and medicine and some water..."

"OK, I remember the soup and sleeping on the couch. How did I get into my bed?"

I said, "Well, I wanted to make sure you got a good night's sleep, so I moved you in there."

"You moved me in there, why don't I remember that? Did you do something weird to me?"

I decided this was too good to pass up. "Well, that all depends on what you mean by weird."

"What?" she said.

"Well, I took you in there and undressed you but I couldn't find the right nightgown for you to wear, so I decided I had better put your sweats back on."

"Oh, no, I am so, so embarrassed."

I interrupted the neurotic meltdown by saying sternly, "Erika, chill. Seriously, I didn't do anything to you and I only wanted to help you. I was extremely respectful of you and protected your modesty and dignity."

"I know," she said, "I know you are always a gentleman and would never do anything to me."

"You are putting words in my mouth. I never said I didn't want to do anything to you. I said, I didn't do anything to you."

"You are a naughty boy and maybe you are a perv."

"Let's back track," I said. "I was awakened by you gently calling me a sweet man and five minutes later you called me a pervert."

"No, I don't think you are a pervert. I am just humiliated that I was so gross and disgusting in front of you."

"Erika, you slept like an angel and looked like one."

"Why do I always treat you so badly, when you are so sweet to me? I was so hideous when my car broke down and totally lost it. Now this. I so don't deserve you."

"I agree," I said.

"So how did this all happen? I am still pushing back the cobwebs," Erika said.

"Erika, before we retrace the timeline in our magical night together, let me say one thing."

She suddenly looked very serious and waited for my words.

"Chick, did you ever wonder why they put those measuring cups on the night time cold medicine? You can't guzzle that like an ice cold beer on a summer's day. I had to check a few times to see if you were still breathing."

"Okay Daddy, I was a bad girl. Eeeew, I am so embarrassed. I must have looked horrible," she kept saying, while covering her face with her hands.

"Hey," I said, "I am the one who slept in my clothes. I feel really disgusting myself."

"Oh I know, you are the kindest, gentlest person I have ever met," Erika said, "I don't know of any other man who would do this."

"Thank you. By the way, Erika, how are you feeling?"

"I am better. My head still feels stuffed up but way better than yesterday," she said, "I don't know what happened yesterday."

I said, "I tell you what, are you up for some coffee and a bagel?"

"Wow, that actually sounds good," she said.

"Okay, I will run down the street and get us some."

"I will take a really quick shower and try to not be such a pig when you get back," she said. With that I staggered out of the door to retrieve breakfast. When I returned she was wearing a bright blue long-sleeved t-shirt and some tight, dark denim pants. She sure didn't resemble a pig. The blue shirt made her eyes really intensely blue. I noticed the tulips were in a vase on the kitchen counter. I had actually forgotten about them.

Erika asked, "Did you get these for me?"

"Ah, yeah..." I said, "Where did you think they came from?"

"You brought me flowers when I was sick. Do you know no one has ever done that for me? You are the first and the best," she said.

I had no retort for that and just smiled. That was definitely worth the \$5.

"Let's retrace our steps from yesterday," I said. "I couldn't get you all day. I didn't see you at the coffee shop. No big news flash, I was just checking in with you. I thought it was odd that you didn't respond but I thought maybe you were really slammed at work or in a meeting or something."

Erika said, "I started feeling really crappy Thursday and just really tired and draggy. I got up Friday morning and really didn't feel well but went to work anyway. About two hours into it, I just wanted to put my head down and close my eyes. My head felt terrible."

"You should have called me," I said, "I could have helped you get home."

Erika said, "You are sweet but I just came home about mid-morning and shut off my Blackberry and phone and just wanted to totally sleep. I thought I would sleep for a few hours. The next thing I know it is 6 and you are buzzing down below."

“Wow that is very unlike you. So you do remember letting me in?”

“Of course, I remember you feeding me soup and drinking some water. I remember you being tender and sweet to me and then it gets really fuzzy after that.”

Uh, oh, I thought. I wondered how much she heard. I thought she was out of it. “When was I tender and sweet to you?”

“Probably all night but when you held me on the couch after the soup,” she said. “That is about the last thing I remember until I woke up this morning.”

“I wonder what kind of bug you got?” I said. “I am so glad you are better.”

“By the way, you poor man, you look like hell.”

“Don’t sugar-coat it; just give it to me straight.” I replied, “I tell you how beautiful you look even when you are sick and this is what I get?”

“You deserve a big, wet kiss to show you how much I appreciate your many kindnesses but I don’t want to give you my germs.”

“Yeah, the story of my life, my timing is always off,” I said.

“I am going to make this up to you,” Erika said, “You are going to get something special.”

“I can’t wait,” I said.

“Well, we certainly broke through lots of barriers last night, I have no more façade. You have seen the woman behind the mask now,” Erika said.

“Right, princess, who knew that you were so hideous underneath your makeup,” I said. She laughed and before she could reply I asked, “So are you careful about your security, I mean, you can tell who is buzzing your buzzer downstairs, etc., right?”

“Of course, are you afraid I am going to let some guy in who will drug me with cold medicine and do twisted things to me?”

“There are people, like that out there you know,” I said. “But seriously, you are careful aren’t you?”

“I am very careful and I love living in a secured building. If you knew me before, you would realize how remarkable it is that I am so comfortable and feel so safe with you,” Erika said.

“Good, I know you are a big girl, but I want you to be careful,” I said.

“Go get some sleep,” Erika said. “We will get in touch later.”

“Just lay low this weekend and get better okay?” I said.

As she walked me to the door, she hugged me and said, “You are the nicest person I have ever met and you are such a good friend. Go take care of yourself.”

As I descended in the elevator, I thought, “I am her good and nice friend.” That is good. I suddenly feel like I had an itch that couldn’t be scratched. Last night, I think I made it harder to continue to limit myself to that role.