

Carl Lowell rolled over and answered his phone on the second ring, putting the display screen close to his sleep puffy face.

"Hulla?" He said. He couldn't focus on the screen for the mucous in his eyes.

"Morning, Sweetheart," his wife said. "I wanted to catch you before you went out to work. Are you still in bed?"

"No," he said, sitting up and rubbing his eyes with his free hand. "I've just been lying here waiting for my alarm to go off."

"How many times did you hit the snooze button?"

"Haven't touched it," he said, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed and getting to his feet. He still held the phone low and in front of him. His wife was getting a view from below of his unbrushed teeth and scrubbly chin. He scratched his balls with his free hand and walked to the kitchen.

"We really should come down there for a week or two," she said. "I could take care of you. And you could see more of Aria."

He mounted the phone on the cupboard over the coffee maker so that she was now eye level. He rubbed his face with both hands now, trying to get the blood flowing through his skin and hopefully make it's way to his brain and wake him up.

"No, no," he said. "We've talked about this already. It would make it hard for me to work. I wouldn't be able to concentrate."

"Then take a vacation," she said. "And come down and see us."

"I will," he said. "The week before Aria's birthday. We already talked about this."

"I know," she said. He could not focus on her face and he wished everything was blurry again because he didn't like to see her upset. "Have you been looking for jobs closer to home?"

"Money is better where I am now," he said. "You know that, Babe. And this place doesn't cost me anything. And I shop just for what it is I am going to eat the next day."

"Instant noodles and whatever you can fry in that one pan of yours," she said.

"That's Mister Noodle to you, lady," he said. He got a smile out of her and that made him feel good. He reached over to the fridge and got out the coffee grounds. Keeping them in the freezer kept them fresh longer. Not that he believed it, but she would ask once she saw him take the first sip from his first mug of coffee of the day and he didn't want to lie to her about that.

"Where's my baby?" Carl asked. He peered at the edges of the screen on his phone like he was trying to look around corners.

"She just finished her bath and she is going to bed soon," she said. "You want to talk to Daddy?"

Aria's curly, platinum blonde haired head bobbed in front of the screen, not used to talking on a video phone just yet. "Daddy," she yelled. "Daddy come home soon."

"Yes, Honey," he said. "For your birthday. Will you like that? A whole week with just Daddy. No work. Just me and you. How does that sound?"

"Daddy," she yelled again. "Come home now. You come home now?"

"No, Honey," he said. "Soon. For a whole week."

"Daddy," she yelled a third time. "Now. Arie go bed now. You come home now. Daddy?"

Carl's wife took the phone away from Aria and Carl could hear his daughter just howl with rage and despair like only a two year old could. She looked at it seriously for a moment.

"I'm going to put her to bed," she said. "She always gets like this when she is tired, you know. Want me to call after she goes down?"

Carl yawned and stretched and looked down at the coffee as it began to percolate. He looked at the time display under the pot. Eleven fifteen. Forty

five minutes to midnight. He shouldn't have slept in. It would put him off his game.

"Naw," he said. "I'm already late as it is. I'm gonna throw this coffee down my throat, get in the shower, then hit the streets."

"Do you have any hot ones?" she asked.

He took his first sip of coffee. It was very hot but it tasted so damned good. "Got one for sure," he said. "A three month old Ford owned by some old lady no far from here. I might be able to trade it up for something more from one of the kids."

She pointed her finger at the screen. "You be careful bargaining with those kids," she warned. "They can be dangerous, you know."

"They don't know as much as they say they know," Carl said, taking a second, luxurious sip. "And so long as I pretend that they know more than I do, I can still manage to get ahead. Networking, Honey."

"With car thieves," she said. He thought she was going to spit at the video screen. "For all the car companies have done for us. Ford has changed our lives. Those little bastards..."

"... let me retire early and you live pretty good in the country," Carl finished for her.

"Without her husband," she added.

"It's temporary," he completed, and took a long, third swig of his hot coffee. "Baby, listen, I hate to say this, but I gotta go, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," she said. "Will you call on your way home?"

"Depends on how early it is. I could be in for around seven or eight in the morning or so."

"Call," she said. "Maybe we can have a little fun over the phone before you bed down."

He raised his eyebrows and finished the last of his coffee. "That, my darling wife, is a date. I'll even shave and get all pretty for you."

She winked. "I love you."

He pursed his lips in an air kiss. "Love you too," he said and pressed the end button.

He stood there at the counter, head bowed, thinking about the coffee pot and if he should have a second cup. It really didn't taste all that good, he admitted, once the flavour settled in the back of his mouth. He had never cleaned the machine and it was probably all gummed up. He could go down to the store and maybe pickup some cleaner and flush it out a couple of dozen times. He could do that and tomorrow he would have a cup of coffee that he would not have to fool himself into thinking that it was good stuff. He sighed and poured a second cup without looking, guessing how full the mug was from the sound of the coffee pouring in. Just as he was about to stop, slender, almost porcelain skinned arms wrapped around his waist.

"How in the name of Mary Fuck do you do that every goddamned morning," the voice behind him said. "I mean, seriously. Sugar fucking shock. Is that coffee fresh. I'd blow a horse for a decent cup of coffee."

The red headed nymphet came out from behind him, her long hair tied back in a ponytail, the top of her head barely coming to his shoulders, and grabbed at his mug. He considered holding it up over his head but he lowered it down for her to take. He backed up and away from him to get a look.

She held the mug with both hands and brought it to her full lips and took a deep swallow. She put the mug down, holding it against the middle of her chest, in between her apple sized breasts. They were topped with tiny nipples that seemed a sinister colour of red. Her green eyes caught him admiring her and those sensuous lips curved into a smile.

"You wanna be late for work I take it," she said, looking to the bulge in his crotch. A small dark drop grew at the front.

"I can't be late," he said. "You know that. I got to get to that car before your friends do."

She put down the coffee on the counter behind her without taking her eyes from Carl. "Don't worry," she said. "I won't take long."

Thirty minutes later, a freshly showered Carl, wearing yesterday's unwashed clothes and no underwear, had walked along Bloor street, crossed the viaduct and crossed back across Bloor at Broadview to get over to Cambridge Avenue. He checked his phone, folded down to just a display and strapped to the inside of his wrist. Fifteen minutes to spare, he confirmed, and lit a smoke. The kids from Macushla's gang would not be able to do anything until midnight plus one second, when the ownership of the car went from being the old woman's and went back to being the property of the Ford Motor Company. He pinched the filter of his smoke between his teeth and reached past the folds of his overcoat, sport coat and hooded sweatshirt for the firearm in his shoulder holster. The big bad gun's grip was in his pit and the tip of the sight dug into his kidney if he bent the wrong way. He had a smaller piece, one that was actually more effective in a firefight, strapped to the inside of his leg. But he had gauged the reaction of he had got from Cush when she first saw it.

"What a fucking cannon," she had said.

Her eyes were genuinely wide with disbelief. Carl had liked the drama the size of it had created. He stood there, smoking his cigarette, waiting for the first minutes of the next winter's day, a day that was proving to be as cold as any had been leading up to it, remembering how it felt to see Cush as she went over it with her eyes, how it felt to keep it from her, saying that it was too dangerous for her to even touch it. A hair fucking trigger, he had told her. If I fart, I'll set it off. Truth was, the trigger had an eight pound test. For all of the fingers it would take for her to exert that pressure, she'd never get them all inside of the guard.

He told himself he had done it because he wanted her to go back to all of her friends, like he knew that she would, going on about how she had fucked the shit out of him, robbed him blind, and told him nothing but crap about what it was they were up to, but she wanted them all to see the gun how she saw it. So that when they saw him, they would see the gun and they would hesitate long enough for his old bones to get a leg up on their young blood and maybe make it through another day. He held the wooden grip of his weapon and told himself that.