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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in
this novel either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

for Alexandra Machinist

REAL
EASY

An oncoming truck approaches in the opposite lane, one headlight dark. Nick squints and straightens out.

Later, when Rosie is in bed and they are watching TV, he lifts Samantha's large feet onto his knees and massages the soles, one for much longer than the other. She thinks that he is remembering the truck's headlights, one on, one off, and the phototropic glide of their car toward the homes. He switches back to her other foot a little too quickly, like he knows what she is thinking, like she has caught him doing something wrong.

THIS NIGHT WANTS to bend into itself. Some Saturday nights do. Men buy because others are buying, then buy because they have already bought, then hide from what they are doing by doing it again. The club has no windows; there are no clocks. She is used to not knowing what time it is. She dances for a man with four kids. He shows her a photo from his wallet and is deeply pleased when she compliments the family portrait, the fluffy-headed children, his wife's studied smile.

Then the hunched man, Ron, who had been in construction, whose back was broken on the job, buys a bottle of champagne, and the waitress jots down when his time in this room will end. Though he pays Samantha immediately in two starchy hundreds, plus extra per dance, and doesn't care that she fake-drinks the champagne, which he has poured into flutes with strawberries at the bottom, he is difficult company. He shifts from skepticism that, in fact, no touching is the rule and the bouncers will enforce it, to cheated belief, to seeking compensation by talking dirty. Does she know what he would *like* to do? He knows she wants to hear.

It's gross but also boring. There is nothing original about what men want to do to women. Listening to Ron makes her appreciate Nick more. He is a good man. He is the kind of man who keeps other men in line.

When the hour is up, the waitress pulls the champagne bottle from its slushy bucket and tells Ron he must buy another if he wants to keep the room. He reaches for his wallet. Samantha is relieved when Gigi

interrupts, stepping into champagne even though she is not supposed to. "Your chia pet's got a problem," she tells Samantha.

"What kind of problem?"

"The kind that gets you fired."

Ron is not smiling. He taps his watch. Samantha ignores him, grateful for the excuse to leave, and follows Gigi backstage. A cold creek of worry runs through her. What did "you" mean? Jolene? Or *her*, Samantha?

Then she sees Jolene floppy in Bella's makeup chair, tears leaking from shut eyes, and forgets to worry about herself. "Hey," Samantha says. "Honey. It's me. What's wrong? Come on, don't cry."

The girl opens her eyes. They are deep blue, the kind of blue that crayons get named after. "I am so happy."

Gigi blows out a breath. "Lollipops."

"I kept her back here soon as I realized," Bella says. "She's as high as a kite."

"Dale's gonna lose it. He's gonna put her out on her ass."

Samantha shakes her. "What'd you take?"

"Must be X," Gigi says. "She keeps saying she loves everyone."

"I do." Jolene shivers. "I love you."

Gigi rolls her eyes, one false eyelash askew. "We can't hide her here forever. The twofer's coming up. People will notice she's missing."

"We say she's sick," Samantha says.

"You say you did not find her with me," Bella says.

"This won't work," Gigi says. "She does not look sick. She looks ready to fuck the chair."

"There she is. I thought you'd want to know."

It is Violet, with Dale right behind her. She meets Samantha's flung-up gaze, and there is something about Violet's expression that makes Samantha wonder what her own shows. Betrayal? How had Samantha come to feel so protective of a girl she didn't even like?

Dale's dress shoes clap the concrete floor as he approaches the chair, the girl's prone form, her billowing chest, open mouth, open eyes, tear-streaked cheeks.

"She didn't take any drugs," Samantha says.

Gigi gives her a cynical look.

"I mean, it's not her fault," Samantha says. "Someone must've put it in her drink."

Dale's gaze doesn't leave the chair.

"She's new," says Samantha.

"Not that new," says Violet.

"Trusting," says Samantha.

In the uneasy silence, Gigi turns to a mirror and tries to nudge the loose eyelash back into place, then catches Dale watching her. "Lady Jade's got pennies for brains," she says.

A hot hand slips into Samantha's. "I want to go home," Lady Jade says.

"I'll drive her home," Samantha says, though she doesn't know where Lady Jade lives.

"Come with me, Ruby," Dale says.

In his office, high up on the third floor, with an interior window overlooking the club, he pulls a manila folder from a wooden filing cabinet and sits at his desk with its blotter and an old-fashioned green library lamp that makes his hands look out of proportion to the rest of him. The club music is muted here. A large fish tank burbles, fish sliding behind the glass. He consults the file, writes a few lines on a pad of paper, and rips the paper from the pad. "Her address."

Samantha takes it. She knows more or less how to get there. "Are you going to fire her?"

"No drugs at my club."

"She didn't mean to take it."

"Maybe she didn't, maybe she did."

"Please."

Dale smiles. "Lady Jade's lucky to have you as a friend," he says, a polite way of telling Samantha not to push it, and lifts the phone from its cradle.

She calls Nick and imagines him turning over in bed, burying his face into the pillow, and Rosie, who sleeps like the dead, sleeping on. She hears her voice echoing from the answering machine as she explains the situation, sort of ("another dancer has a stomach bug, poor thing"). Dale's smile becomes one of amused confederacy.

A bouncer is summoned to carry Lady Jade. Samantha goes backstage and is changing in front of her locker when she hears, “Ruby.” She turns. Violet has a bar receipt in her hand. “That man in champagne was looking for you.”

On the back of the receipt, in delicate script, Ron says he understands why she never came back. He always runs his mouth. He says things he shouldn’t. He just hasn’t been the same since his accident. He has left his number.

Samantha folds the note. She looks at Violet, who doesn’t look sorry she betrayed another dancer. Samantha says it calmly: “Fuck off.”

THE LOT IS armored with cars. The club will be open for another few hours. The packed lot reminds Samantha of what leaving early will cost her. Four hundred? Five?

Jimmy carries the girl, who, while not exactly unconscious, is definitely not all there. Dale had the lock on the girl’s locker cut off, and Samantha has Lady Jade’s—not Jolene’s—earnings from the night, bifolded and rubber-banded, and keys. Although Samantha wiped off her makeup and changed into jeans and a T-shirt, Lady Jade still wears her slithery dress, which spills like mercury down Jimmy’s pants.

After Samantha’s in and the bouncer has strapped the slumped girl into the passenger seat, he pats the hood of the car, solidly, twice, instead of saying goodbye.

IT’S NOT CLEAR when Samantha notices the car behind them.

It’s late, but there are other cars on the road, at least at first. Since nothing comes from the passenger seat but murky breathing and isolated words dropped like laundry no one is going to pick up, Samantha chews gum to keep herself company. She snaps and pops. She fiddles with her pearl earrings.

Maybe it’s after she gets off the interstate. Maybe that is when she notices. This road is nothing special. Strip malls, mostly, strange only

because everything is so empty, and that's not actually strange—it is expected at this time of night.

And there is that car, that same dark car. It has been behind them all the way from the club.

The tank is three-quarters full. Samantha stops at a gas station anyway and takes longer than she needs to pay. She asks the man behind the counter for directions, though she is not worried about how to get where she is going. The attendant spits a long brown stream of tobacco juice into a paper cup and gives an endearingly detailed answer.

For a while, after Samantha drives off again, she is relieved. She takes a turn. Then she hears, "The lights."

Jolene/Lady Jade is right. A set of headlights is following them. Samantha switches on the radio, keeping only one hand on the wheel. "It's nothing." There is always a car behind another car. This is a road. That is a car. This is what cars on roads do.

"I'm sleepy."

"Go to sleep."

"You—"

"Yes?" Samantha turns off the radio to hear better, yet there is nothing to hear.

The road is darker now, headlights brighter. Open land pours around them: prairie, probably. Or—a low crossbuck fence zips past—horse farms. Maybe the land has been bulldozed for building. It is too dark to tell.

A spongy anxiety makes Samantha say, although she has just said the opposite, "Hey, wake up."

She doesn't wake up.

They are not far from their destination. All Samantha has to do is drive, and it will not surprise her if the car behind her takes the next turn she doesn't, and the rear windshield goes black, and her fear is wiped away.

She imagines the sleeping woman beside her as a child. Blond braids, the part in her hair as white as the spine of a feather.

Light slices into the car. Samantha's heart goes fast, but it is not

the rhythm of fear, she tells herself. She reaches for the girl's hand. Samantha wants to say her name, but isn't sure what to call her. She is still holding her hand when the car behind hurtles into them, running them off the road.

SAMANTHA OPENS HER eyes in the jolting dark. Her head hurts. It feels broken. Her body is jammed into itself, her cheek pressed against rough, wiry carpet. The constant hum of the carpet makes no sense until she realizes that she is in the trunk of a car.

The motor accelerates. The car hits a hard bump. Her head rings with pain, the pain pushing her far away from here, until she forgets where here is, and then is nowhere at all.

DETECTIVE VICTOR AMADOR

Victor has his windows down. His patrol car smelled like ass from the first whiff of his late-Saturday-night shift. Then a DUI pissed himself in the back seat right before Victor dumped him at lockup, which made things extra awesome. A few hours later, it is clear that a fistful of disinfectant wipes has not helped much. The radio is quiet, so he parks near a forest preserve, one of those new, curated affairs with a bridge over the marsh, and listens to the gulping frogs while he reads his *National Geographic* and tries to enjoy the fresh air.

Being a detective is supposed to be the better job, but Victor likes occasionally working overtime in patrol, paying down the mortgage on his mother's house, and West Cover isn't bad, though he prefers Central, with its dime bags and domestic abuse, where calls come in a steady patter, making it easier to stay awake. The other detectives rib him about working overtime, but since Tess dumped him he doesn't have anything better to do. "He *loves* the uniform," says Backyard. "I am getting hard just thinking about how much he loves it," says Pradko. Holly, though, never says anything, only lifts her dark gaze from her paperwork to consider him. "She's spooky," Tess said the first time she met Holly. Tess would have pitied Holly if Victor had explained, which is why he hadn't.

A gray predawn halo hovers over the fringed water, and there are only a few hours left to his shift. It will be a nice Sunday. Victor cranks his seat back and gets cozy with its humid grime, scooching over a patch of duct tape on a hole worn into the fabric. His finger tracks the yellow frame on the magazine's cover, corner to corner. It is the latest issue. He has read most of it already. He likes the story about Marco Polo in the desert, sucking on a pebble to forget his thirst, and he likes the crazy-looking birds of paradise. He admires a spread of wild orchids and huffs, recalling a question on his psych eval when he was applying to the police academy: "I would like to be a florist. AGREE or DISAGREE." Afterward, Victor asked the examiner what was up with that. He was told that sociopaths like the idea of being a florist.

"But I said yes." Victor was worried.

The man smiled.

Victor gets it: the trimmed stems, arrangements, water-laden green foam collapsing beneath the touch, refrigerators like glass coffins. The tricks of the trade. Forcing an orchid stem to grow erect, clipped to a stake. Peonies, his mother explained, can be cut in the bud, when the bloom is compact yet marshmallowy. Go ahead, squish it, she added in English, her Cuban accent heavy. She often spoke in English about the flower shop, proud to show that she had learned this country's language and could do anything to take care of him. They had taken a bus from the town where he was born to Cuba's northern coast, where she paid a fisherman to take them across the bay to Miami. He had been little, and can't remember the bus or the boat. He remembers playing marbles in the sandy dirt beneath an almond tree outside his grandfather's house the day before they left. He remembers taking a Greyhound bus from Florida to Illinois, where his mother's second cousin said he had a job for her. The bus window grew colder as they drove north. He saw his first snow. Being a florist is good work, his mother said. All that beauty, every day. He said, One day, I will buy you all the flowers you want. When he became a cop, he told her to quit her job. I'm taking care of you now, he said.

At the time of the police academy exam, he felt fooled by the question, like it wasn't a general question everyone had to answer but had

been tailored to him so that he would fail. “So I like flowers—so what,” he told the examiner.

Victor got into the academy anyway.

His stomach is sour from his last cup of coffee. He drinks the cold dregs and reads. It feels almost as good as sleep. A woodpecker is typing in the trees. The sky gets pink as he reads the article he had been saving, the one about woolly mammoths.

“West Cover,” says the radio, “we got a 10–50, single vehicle, unknown injuries. Do you copy?”

Victor rolls the magazine into a baton. An hour ago, he would have been grateful for something to do. Now he is on the cusp of going home and going to bed. His supervisor, Sergeant Rabideaux, should overrule dispatch. Rabideaux should come onto the radio, take this job from Victor, and reassign it to the day shift. Plenty of fresh patrol officers have just started work, and one of them could—*should*—handle this. Rabideaux, though, is saying nothing—if he is even paying attention.

“Do you copy?” says dispatch.

Silence.

“Copy that,” Victor says, rolling his eyes.

Dispatch says the abandoned car was seen in a ditch on US 6. Victor runs his lights. Years ago, when he was new to the job, Victor would have tried to predict what he might see at the scene. Now he keeps his head clear. Nothing he can do. Not for an accident. Not until he gets there, and even then, not always.

“Advise me when you’re on scene,” Rabideaux says over the radio.

Oh, so *now* he’s got something to say. Rabideaux used to be a friend. A mentor, even, in Victor’s early days in the Fremont PD. Now Rabideaux is snide and lazy, lively only when he complains about his ex-wife, and steals time from the department by clocking in earlier and out later than his actual shift.

The sun is up. Victor sees the glint of the wreck down the long, straight road. He can smell it, too: oil and fuel and blown airbags. The road is sequined with smashed glass.

His pulse raps at his chest. His mouth tastes like tin. The red car lies in the ditch on its side.

Victor throws his car into park, and he is out, shoes crunching glass. He jogs up to the vehicle. He expects to see blood greasing the street, but there is none. He skids into the ditch and glances into the windows. His breath sags out of him, and he is, all at once, sleepy again, bottomed out, and pretty fucking annoyed.

He gets on his handheld. "This is West Cover. The vehicle's unoccupied." Typical. He has seen a lot of these, though it rarely looks this bad. The story here is clear: a drunk crashed his car and walked off to avoid arrest for a DUI. "Run the plates. See who comes up."

"10-4," says dispatch.

He snaps on his blue search gloves, primarily out of caution for his hands. There is glass everywhere, even on the seats. The car is wedged onto the driver's side. Victor never likes to look at the underbelly of a car. It feels wrong to see it exposed to the sky, all its snaking, arterial parts. The vehicle is cool; the crash happened at least a few hours ago. The door on the passenger side is open, tilted up like a dog's lifted leg. He pushes back the airbag on the passenger side and reaches for the glove compartment.

There is blood. It is on the dash. The airbag, he sees now, is spotted, too. The old coffee bubbles in his stomach.

He flips open the glove compartment. The registration is there, sealed in a Ziploc bag.

The radio clicks. Dispatch says the plates came up clean, no record. They match what is on the registration: a Nicholas Sullivan, whose address is the old Fremont button factory that has been converted into apartments. A nice part of town. "Send someone over there," Victor says into his handheld. "See who should be driving the car." He pauses. "There were two people in it. Unknown injuries." Then he sees the seat belt.

It's cut. The seat belt is cut. The driver's side, too.

He skids a rubbery blue thumb down the surface of the cut. He drops the strap and pushes in the red button on each buckle. The seat belt releases nice and smooth.

Dimly, he knows his shift should be over. But he sees his future. He will not be going home now, not for a long while. He sees his day

aging, how his eyes will scum over with fatigue. Close encounters with higher-ups. The paperwork. He wants to call Holly, but he shouldn't. Not today. She has taken this day off, same as she does every year.

"Send an ambulance," he tells dispatch. "An evidence tech. And an accident reconstructionist." Though it kills him (he does not want to deal with Rabideaux), he adds, "I need a supervisor on scene. I got a possible 10-35."

"Will-all, Lincoln-all, do you copy?" says dispatch. The dawn is quiet, but the radio makes its own kind of birdsong. *Will-all, Lincoln-all.*

Victor is aware that he must have contaminated evidence, might be contaminating it even now, but he goes through the car, looking for signs of a struggle, of knife cuts to the seats. He finds a purse—no, two purses, the contents spilled—and the license of a pretty woman with large, straight-ahead eyes. Samantha Lind. Her wallet has a school picture of a gap-toothed girl smiling one of those smiles that tries so hard it hurts you a little.

He finds money, two fat folds of cash, on the floor of the car. He holds a wad in each palm, feeling their chummy weight, then carefully puts the money back where he found it.

He ducks out of the car. He looks at the bright sky like it is not the sky but a photograph of it, something from the magazine he was reading. He has the feeling of *This is a place I will never see* even as he is seeing it.

Up on the back slope of the ditch, the high grass is flattened. Not very noticeably, just a dip in the line of green.

He feels slow as he walks the slope into the grass, up to his hips. Grass hisses against his wrists. His numb, blue-gloved hands push his way into the field. He thinks about his unfinished article, the woolly mammoth frozen in a cave, the cold hulk of it.

He does not need to part the grass when he finds the body. The body has created an open space around it with its own weight. She is lying on her back, her silver dress slit open. There is a piece of glass embedded in her cheek. It winks at him like ice.