

Damaged Goods

John Boston

Melissa Modry sat in the examining room waiting for the doctor to see her. She was nervous, as she should be. She had gotten a certified letter from the County Health Department suggesting that one of her former sexual partners may have exposed her to HIV. This is what it had come to for her. Waiting to find out if she had HIV. In some ways, she had almost hoped the test turned out to be positive, at least it would be some kind of closure. She sat on the table wearing nothing but her examining gown, which wasn't a gown at all. She wondered what the doctor would do if he came in and she was wearing nothing at all. She figured he'd at least have a nurse with him. Maybe they could all get it on and she could give them HIV as well.

She heard the knock on the door.

"Come in," she said.

A doctor in his late 50s or 60s came in. He had another assistant with him. A third doctor came into the room a short time later.

"Melissa? Nice to meet you. My name is Dr Levinson. This is Doctor Adamski and Nurse Choi. Doctor Adamski and Nurse Choi work for the hospital. I work for the CDC." he said, shaking her hand.

"The CDC? You mean the Centers for Disease Control?" she asked somewhat alarmed.

"Yes. Every time they declare a county health emergency, we get called in. I was here last month for a Hepatitis outbreak. It's nothing to be alarmed about."

"I thought I was just here for an HIV test. You took my blood last week. I hoped the results would be back by now."

"Yes. Melissa, we already did the test. You do not have HIV. We're certain of that. You see we are here because we have traced an unknown std back to you. You are our patient zero." said Dr. Adamski

"Patient Zero? What do you mean?" she asked

"Melissa, do you know a Bradley Waterman?"

"Name sounds familiar.....oh, wait Brad.....yes, I know Brad. We um.....we dated for a while."

"Yes, well. Brad is currently down in our ICU unit, suffering from what we thought was HIV. He has all the symptoms, except he tests negative for the virus and isn't responding to any of the

usual HIV medications. Then there is Mario Gunderson. He's also in the hospital suffering from much the same symptoms. Whatever is causing this disease must be sexually transmitted. We contacted all of their sexual partners. Other than their spouses, the only person they claim to have had sexual relations with is you over the past two years. We now have a third patient who is suffering from much the same symptoms, Chris Drake. I believe you know him as well?"

"What do you mean? Do you think I somehow caused them to get sick? That's crazy." she said in almost disbelief.

"Melissa, we ran your blood work several times. It seems that you are the carrier of an unknown virus. A very dangerous virus that seems to have no cure and doesn't respond to any of our medications."

"Me.....you think I have this?"

"We've isolated the virus.....we just don't understand how you can be a carrier and yet not show any symptoms of the disease.....of course, we don't really know exactly what disease it is at this point, but we were hoping you could fill in some of the blanks," said Dr. Levinson.

"What do you mean?"

"Melissa, have you traveled recently to South America or any other tropical area?"

"No, why?"

"Because you tested positive for Malaria. At least we thought you did. It turned out to be a false positive. Meaning you must have contracted the disease at some point but managed to beat it, which is almost unheard of for Malaria."

"I haven't left the city for the past six years. Certainly haven't been to the tropics, that's for damn sure."

"Melissa, we realize this is a very personal question, but given the nature of the problem, we must know," said Levinson.

"Must know what?"

"We must have a complete list of all of your sexual partners for the last ten years."

"That's why you asked me here? You wanted to know who I've fucked? That's none of your business." she said in shock.

"Melissa. I know it's very personal, but Mr. Anderson and Mr. Waterman.....they most likely will not survive much longer unless we can figure out how to treat their disease. Everyone else on your list could very well be in the same position. Perhaps if we can get to them before the appearance of symptoms we might have a better chance at treatment."

Melissa could see they were deadly serious. She knew if she refused, she'd only make things worse for herself. These idiot doctors actually thought that she was the cause of all this. That was just plain silly. The nurse had a clipboard along with a pen and paper.

"Just try to remember their names and where they were living at the time." said the Nurse who handed her the clipboard.

She quickly realized that there wasn't enough paper.

She met Brad Waterman six or seven months ago at their gym. She just did cardio and Pilates. Brad loved the weights. He also loved the girls at the gym. He struck up a conversation with her one day while they were walking beside one another on the treadmill. Melissa was surprised to find he was a pretty smart guy who had his own accounting firm in the city. They talked mostly about running but started talking about politics as well. He said that if more people paid attention to our elected officials, they wouldn't be able to get away with as much as they do.

"Remember, they work for us, not the other way around," he said.

She didn't think much of it, he finished his run and got off. She had almost completely forgotten about him when she ran into him in the parking lot. He gave her his business card and asked her to call him sometime. She knew he was probably married, but decided to call him anyway. After all, he could be the one. For a while she thought he was, even though he was already married with a six-year-old daughter, she thought she could have the same thing his wife did, they would just share him.

They had dinner the following week and he stayed over the place the following night. For her, it wasn't just about sex, it was about the chance to finally be happy. She wanted to fall in love and get married, she had wanted it so very, very badly, sometimes she would cry herself to sleep at night just thinking about it. She had been in plenty of relationships, none of which had been successful. She had been with single guys, married guys, and even married women. She figured she'd give it a shot, just to make sure she wasn't paying for the wrong team. It didn't take her very long to figure out that she most definitely was into guys, not girls.

For a while, things were magical. Their relationship had quite a honeymoon phase. They traveled together. He even met his daughter. She knew he could be the one, but he had a wife. The wife was ruining everything. She knew about her and would call him constantly when they were together. At the end of the day, she knew she had to give him an ultimatum. It was either her or Melissa. She was done sharing him with this bitch.

Unfortunately for her Brad chose his wife. He said they had been together for almost ten years and it was just too much time to throw away.

"Ten years is a long time baby.....we can still see each other if you want, but we cannot be in a relationship. She leaves me, she gets everything I've worked for. I can't let her win.

She tried to forget about it. She really did. But, the sickness had returned. That same, horrible sickness that happened after Mario. It kept her up at night, just eating away at her, wanting to get out. She knew there was only one way to make it go away. She had to screw him one last time

and make him part of the family forever. The sickness was family as far as she was concerned. Maybe he would give it to her and then they could both have the sickness. She wasn't sure up until that day in the doctor's office if the sickness was real or not. Now she knew. There was no going back. Another year older and not a damn thing to show for it. Without a family of her own, she was better off than when she left home for the big lights of NYC 15 years ago. 15 years later, she was still the same, scared little girl. Only now she had a very long list of sexual partners to show for it.

They had sex for the last time on the sofa in his office. She made sure he wasn't wearing a condom. She left the office as soon as it was over. If he got the disease, he was hers forever. The sickness was family. She really thought it was all in her head. She didn't really believe she had some kind of disease.....the kind that can kill you. She just sort of wished she did, so that her ex-lovers could feel what she has felt. Perhaps it might make them into a better person.

She thought for a while she was simply making the whole thing up. Maybe she did get an STD, it certainly was possible, but she didn't always feel sick. She only got sick after a breakup, much like she did when she was a teenager. She knew it was impossible for someone to actually invent a disease in her head.....right? She wondered if it was possible to simply channel all the negative emotions into a single thought, a single cell that housed all of the bad feelings.....what if that single cell became a real cell and turned into a real virus? She was so angry at Brad, she wondered if it really was possible. She would stay up late and night and wonder why she fell in love with men who were simply incapable of loving her back. She could feel the disease inside of her, swimming in her blood, wanting to get out and colonize the world, one unsuspecting victim at a time. Melissa and her disease really weren't that much different, they both wanted the same thing. To reproduce and leave their mark on this world.

She had thought about simply getting pregnant and raising the child on her own, but that would mean poverty and she wasn't sure if she was up to the task alone. She wanted a husband. She wanted to go on vacations together and send her dysfunctional family Christmas cards each year to remind them that she had found love and happiness. It was what every normal girl wanted. It was always so close, but always so far away.

She met Mario at work. He was a delivery driver. She would sign his invoice after making a delivery. They started talking one day and it just mushroomed from there. It took several months, but he finally gave her his number and asked her to call him. He had a live-in girlfriend as well, but made it clear they were just not right for each other.

"We fight a lot, then we make up. I'm 33, I don't have time for a high school relationship, I want to get married and have kids, you know," he said.

"Totally," she replied.

It wasn't long before they were meeting at her place after his route was done. They never even so much as kissed the first time he came over. He was tall and tan. He looked like a lifeguard, not a delivery driver. She could definitely see potential with him. He was ready to take the plunge, he just needed a little shove.

Their second date ended up in an all-nighter. She cooked him dinner and they drank a bottle of wine before having sex. They saw each other regularly for a month, then he just stopped taking her calls. He broke up with her by text. It didn't exactly surprise her. She kind of saw it coming. The last time they were together, she let the sickness have its way. She got so sick afterwards, she nearly threw up. She lay on the bathroom floor having convulsions as it emerged. It was getting stronger now, it was getting harder to control.

He told her things just weren't working out. Turns out Mario and his lady had two little kids together, something he forgot to tell her. He made sure to get a new route the next day and she never saw him again.

He said his name was Chris. He told her he was married, at least he didn't lie like the others. He bought her a drink and listened to her sob story. He was a banker, but he was also a good listener. She talked with him for almost two hours. He never interrupted her, never checked his phone, and never did anything except order more drinks. By the fourth Daiquiri, she could barely stand up.

"You're coming home with me Mr. Chris," she said and pulled him in for a kiss.

They barely made it back to her apartment before their clothes came off. She could feel the monster wanting to come out. As hard as she tried to suppress it, she just couldn't. When she climaxed, she could feel it leave her body and set up shop in a new and unsuspecting host.

She passed out a short time later. When she awoke the next morning, he was gone and so was the sickness. She spent the whole morning in bed, wondering how her life had come to this. One big disappointment after the next. One failed relationship after the next. She was running out of good years left. Pretty soon she'd be 40 and then who the hell would want her? She had no friends to speak of. Her only friend in the city left her a few years ago after she got drunk and kissed her husband, who passionately kissed her back. They both realized they had made a mistake and told her friend about what had happened, hoping it would clear the air. It did, just not in the way Melissa had hoped. Her friend cut off all contact with her the next day. That hurt worse than any guy breakup she had ever had. She had no one left to talk to. She would talk to her mother once a month or so, just to make sure she was still alive. She and her mother had never really gotten along, something that hadn't changed as the years went by and probably wouldn't in the foreseeable future. Her mother had been lucky enough to find her soulmate at an early age. He died when Melissa was 12 and her mother had never recovered. She had been hospitalized twice for alcohol poisoning, the last time, being the most serious. For a whole day, Melissa wasn't sure if she would ever see her mother again. It happened on the date of his death.

It was as if there was a giant rain cloud following her around, pouring down on her each and every time she might find happiness. Finally in desperation one day, she went to confession. Something she hadn't done since she was a teenager. She wondered if maybe the priest would be cute and they could flirt with each other. She never dated a priest before. That would be a first.

"Bless me, father, for I have sinned. It has been.....well it's been a very long time since my last confession." She said, stepping into the confessional box and kneeling on the small step in front of her.

"Tell me your sins my dear." said the priest.

"I have had premarital sex with men. Lots of men. Lots of worthless men. Lots of cheating men. Lots of lying men. I'm that girl father, I've become that girl."

"What do you mean you've become that girl?" he asked from behind the wooden veil.

"I'm the girl husbands cheat on with their wives, instead of being the wife. I'm never going to get married and have a family of my own. Never going to have a little daughter I can take to the mall and put makeup on her. Never go out for pizza with my family after my kid's little league game. I come home to an empty apartment every night and wake up every morning just waiting for my life to start."

"I see. Why do you think that is?" he asked

"Cause I guess at the end of the day, men just don't see me as wife material. They see me as slut material," she said with tears in her eyes.

"Maybe that's how you see yourself," he said

"Maybe. Maybe I'm just not looking in the right places."

"So you want to get married and have a family of your own?"

"Yes Father, I want that more than anything else in the whole world," she said

"You see my dear. I think you want it, but you're not going about it the right way."

"What do you mean?"

"We attract what we respect. You don't respect the institution of marriage. If you did, you would be running around with married, it's a sin and a big one." he said

"Yes, I think you're right. I guess we really do attract what we respect. I used to have morals father, and try to live a Christian life, I really did. It's just that after one failed relationship after another. One loser boyfriend after another.....I guess I just lost my faith in people and God."

"And yourself," he added

"That too. What should I do father? I'm not getting any younger here. I just want to meet a good man, get married, and have children, is that so wrong?"

"No, it's not wrong at all."

"So, how do I do it?"

"I think you will find what you seek. The question you need to ask yourself is: what do I do once I find it?" he said

"Okay...is that all father?"

"Say two Hail Mary's and please.....chastity is done for your benefit. Don't meet a man and start having premarital sex with him right away. No man will respect a woman without morals. I can tell you that."

"Yes Father, thank you," she said and left the confessional. She never did say her Hail Marys, she just went straight home and thought about what the priest had told her. She didn't respect marriage. That was her problem. She treated it as something that was owed to her, rather than something she should work for. It was like she was running a long race and to cross the finish line was to finally say "I do", only she hadn't been training for the race. She only wanted to do the last hundred steps to the finish line. She felt better than she had in years. Things were finally beginning to make some kind of sense for her. Then she checked her mail and saw the letter from the County Health Board.

"Melissa, this is Dr Pratt. She's a virologist. She is here to study that nasty little bug you have hiding in you." said Dr. Levinson

Melissa could see this chick wasn't taking any chances. She was wearing one of those face masks while they did the blood draw and was wearing nitrile gloves. She could also see two large male nurses standing beside her wearing plastic face shields and some type of thick gloves. She figured they were not there to see if she needed her pillow fluffed. These people clearly meant business.

"Melissa, I need to ask you one more time, you have absolutely no idea how you came to be a carrier of this virus?" asked Dr. Pratt holding a syringe in her hand.

Melissa shook her head.

"I think somehow I created it," she said softly.

"How did you do that?" she asked.

"I was feeling so bad, I think somehow my emotions just turned into a virus. As crazy as it sounds, I really think it's what happened."

The doctors looked at one another then Dr. Levinson spoke up.

"Well, Melissa, I'm sure you know that what you're describing is physically impossible," he said.

"It's improbable, not impossible. Nothing is impossible. I would think a scientist of all people would understand that." she said

"Melissa, this virus is very similar in nature to the malaria virus transmitted by mosquitoes. Symptoms are almost identical, only it isn't like any strain of malaria we've ever seen. We were hoping you could explain how you came into contact with the Malaria virus." said Dr. Pratt.

"Well, I was feeling really, really bad about my breakup with Luke, this guy I met before Brad. He dumped me after we had sex. Guess I wasn't up to his standards or something. Anyway, I remember getting drunk off a bottle of wine and passing out while watching TV. There was this show about what malaria did to people before we had an antidote for it. Killed a lot of people. I guess whatever was inside of me just mutated into malaria, my own kind of malaria, just for me." she said.

"Right....well, Melissa, we're going to need to draw some blood from you if that's ok?" said Dr. Pratt.

"Do I have a choice?"

"No."

"Well then, go right ahead. The sooner I get out of here the better," she said and winced as Pratt stuck the needle in her arm and began extracting some of her blood.

"Melissa, about that. I'm sorry to inform you that you won't be leaving here any time soon. See that police officer out there?"

Melissa turned towards the window and could see two uniformed police officers standing in front of her door.

"Yeah."

"They are here to make sure you don't leave the hospital. If you do, you will be arrested. Do you understand?" asked Dr. Levinson.

"What? You can't do this to me. I have rights, you know. I'm not an idiot doctor, I know you cannot indefinitely detain someone, certainly not without a court order."

"This is a court order, signed by Judge Wilkinson of the third district court. In the event of a medical emergency, the CDC does have the legal authority to confine anyone it sees as a threat to the community to a medical facility. It's federal law." said Dr. Pratt.

"Look, bitch. I'm out of here," said Melissa and jumped out of the bed. She put her sneakers on and was just about to leave when the nurses both restrained her.

"GET OFF ME!" she screamed.

"Melissa?"

"WHAT?"

"I thought you should know that Brad Waterman died early this morning. He went into cardiac arrest. We were unable to revive him."

"What? Brad's dead? You're lying." she said in shock.

"I wish we were. You can see that whatever this virus is, it's very deadly. We need your co-operation."

Melissa quit fighting the nurses and relaxed. She sat down on the chair in her room and began to cry.

"He's really dead?" she asked

"Yes and unless we can find out what's inside of you, Mario Anderson will be dead soon too. We can't help him at this point, only try to make his time more comfortable," said Dr. Pratt.

"I didn't want to kill anybody. I just wanted him to suffer a little bit. To feel as bad as I did, that's all. I didn't want him to die."

"I'm sure you didn't Melissa, but the fact is that more people could be sick from you as well. We're going to have to go over that sexual history of yours. I have a feeling there were a few names you left out, am I right." said Dr. Pratt.

"A few. More like a dozen."

"Yes, well, we're going to need their names and where they live," said Dr. Levinson.

Melissa took the clipboard and paper and began writing down the names of every guy she could think of. She wasn't even certain of many of their names, especially their last names. She met one guy at a hotel bar. He said his name was Steve, but it could have been a fake name.

"Brad's wife is sick too?" she asked.

"She was admitted yesterday with the same symptoms. It doesn't look good for her."

"But their daughter, who is going to take care of her daughter?"

"I don't know Melissa, a family member perhaps," said Dr. Levinson.

Melissa handed the paper to the nurse and started sobbing. She didn't want this to happen. She had gone from being pathetic to a medical biohazard. She had just killed Brad, a guy she was madly in love with because he wouldn't leave his wife for her. As bad as she had felt before, she was feeling even worse now.

Melissa spent the next two days in her room in a quarantine wing in the hospital. She was allowed to have her cell phone with her, but really had no one to call, so it didn't really matter. The story had somehow been kept out of the media, at least for now. She was stuck with several needles and took two CT scans, but nobody had the slightest idea what was inside of her. She tried to explain it to them, that she had created this whole thing, but no one wanted to listen. She overheard one of the doctors telling the other doctor that "her bread didn't seem to be completely baked" and that they should just ignore what she told them. They were still going on the assumption that one of her ex's had passed the disease onto her, but she somehow had an immunity to it. In reality it was the other way around. Turns out that another one of her ex's,

Steve Wilcox had been sick for over a month with the same symptoms, just not quite as serious as the rest. He tested positive for Malaria, but the treatment didn't seem to have any effect on him either. Mario's condition was deteriorating by the hour and the staff didn't think he'd last more than a few days. His girlfriend had to be restrained from entering Melissa's room by security. She had a small kitchen knife with her. Clearly, she didn't want to get to know Melissa on a more personal level, she wanted her dead.

Melissa did feel bad about all of this. She never wanted any of this to happen. As upset as she was at the guys, she was also more upset with herself. Love comes so easily for some, for others, they may as well try to walk on the moon. She began to wonder if she just wasn't meant to be single her whole life. To be one of those lonely, pathetic old people who invent reasons to go to the grocery store just to have someone to talk to. No, that was not in her future. Not if she had anything to say about it. She might be down, but she was definitely not out. She decided to test the waters and go down the hallway to the soda machine and get some Cherry Cokes. She could stand just about anything as long as she had a Cherry Coke.

She tried to put on some more clothes, but all she had was a sterile bathrobe the hospital had given her. It would have to do. She told the officer standing outside her room what she wanted and he said to go ahead, but he would have to go with her. She sighed but knew arguing was pointless. She could also tell that he kept his distance from her like she was a Leper or something. She introduced herself and the officer just said his name was Officer Larmer.

"I can see that, it's on your name tag," she said and shook her head.

There was someone standing at the soda machine in front of her. He was clearly having problems.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but would either of you two happen to have an extra dime? It seems I've come up a little short," he said

She reached into the pocket of her bathrobe and found a dime. Even in the hospital, she always had change with her. She had some change in her jeans when the hospital staff took them from her.

"Thanks. You're a lifesaver," he said and fed the dime into the machine. She was surprised to see a Cherry Coke come out at the bottom.

"What are you in for?" she asked.

"I'm donating Bone Marrow. I got the call two days ago. I guess I'm a match for this little girl dying of Leukemia. It's a long shot, but they're doing new things with stem cells every day." he said.

"Wow, that's cool. I fucked these guys and now they're dying of some weird STD they got from me. At least that's what these idiot doctors think. I've been ordered to stay in the hospital by the County Health Board and the CDC." she said.

"Goodness. Sounds like you've got quite a situation on your hands. You really can't leave the hospital?" he asked.

"Nope. If I try, Officer Larmer here is going to tackle me, right?"

"Something like that." he said.

"Maybe he'll just TASER me. I've never been TASERED before, I bet it sucks."

"Me either. My name is Joseph Crisp. Everybody just calls me Joe." he said and stuck out his hand.

"Melissa Modry. Everybody calls me M&M."

"Nice to meet you. I hope everything works out for you," he said.

Melissa smiled at him and fed her change into the machine. She was praying Joe didn't take the last Cherry Coke. Fortunately for her, he didn't. She bought two of them and then walked back to her room.

"Officer, how bout a quickie? I won't tell your wife," she said jokingly.

"I think I'll pass. I saw what you did to the other two guys. I'd rather not end up like them." he said.

Not that Melissa had any intention of letting this dork near her, but she did love to drive the boys wild. Only once, in her entire life did a man ever refuse her offer of sex. It took her a month to get over it. No matter how many guys she's been with, she'll never forget him.

The days turned into a week. She lost her job and would probably lose her apartment as well. She didn't really care for her job or her depressing apartment, but they were all she had and now she had nothing. Mario died a few days later and the doctors were really panicking now. They still had no idea what she had or how it killed its victims. Dr. Pratt now had a whole team with her. They were now wearing face shields and sterile suits when they entered the room. The officer at the door now wore a face mask. There was another uniformed officer at the elevator to make sure she didn't leave the floor. This had gotten very serious all of a sudden.

Melissa thought the whole thing was absurd. As long as she didn't screw anybody, what was the problem? Wasn't it possible that Brad and Mario had gotten sick from someone else? Maybe they should be checking on their sexual histories as well. She doubted she was the only one they screwed around with. The whole thing was absurd, very absurd. If she did have sex, she'd just tell them to wear a condom, problem solved. She did get a hold of a lawyer who agreed to take her case. She was challenging her indefinite confinement as being unconstitutional when even her doctors admitted that her disease was not contagious. She was like their guinea pig and this room was her cage. She could tell they were worried. It seems that two of her other sexual partners were showing signs of the illness, but as of yet, it had not become full-blown. She spent most of her days walking up and down the hallway, listening to music and watching TV, hoping one of the doctors would fill her in as to what was really going on. She called her mom and sister

to inform them what was going on. It was pretty much a waste of a phone call. They were concerned but stopped short of giving her money for a lawyer to challenge the judge's ruling.

"Just be strong dear, you'll get through this." said her mother.

"God Melissa, what did you do to those poor guys? It's all over the news?" said her sister.

So much for keeping things quiet. The genie had been let out of the bottle.

Melissa and her sister never really got along. Melissa was five years older and her sister was married with children, something that drove her nuts.

"I guess I gave them what they wanted," she replied.

It was about ten days later that she was awakened by the sound of something calling her name next to her bed. She wasn't sure if she was dreaming or not. She thought at first it was a rat in the ventilation system, but it was far too big to be a rat. As she came to, she could see someone inside the duct next to her bed. She crawled out of bed and got down beside it.

"Joe? The hell are you doing in there?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

"I wanted to warn you," he said

"About what?"

"They're going to take you to an isolation wing at the CDC Headquarters in Atlanta. Melissa, I'm a microbiologist. I study germs for a living. I even tried to get a job with the CDC after I graduated. I can assure you if you go in that isolation wing, you'll never come out. That wing is reserved for the most dangerous viruses known to man. Ebola, Marburg, assa Fever. Nasty stuff. Whatever you have, it must have scared the crap out of them. This is their way of panicking." he said.

"That's bullshit, they can't do that. I have rights," she said in shock.

"Yeah, but the law is clear. There's not much your lawyer can do, except take your money. They can label you a biological emergency and your rights just vanish. They can hold you for as long as they want. They held an Ebola patient in that wing for six months. He wasn't showing any symptoms and had no trace of the virus. I think they injected him with something and wanted to see what his reaction was."

"How did you find out?"

"I was in the elevator with Dr. Pratt and someone else, they were talking about it on their cell phones. They're going to move you tomorrow morning. They don't even have the decency to tell you what's going on."

"I got to get out of here Joe. I'm not sick. I'm not spreading any disease. It's not even an issue unless I have sex with somebody. I think they're overreacting. I'm going to call my lawyer."

"Melissa, can you open this vent cover? It's a straight shot out of this floor and into the next one. You can take the elevator right out of here. Bypass the cops all together.

"I'd need clothes. No way I can get out of here wearing these."

"I've got some jeans and a shirt in my bag, by the way, what the hell are you still doing here?"

"I had to come back. The doctors screwed up the marrow extraction. I guess I timed it just right." he said

"Joe, how can you be sure I won't get anyone else sick?" she asked.

"Well, we met exactly ten days ago. If you really were carrying some dangerous disease, you'd be showing symptoms right now, maybe even be dead. How do you feel?"

"I feel fine."

"Ok, what about the grate? Can you move it?"

Melissa tried to move it, only to see that it was screwed shut.

"Hold on, I have something that might work." she said and ran over to her bed and grabbed a metal butter knife that came with her dinner. She spent the next 15 minutes carefully loosening the screws with the blade of the knife. When she finally had them removed, she popped off the cover and crawled inside the duct with Joe.

"They usually come to check on me after shift change at eleven. That gives us almost half an hour," she said.

They crawled slowly through the duct, trying not to make much noise. It ran parallel to the rooms, not above. She was certain someone would hear her, but the hospital walls have a way of quieting almost every sound. They came back to Joe's room. He handed her the clothes and she quickly changed out her clothes. She was almost naked right in front of him. He stopped to admire her.

"Been a while for ya Joe?"

"Too long. Ok, the cop is covering the elevator. We need to get back in the duct and make it to a lower level. How much time do we have?"

"About 15 minutes," she said, checking her phone.

"Ok, come on," he said

"Joe.....why are you doing this? You know what will happen to you if they catch us?"

"I also know what will happen to you if they catch us," he said.

That was good enough for Melissa. She climbed back into the vent and started crawling. She passed by two rooms and had to stop when she heard a nurse. She and Joe went slowly, not wanting to make too much noise. Once the heater kicked on, she had to hide her face from the heat. She wasn't sure they were going to make it. She saw the nurse standing right in front of the vent duct. She stopped and waited for her to leave. She kept on crawling. How no one heard her was beyond her understanding. They slid down another duct with their backs against the wall. She was breathing hard. She wasn't used to this kind of exercise. The ducts are connected. She was beginning to get claustrophobic. The ducts were barely big enough for her to squeeze through. Last thing she needed was to get stuck. At last, they reached a supply room. Joe removed one of the tiles and they slid down.

She had to stop and catch her breath. Joe opened the closet door and looked down the hallway. He grabbed Melissa by the hand and walked with her to the stairs. He pushed open the door and they both walked as fast as they could down to the lower level, where the parking garage was. They got in Joe's car and left the hospital. They passed by a doctor who didn't even look twice at them and a group of workers working on an electrical panel. No one stopped them. Melissa had managed to slip away. Part one was done, and part two was just beginning. She knew the shit was going to hit the fan when they found out she was gone.

"Joe. Look, I don't want you to get in trouble. You seem like a really nice guy, but you know these people are going to go nuts when they find out I'm gone. I hope you have a plan." she said.

"My plan is to get the hell out of here and as far away from this place as possible."

"Then what?"

"I hadn't planned that far ahead. One step at a time," he said

"I see," said Melissa.

She hoped her new friend did have some kind of plan, other than going back to his apartment and hiding out. They had to get away from the city. Somewhere new, where no one would recognize them.

Once they were out of the city. Joe stopped at a gas station off the highway and filled up his car. Melissa sat outside and smoked a cigarette. First one she had had in almost two weeks. She couldn't sleep at night due to her nicotine withdrawal. She almost didn't want to start back up. She thought about just turning herself back in, but if Joe was right, she might not ever see the light of day again. She did call her lawyer and left a message. She never mentioned Joe's name, but said she would call back in the morning. She did say why she left and that she hoped he would come up with a legal maneuver to block anyone from forcing her to go to Atlanta. She figured it wouldn't be too long before the staff figured out who helped her escape. Joe finished pumping the gas and walked over to her.

"My knight in shining armor." she joked.

"We were damn lucky to get out of there without being caught. Look, if you're having second thoughts, I can always drop you off someplace."

"What is going to happen to me?"

"You'll be a guinea pig. You won't be a person to these people, you'll be in an investment opportunity. A chance to get funding and dollars to fight whatever it is you have inside of you." he said.

"That sounds like a pretty shitty deal to me. Maybe my lawyer can come up with something."

"Maybe. I wouldn't put too much faith in your lawyer. I've made that mistake before as well. Some are honest, most are just scumbags who will take your money and not do a damn thing for you." he said.

"Where are we going?"

"Well, temporarily anyway, I do have an idea. My family left me some property years ago. My mom is in a nursing home and my dad passed a few years back. It's totally deserted, except for a mobile home and a few outbuildings. No phone or power, we'd have to use a generator. I figure it won't be long before the cops ID me. I have to get you hidden before they pick me up."

"Where is this place?"

"About two hours north of here. Used to be a logging camp back in the day. My parents wanted to turn it into their retirement home. Never got the chance to. They gave it to me and hoped maybe I could do something with it."

"I don't really have much of a choice. I can't go back to my place. They'd be waiting there for me."

"Most likely."

"Got no job to go to anymore. What the hell, why not? There's nothing back at my apartment I need anyway, just some new clothes. I'm going to need clothes."

"Ok....I'll see what I can do."

"Joe.....you don't have to do this. I don't want you to wreck your life to help me."

"Melissa, my life already is a wreck. I wake up and go to some shit job I can't stand just to keep my head above water and try to keep my mom alive. When I was younger, I wanted to be in the NHL. I wanted to be a hockey player. Now I make peanut money working at a local hockey rink. They won't even let me coach because of some bullshit that happened when I was younger. All I do is sit around and watch everyone else get to live their dream and I get reminded that I never will."

"Ok, Joe. Look, I don't have any money or anything. I don't know what I can give you."

"Melissa, you've already given me more than I've had in years. Helping you get out of that hospital was the best thing I've ever done. I don't want anything from you, maybe just to listen to me. I haven't had anyone listen to me in years."

"I can do that. I'm a good listener," she said and put out her cigarette.

They drove for over two hours on the highway, got off, and drove for another twenty minutes down a gravel road until they got to Joe's camp. He told her about his job, working for a major pharmaceutical company in their vaccine division before he realized that he was causing almost as much harm as he was fixing."

"Vaccines affect everyone in different ways. Sometimes they do exactly what they are supposed to do, then sometimes they don't have horrible side effects. When I brought this information up to my bosses, they just ignored me and said that the positives outweighed the negatives. I doubt very much they would think the same way if their kids were injured by a supposedly harmless vaccine. I just couldn't continue to work in a job where I was responsible for someone else's misery. We parted ways over two years ago. I haven't really worked since then." he said.

"How do you get by?" she asked, fighting to stay awake.

"I worked as a substitute teacher for a while. Then I got a temporary job working in a lab. I used to have a staff of over a dozen people and a huge expense account. Now I was reduced to eating left-overs from the cafeteria. Quite a fall."

"There's a price to pay for having a conscience these days."

"Yeah, I don't regret quitting. I know I made the right choice. I just don't know if I was prepared to deal with what followed."

"Yeah, I thought I'd be married with a trophy husband and two little kids. I'd stay at home and take them to soccer practice while my husband made all the money. Guess I got that one wrong." she said.

"Maybe you just haven't found the right guy yet."

"No. Women get more desperate as we get older. That whole biological clock thing is for real. We have a window of opportunity. Once it closes, it doesn't open back up. It's kind of ridiculous. When we are able to have children, we aren't emotionally or mentally ready. By the time we are, our bodies say we're too old. Go figure."

"I've studied biology for years. My master's is in applied microbiology. I can tell you that nothing about the human body makes any sense at all. It seems to have its own reasons for doing what it does." he said.

The more time Melissa spent with Joe, the more comfortable he became. He certainly wasn't her type, at least not physically anyway. He was the type of guy she needed, just not the type of guy she wanted. He was very intelligent and though he never came right out and admitted it, she sensed he kind of wanted the same things she did.

He pulled into the driveway of the hunting camp and opened the gate. He pulled up next to a mobile home that looked deserted. Joe got out and grabbed a flashlight from his trunk. He found the generator and after several failed attempts, managed to get it going. He unlocked the front door and turned on the lights. Though no one had lived in the home in quite some time, it was still well-kept. Joe said that he had to live here last year when things got really bad and he couldn't find work. Melissa sat down on the sofa just for a minute. Joe went outside for a few minutes. When he came back in, she was asleep. He pulled a blanket over her and tucked her in. She came to briefly, just long enough to form a coherent thought.

"Thanks for saving me, Joe. I owe you one," she said and passed out.

Joe just smiled. It had been years since he had a female living in this trailer and she certainly didn't look half as good as Melissa.

He stepped outside into the cool fall air. Once the light from the bulb got weaker, it was total darkness in the woods surrounding the trailer. He had no idea what to do next. He figured maybe the authorities would try to find him, maybe they wouldn't. There weren't that many people who knew Joe, and even fewer who knew about his house in the woods. He would go into a bigger city like Albany or Glens Falls, not wanting to risk being seen in one of these little villages where everyone seemed to know everyone else and strangers stuck out like sore thumbs. First thing in the morning, he'd head into Albany for supplies. He wasn't really sure what he would do with the girl.

The days went by pretty quickly for Melissa. She called her mom and sister, just to say she was ok and was staying with a friend. Her mom did mention that the hospital had called her saying that she left without paying her bill, even though she was ordered by the courts and those in charge not to leave. Clever, but her mom knew better.

"The person who I talked to was no secretary, that's for sure."

"I'm just staying here until I can get back on my feet," she said.

She spoke briefly to her sister, who seemed more concerned about Brad than about her.

She did manage to buy a local paper from the city and there was no news about her at all. She did see an obituary for Mario, but that was it.

She began thinking to herself that maybe she had overreacted. Did Joe lie to her, just to get her up here? Those cops guarding the elevator were no illusion, that was for certain. It was as if everyone just pretended she didn't exist. To declare a county health emergency over her std seemed kind of ridiculous. Maybe he did lie to her, but then again maybe he didn't. In her situation, she didn't have much of a choice. Either way, she figured she was better off up here than back in the city. She was also beginning to like Joe. They weren't each other types, at least not at first. She was an ex-club girl, who loved to party. He was a quiet stay-at-home type who spent his off time repairing his snow blower and painting canvases. But, the more time they spent together, the more attracted to one another they became. She liked the way he never judged her, or treated her like she had some deadly disease. He liked the way she listened intently to his life experience and then gave her opinion. She never interrupted him, she always let him finish. Her

insight and opinions were interesting, to say the least. She had a unique way of seeing things and people. Physically she was gorgeous and it was hard not to deny his attraction to her. In many ways, they made up for each other's shortcomings and were much better as a couple than they were as separate people. One night it just happened. They just kissed. Joe wasn't sure what would happen. If he would get sick or not. A few days went by and he felt fine. They spent the next evening on the couch together in each other's arms.

"Joe.....I think we want the same things out of life, you and me. I want a family of my very own."

"Me too," he said.

"I don't know what will happen to you if we have sex. You could get real sick."

"I already am sick. Loneliness is worse than cancer sometimes," he said

"I know what you mean. It's like without somebody in our lives, we're slowly suffocating one day at a time."

"You sure you want to do this?" To be a mother?"

"It's what I always wanted. I figured if I created this disease, then I could make it go away. I am the only one who can stop it." she said.

"What if you can't?"

"I figure I'll already be pregnant by then," she said and took him in her arms.

Officer Gary Woodson was one of two police officers for the town of Grayson. Most of his days were spent chasing speeders on highways or answering calls for elderly citizens needing assistance. He had to draw his weapon last year on two suspects who had robbed a convenience store in town. His days consisted of sitting in his car, fighting to stay awake, broken up by the occasional heart-pounding excitement that comes from pursuing a suspect or answering a 911 call. Most of the time, his days were spent driving around town, trying to avoid the police chief, whom he could not stand.

He decided to check up on some of the cabins and hunting camps around town, just to make certain everything was ok. Last year, they had a couple of reported break-ins at the property. One camp lost a brand new 1200-dollar hunting rifle. Most owners didn't object and many seemed to genuinely appreciate the assistance. He couldn't go inside, unless he thought something was obviously wrong, but just drove around and checked the doors and windows.

His last check was on a camp owned by the same family for generations. He had never met the owners. He pulled up to the gate and drove down the small gravel road. He was surprised to see a car parked in the driveway since it was not hunting season. Still, he didn't sense anything was out of the ordinary. He got out of his car, walked up to the front door and rang the bell. He waited for a minute and could see someone through the window. The front door opened. He was surprised to see a lovely young woman holding a baby in her arms.

"Hi there officer. What can I can I do for you?" she asked

"Morning ma'am. I'm Officer Woodson. I was checking up on some of the properties out here. We had a few break-ins last year, just wanted to make sure everything was alright here."

"Couldn't be better officer. Would you care to come inside? It's not very often we have visitors out here." she asked and opened the door.

"Sure," he said and got inside.

Woodson was startled to see a man hooked up to a ventilator. The man looked like a corpse. He could barely lift his hand to wave at him.

"That's my husband, Joe. He's a little sick. He'll get better though. We just have to get him over this rough spot. I just had my twin boys. Delivered them myself." said Melissa holding one of the babies.

Woodson looked at the babies and could immediately see that they didn't quite seem to look right. The baby smiled at him and for a second, he thought that he could see some kind of long lizard-like tongue in its mouth.

"Got a nice family there ma'am. Congratulations." he said and started making his way back towards the front door."

"Coffee, Officer? I just made some," she said and walked into the kitchen.

"No thank you, I really should be on my way. I've got a lot of properties to check out."

"You know, it's true what they say," said Melissa.

"What's that?"

"Family.....it's all that really matters," she said

"Yes ma'am," he replied.

Woodson looked at what was left of the man sitting on the sofa. He gave Woodson a thumbs up. He thought he saw something crawling through the man's skin. Woodson backed away from the man and headed towards the front door.

"I really must be going. Nice to have met you folks," he said and left the trailer.

He quickly walked out to his car and got inside. He was glad to be out of there. He remembers seeing a BOLO Alert about an escaped patient from a hospital in NYC who was thought to have been in the area. The alert was for a woman matching the girl's description, possibly accompanied by a man. It couldn't be the same people. Since when was it a crime to leave a hospital? They seemed like a nice family. He hoped the guy got better soon, or just up and died. No one should have to go on like that.....nobody.

He had never seen anyone look like that in his life. He couldn't get it out of his mind.....he looked like something out of a horror movie. Hopefully, it wasn't contagious. The girl was cute. He might have to come back and check on her.....just being neighborly. That poor bastard..... someone really should just put him out of his misery.