

## EUREKA

A full moon hung over the Trinity River Valley in Northern California. It made for a beautiful drive—the moonlight on the water, the gentle slope of the canyon lined with pine trees, the river looking like a rippling white ribbon. Ward glanced up from the winding road now and then, determined to print the picture in his mind. He'd never seen a picture so perfect. He figured he'd be in Eureka around 10:00 PM. He'd get a room there and take a long, hot soak in the tub and then a shower. After camping for five days on the Trinity, a hot bath and a warm bed seemed like heaven.

He had left Jimmy in Junction City at Pat's place. Jimmy would be heading home tomorrow, back through Redding and down through the valley to Vallejo. They had fished the Trinity hard, from Weaverville down to Junction City, with nothing to show for it—as usual. That didn't matter. October on the Trinity was reward enough: the clear, cold mornings out on the water, the afternoon temperatures climbing into the eighties, the air so fresh you could taste it. And

then hanging out at the bar Pat owned where the cold beer and the conversation flowed like the river itself. Ward told himself the fishing didn't matter.

What mattered was that this was probably his last trip with Jimmy, Karyn's father. Karyn was moving on and there was no way to change that. She was in love, and you can't fight love. You can't say *don't love him, love me*. It doesn't work that way. It was good of Jimmy to plan the trip, their last hoorah so to speak. They had fished the Trinity for salmon every fall for a half-dozen years and this trip was a nice little nod to tradition. He was a good man, a damn good man. For the five days that they were together, he never mentioned Karyn, never asked about their break-up. Ward was grateful for that. He didn't want to talk about it.

He made it to Eureka on schedule and found a room at a Best Western on West Fifth Street. After the hot soak and the shower, he felt like a new man. He was ready to find a friendly tavern and throw back a cold beer or two. He asked at the front desk and the clerk directed him to a place a couple of blocks over, an easy walk from the motel.

The night air was cool and the fog was beginning to roll in across Humboldt Bay. He was about to cross the street to the bar, situated on the corner, when a car came tearing down the street and lurched to a stop at the curb. There was a girl with short blonde hair hanging out the passenger side window, laughing and shouting incoherently. The driver, who looked to be a little older, jumped out of the car, helped the blonde out of the front seat, and together they stormed through the door of the bar.

Ward watched all of this and debated whether or not to turn around and head back to his room. He finally crossed the street and went inside. There were a handful of customers, some at the bar and some in booths along one side. There was a small dance floor and a jukebox toward the rear of the room. He took a stool and waited. The bartender was busy with the two new arrivals, especially the blonde girl. She was talking loud and laughing, poking fun at him, and he was giving it right back to her. They obviously knew each other. Then she stood up on her stool and leaned across the bar, showing generous cleavage from a scoop-neck knit top, and demanded a kiss from the barkeep. He grabbed a breast in each hand and planted a kiss on her lips, all the while squeezing the ripe little peaches. The blonde girl found this hilarious. Ward wondered what strange world he'd stumbled into. The bartender broke away and came toward him.

"Hey, buddy! What can I get you?"

"Whatever you have on tap ... and a little protection from that wild child."

"Don't worry about her." He laughed out loud. "Her sister is keepin' an eye on her."

So that was it: little sister, big sister. Ward nursed his beer and tried to relax. He noticed that the blonde girl glanced his way every now and then. After a couple of rounds, she was starting to look pretty good. She was a little plump with obvious muffin tops spilling over her jeans, but she had a pleasant face and large, expressive eyes. It really was a nice face. You'd have to say pretty if you were being fair. She smiled at him once when their eyes met and she had a nice

smile, too. Another couple of beers and she would look like Shirley Jones. The *Partridge Family* theme played in his head briefly.

Ward took some change and wandered over to the jukebox. It was a good playlist and he dropped in a few quarters and started to punch in his picks. And then the girl was standing next to him, bumping elbows.

“Why don’tcha play ‘Earth Angel’? I love that song.”

“Sure.” He punched in the letter-number combination. “Anything else?”

They scanned the columns and made a few more selections. Ward could see that she was very young. He wondered if she was old enough to be in this place, but that wasn’t his problem. He got a strong whiff of cologne, mixed with the alcohol on her breath, and he recognized the scent: it was Karyn’s favorite. What was it called? Emerald, or Emeraude, something like that. This girl had obviously bathed in it.

“I’m Ward, by the way.” He waited for her to respond. “And you are?”

“Umm ... I’m Jane. Call me Jane.”

“Jane Doe?”

“What?”

“Nothing. Can I buy you and your friend a drink?”

“Sure.” She led the way over to the bar. “This here’s my sister. What’d you say your name was?”

“Ward.”

“This here’s Ward. He’s gonna buy us a drink.”

Big sister gave Ward a critical glance and then nodded. Apparently she had no name that she wanted to share. She was drinking club soda. Jane ordered a 7-and-7. They sat through several rounds and chatted about nothing in particular. Big Sister kept her eyes straight ahead, chain smoking cigarettes and sipping her soda. She had nothing to say. “Earth Angel” came on the jukebox again.

“Oh, come on, let’s dance.” Jane grabbed Ward’s arm. “I love this song.”

They slow-danced to “Earth Angel” and then to two more songs. By the third song, Jane was wrapped around him and Ward couldn’t help but be aroused. He knew she could feel it but she didn’t pull away. He was feeling lightheaded from all the beer. Or was it the cologne? As the song ended, she reached up to him, her lips parted, and he kissed her long and deep. When she finally stepped back, he could see tears in her eyes.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

“Nothin’.”

“Come on, I thought we were having a good time.”

“It’s not you, Ned—”

“Ward.”

“Ward ... sorry. I’m thinking about my old man. My boyfriend. He’s doin’ six months in county. I really miss him.”

“Sorry to hear that.” He started to ask *six months for what?* But he wasn’t sure he wanted to know. “Come on, let’s have another drink. Maybe you’ll feel better.” He led her back to the bar and ordered another round.

“I really feel bad, ya know? I miss him. He’s not a bad guy. He was always good to me.”

“Well, maybe he’ll get out early ... you know, good behavior or something.” Ward glanced at Big Sister who gave him a look that said *Yeah, sure.*

“But I feel bad ... ‘cause while he’s been in there ... I chipped on him ... I chipped on him a lot.”

Ward thought he knew what “chipped” meant, but he wasn’t sure and he didn’t want to ask. It was a good time to take a trip to the men’s room and splash a little water in his face. He excused himself and made his way down the narrow hall just past the dance floor.

As he washed his hands, he noticed the condom vending machine mounted on the wall. He thought about the kiss on the dance floor and imagined taking that warm young body to his bed. He dried his hands, dropped in the required coins and stuffed the foil packets in the pocket of his jeans.

When he came back to the bar, Jane was gone. Big Sis was there, chain smoking and fixing him with a steady gaze. She turned on her stool to face him directly.

“Watch yourself, *Ward.*” Her voice was calm and cool, but she pronounced his name like an exclamation point. She was about his age—mid-thirties—and though her hair was dark, he could see the resemblance to her sister.

“What?”

“You heard me. Watch yourself. She’s just a kid ... a kid with problems. The last thing she needs is a one night stand with a jerk like you.”

“Look, I don’t know what you think—”

“You think it’s going to be easy ... a sure thing. Right, *Ward*? You’ll just say, ‘Hubba hubba, baby. Let’s go back to my place. I’ll show you a real good time.’”

“No, I mean ... come on—” He glanced around as though looking for help. He could not look her in the eye.

“And what’s your story, *Ward*? Divorced? Separated? Yeah, I noticed the little tan line on your ring finger.”

He immediately covered his left hand with his right.

“And now you think you’re God’s gift to wayward girls?” She punctuated the question with a wry smile.

“Look, Big Sister ... sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“My name doesn’t matter, *Ward*. Let’s just say I’m your conscience, here to make sure you do the right thing.”

“Which is?”

“Leave now, while she’s still in the ladies room. Go back to wherever you’re staying, watch some porn, whack off, do whatever it is that you do. And *leave my sister alone*.” She let it sink in for a few seconds. “Don’t worry ... I’ll tell her you said goodbye, good luck, best wishes, etcetera.”

There was nothing more to say. He'd been busted and he was no match for this woman. He got up off the stool, dropped a few dollars on the bar and headed for the door, away from this strange encounter in Eureka.

---

Ward hit the road early the next morning. He took a cup of coffee but decided to wait for breakfast until later. His stomach was a little queasy from the night before. He cruised down US-101 enjoying the redwood country, and then took the exit at Legget that cut over to Highway 1 and the coast. By the time he reached Mendocino, he was very hungry. Just south of town, he saw the sign that marked the entrance to Van Damme State Park. He turned in and up the road to the ranger's station. There was no one in the booth so he continued into the park and found a campsite along the river. The campground was nearly deserted. He'd stop and pay the fee on the way out.

He popped the tailgate and took out his camp stove and some cooking gear. He had bread to make toast and in the cooler there was a pound of bacon and a dozen eggs. As he reached for the cooler, he saw his clothes from the night before, wadded up and stuffed in among the camping equipment. He picked up the Pendleton shirt he'd been wearing and brought it to his nose. It smelled of cigarette smoke and cologne. He paused to play back the events at the bar and he felt the blood rush to his cheeks.

Ward sniffed the shirt again, and just for moment she was there. She had not been with him all week on the Trinity, but now she was. He started to say her



name, but his throat tightened. He'd lost her, and now he was out here on his own, acting the fool.

One thing was certain: he'd have to put those clothes in a plastic bag; either that or throw them away. There were things he needed to forget and that scent carried memories.