

When Dreams Bleed

a novel

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Empty Nest Publications
Scottsdale, AZ 85255
www.EmptyNestPublications.com

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LCCN: 2009940975
ISBN-10 0-9842898-0-1
ISBN-13 978-0-9842898-0-6
Copyright information available upon request.

Cover Design: Manjari Graphics
Interior Design: J. L. Saloff
Typography: Garamond Premier Pro, Arial, Sceptre,
Courier Standard, Gloucester MT

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v. 1.0
First Edition, 2010
Printed on acid free paper.

**This book is dedicated to my father,
whose arms I feel around me...even now.**



EXACTLY ONE-THIRD of a living, breathing human being once upon a time, she is now, she believes, exactly one-third of a dead one. Her no-good father—may he rot in hell—had made certain of that.

As part of her daily ritual, she pulls the paper from the back of the book she'd stolen long ago from one of her foster parents' houses, carefully unfolds it and proceeds to read it aloud to the empty room:

FATHER IS CHARGED IN DEATH OF SON, 10

A Los Angeles man, accused of fatally beating his 10-year-old son, was charged with first-degree manslaughter on Sunday.

The man, Marcus Lewis, 30, told the police that he beat his son, Franklin, on Friday evening, the authorities said. One of a set of mixed triplets, Franklin had been fighting with his identical twin brother, Mr. Lewis told police. According to the fraternal twin sister, one of Mr. Lewis' blows

was so strong it sent the boy flying across the apartment, the police said. After the boy hit his head against a wall and lost consciousness, Mr. Lewis called an ambulance, they said. The boy was taken to San Marcos Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead, apparently of brain injuries.

In his statement to the police and an assistant district attorney, Mr. Lewis said he had previously beaten Frank on several occasions, but "the good-for-nothing brat would just never mind his business."

When officers arrived at the man's home, they found the apartment overrun with insects. "It was a real condition of squalor," said Stan Conklin, a spokesman for the Los Angeles County district attorney's office. A neighbor, who agreed to speak on a condition of anonymity, told reporters at the scene that Mr. Lewis' wife had disappeared months before and that he often left the children alone.

The other two children, though suffering from what appeared to be malnutrition and severe neglect, were unharmed, although the daughter was being examined for sexual abuse. They were immediately taken into custody by Child Protection Services and placed in temporary foster homes.

Slowly refolding the news article and placing it back in the book, she hears the haunting cadence of her father's voice as it rushes in and fills up the dark recesses of her mind.

"No one will ever hurt you, angel. I promise," he would whisper while caressing her, often lying naked on the bed beside her. "Even

though there are three of you, I promise to always love you best. You're the only one that matters. I don't even have a use for those other two."

Her hand now shaking, she picks up the razor blade and, just like the day before and the day before that, she repeatedly slices the top of her thigh until she can no longer distinguish one pain from the other.

“In position play, the master does not search for combinations. He creates the conditions that make it possible for them to appear.”

*~Irving Chernev,
Logical Chess Move By Move*

Part I



FRANK CAMPELLETTI'S balls ached. The “boys” (that’s what he called them) had been complaining ever since he’d gotten out of bed that morning.

Must’ve strained them in my workout yesterday.

Uncrossing his legs to provide a little extra room, he made an effort to appear interested in what his assistant was now saying to him.

“I’ve scheduled everyone to meet in the conference room. Ms. Roderick should be here in fifteen minutes,” Janie said, referring to the Realtor she had scheduled to meet with Frank and his management team. “I’ve set out fresh coffee, and you’ll find the paperwork for the other property on the table by your seat.”

“Great. Thanks.” Frank gave Janie his “Okay, you can go now” look, hoping she’d get the message. Looking at her until she finally nodded and walked away, Frank couldn’t help but wonder—and not for the first time—where she shopped for her clothes. Flat, nondescript, old lady shoes; loose-fitting, dark-colored, long skirts no longer in fashion; and suit jackets—the likes of which were favored by old schoolmarms. Hardly the impression Frank wanted his employees to

send. He made a mental note to speak to her about it later in the day.

Frank grabbed the pile of phone messages Janie had left on his desk, taking note of their sheer number. He'd only left the office an hour early the day before, but it appeared that fifteen arbitrary and unknown people had called to speak with him. Janie was not doing a very good job of screening his callers—one more thing he made a point to discuss with her. She had only worked for him a few months, but there were already signs that the quality of her work was lacking. Her connection with the Realtor for the meeting this morning was, quite frankly, the only thing saving her matronly-looking ass.

Frank leaned back in his chair, wishing the pain in his balls—which was now a dull ache—would subside.



Down the street, two blocks and over one, Sadie Roderick was purposefully striding up the sidewalk on De La Cruz when the photo of Billy Harwood stopped her dead in her tracks. His haunting, azure-colored eyes reached out to her from the cover of the tabloid on the newsstand rack.

Their relationship had lasted two months, two days, four hours and thirty-five minutes—thirty-six minutes if one counted the moment Billy had hit her for the last time. It had been nearly a month since she had walked out of his Los Angeles mansion, his irrepressible rage exactly imprinted on the left side of her face. Up-and-coming movie star or not, Billy Harwood was nothing but a beautiful face covering up a lifetime of insecurity, with years of secrets hidden behind that million-dollar smile. She had sworn she would never look back.

The sight of Billy's face now struck Sadie—much like his hand once had. The memories of his passion—some good but most of them bad—lingered. Billy still had a hold of her, even from a distance. Sadie forced herself to turn away from his grasp and continued to walk to her appointment.

Sadie arrived at the entrance and paused briefly, checking her reflection in the oversized glass door. The blonde, thirty-nine-year-old woman in the St. John suit and Jimmy Choo heels gazing back at her provided just the shot of confidence she needed. She took a deep breath and entered what she prayed would soon be the old office of the software maker, MineWare. The importance of the real estate transaction she was about to pitch weighed heavily on her mind. She shook her head in an attempt to clear her brain, knowing thoughts of Billy would only be a dangerous and unhealthy distraction.

Once she was inside and had passed the receptionist's scrutiny, Sadie was then greeted by what struck her as a surprisingly, unfashionably dressed woman sporting a similarly unfashionable hairdo. Sadie was normally not the catty type, but this woman was downright mousey—unusual for a high-profile Los Angeles firm. Most of the up-and-coming, egocentric executives Sadie had encountered favored hiring women who could qualify as Miss America contestants. Administrative ability was secondary to glossy cover art.

Strangely, there was something about this woman that looked vaguely familiar to Sadie. Nevertheless, unable to place her, Sadie didn't give it another thought.

"Hello, I'm Mr. Campelletti's assistant—Janie Mitchell," the woman said, extending her hand. Her very short, clipped and unpainted nails were another anomaly for L.A.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Janie. Thanks, again, for getting me in to see Mr. Campelletti. Mr. Harwood has done me a huge favor here."

Sadie hated to make mention of Billy's name after what she'd recently been through, but it was he who had gotten her this inside connection to MineWare. The market being what it was and MineWare being the hottest commodity around, this deal would cement Sadie's reputation in town for a long time to come.

MineWare's explosive growth over the last few years had put it in

the market for a move. Sadie had control of this property she was presenting due to the fact that it was owned by a good friend's father. The minute Sadie had heard about MineWare's search for new space she had mentioned it to Billy, found out he knew someone who worked at MineWare and eventually maneuvered her way into making this presentation. Though fairly confident she could have eventually gotten here on her own, Sadie acknowledged that timing had everything to do with this one.

Leaning in a bit closer and speaking in a substantially quieter voice, Janie said, "Mr. Harwood and I have known each other a long time, but I try not to publicize it. Mr. Campelletti doesn't know this is a favor. So, just FYI, let him think we go way back and we'll all be better off."

Her facial expression corroborated her condition of complicity. After Sadie nodded her head in agreement, Janie led her upstairs to the conference room where the MineWare executives gathered. Sadie steeled herself for her next move.

Through the open conference room door, Sadie saw that owner, creator and forty-five-year-old legend Frank Campelletti was standing to greet her. She refused to let the infamous charming smile she'd heard so much about disarm her.

"Good morning, Mr. Campelletti. I've brought the paperwork on the property I mentioned to you yesterday on the phone," she began, waiting for a sign before continuing.

Mr. Campelletti simply nodded.

"It's a building that just came to my attention and, though I know you were considering making an offer on another one," she gestured to the papers that sat in front of him. "I truly believe that this one may be worth your time."

The others on the management team sat at the long oval table exchanging skeptical expressions. Many years of business transactions had prepared Frank and his team in the art of spotting flawed deals.

But Mr. Campelletti, intrigued by the eagerness and earnestness with which Sadie spoke to him on the phone the day before, allowed his curiosity to get the best of him.

“Please, call me Frank.” The timbre of his voice exuded self-confidence and composure. His penny-brown eyes gazed directly into hers as he reached for the papers in Sadie’s hand.

“Fifty-eight-thousand square feet,” Sadie began, struggling not to let her nerves show. “Adjoining building with another sixty thousand available when the tenant moves out at the end of the year. Two stories, shared courtyard, underground secured parking, tenant improvements include...”

Frank stopped listening. The research he’d done since Sadie had called the day before to set the appointment, along with the photo of the building and the attached specs he could now see, told him everything he needed to know. The price was a little high, but he knew the difference between the asking and the getting. This building was a beauty and, unlike the one they had been close to making an offer on, this one far better represented the image he sought for his corporate headquarters. As he studied the papers, Sadie stopped talking and everyone else in the room waited in silence.

Certain Frank’s silence was a sign of a fatal career move on her part, Sadie was just about to offer additional facts when he leaned back in his chair and spoke.

“This looks perfect. Absolutely fucking perfect.”

The words had no sooner left Frank’s mouth when a couple of the skeptics at the table stood, immediately leaning in to get a closer look. Sadie couldn’t contain her grin. Something good had come out of her relationship with Billy after all.

Sadie knew MineWare needed to make a statement, to have a space that reflected its huge success. Though she had heard stories of the man behind the magic of this firm, she had never seen him in person. This proposal had been a risk. She hadn’t wanted to risk

coming across as too aggressive, nor appear greedy for suggesting an alternative that would likely make her more money. It was a risky but very calculated move. Sadie knew this building was their answer. And, it appeared Frank was now aware of that as well.

“Let’s make them an offer,” Frank announced to the group at large. “And let’s pull it together now.” Sadie glanced at the clock and quickly time-lined the steps that lay ahead. The workday was nearly over, and this deal would require some time.

Frank read her thoughts and quickly added, “And let’s do it over dinner.” Not waiting for her answer, he turned to the others gathered around the table. “Paul, take this other deal and get back to Legal about our decision. Janie, please call and cancel my dinner plans. Reschedule for next week if possible. Peter, get a copy of these specs to Susan and her team for review.”

Decisively spurred into action, everyone quickly gathered their things and left the conference room. Sadie tried to catch Janie’s eye to offer thanks, but Janie never again looked her way. A new energy and direction had been created and it was apparent Frank wanted no time wasted. He turned and addressed Sadie, “Ready to go make a deal?”

Sadie, unable to believe the speed with which it had all happened, could only stare in awe. When Frank rose from his chair, she quickly regrouped and stood as well. His six-foot-tall runner’s build, outfitted in what she now recognized as a beautifully worsted, wool Dolce & Gabbana suit, was slightly less intimidating to her now that she’d gotten the response she’d sought.

“Why, yes, of course. Just give me a second to make a quick couple phone calls.”

“Yes, please, take all the time you need. Make yourself comfortable and join me in my office when you’re ready,” he told her, adding a thank you as an afterthought as he left the room.

Frank grinned as he closed the door, excited now at the prospect of this new building. As he walked down the hall, he realized the ache

between his legs that he had experienced earlier had finally subsided.

Ah...the therapeutic results of good business.

Cee

Back in the conference room, Sadie's first inclination was to whoop and holler and dance across the room. With everything going as planned and unable to contain her excitement a second longer, she did a little victory dance in front of the large, plated glass window. In the tradition of runners as they cross a finish line, she raised her arms and listened for the applause of an imaginary crowd.

"Woo-hoo!"

This deal promised to be a major career score, and time was of the essence. She did one more joyous little two-step, straightened her blouse and quickly pulled out her cell phone to call her office.



LATER THAT EVENING over dinner, Sadie learned of Frank Campelletti's true passion. When a promising football career was brought to an end by a college knee injury, he'd changed directions and become a man obsessed with winning in the game of business.

"It's just like a game of chess," he told her. "You've got to anticipate your opponent's next move."

He had been recruited right out of college by a then-new software company named Aptiva, he explained. Seduced by its promising future and the way he had seen it play the game, Frank had gambled, guessing that Aptiva's stock options would one day guarantee more than adequate start-up funds for his own business.

"And my timing and choices couldn't have been better," he explained. "The stock offering generated millions, and my option values soared."

"Well, we seem to have something in common then, Mr. Campelletti." Sadie let the words tease his curiosity before she continued.

"I was once a Realtor in 'Dot-Com Valley'—Dot-Com Valley,

Frank.” Her words painted a picture with which he was familiar. Much of his client base represented dot-com business.

“Start-up companies are usually cash poor. I asked for stock options before they went public, cutting my commission to the bone. Lost a few dollars on some—but others? Well, let’s just say my timing and choices couldn’t have been better either.” Her smile told him the rest of the story.

Though Frank appreciated the talents he saw in her, his respect level for her now bordered on awe. She had to be worth plenty and it was because she had taken risks few besides him would ever consider. Up until now, Frank’s longest relationship had been the one he had with his computer. Now that he had met Sadie—seen her savvy—his instincts told him that was all about to change.

Through the rest of dinner, they reviewed the details of the building and what was needed to make it work. Sadie identified with Frank’s vision of a corporate office tempered with modesty. He shared how he hated the pretentiousness of some buildings, believing they were simply monuments to the egos that ruled inside. He wanted grand but not grandiose. He wanted functional but not austere. He wanted fine materials and solid workmanship, but he wasn’t willing to spend ridiculous amounts of money in pursuit of some fame-seeking designer’s dream to appear on a magazine cover.

Not one of those “the sky is the limit” kinds of people who threw money around simply to impress others, he had learned lessons from his past. Frank had chosen not to involve himself in the family business, making up his mind to go in another direction. But it hadn’t been easy. Though he was extremely successful now, it hadn’t always been that way and he made diligent efforts to never take it for granted.

After several hours of conversation—including nonlinear topics, such as the day’s headline news and the best vodka one should use for a martini—and more than one bottle of very expensive red wine,

they managed to complete writing up the offer. Sadie was more than pleased with their progress.

“Frank, I think you just might have yourself a new building.”

A substantial commission would come Sadie’s way, and Frank believed every good deal required all parties to contribute, so he tested her willingness and commitment by negotiating her fee. Sadie pleasantly surprised Frank with her bargaining skills when she persuaded him to meet her in the middle. This last concession on Sadie’s part convinced him to do whatever it took to make the deal happen. Though unwilling to tell her this little fact, Frank appreciated her tenacity and drive. He felt she could instinctively sense his determination.

“Well, let’s hope the seller sees it our way and we get this building. We are dynamite together, aren’t we?” he told her.

Frank watched Sadie contemplate his word choice and, when she spoke, the liberating effects of too much wine turned her words into a seductive proposition.

“Mmm—together. That sounds very nice.” Her thoughts were now displayed front and center and the realization of it began to immediately spread across her face in a scarlet cloud. “Oh my, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

“No need to be sorry. No need at all.” Frank reached over and pulled away her hand trying to shield her face. “We could be one hell of a partnership. This evening has truly been a pleasure.”

Sadie appeared to freeze in place and her blank stare caused him to awkwardly search for clarification.

“I’d love to see you again—on a personal basis—beyond business. Like a date, just you and me. I really feel like we have something special here,” he stumbled, trying to explain, but the puzzled look on her face continued. Embarrassed, he let go of her hand.

“I’m sorry, Sadie. I guess I am being too presumptuous. Forgive me?”

It took a moment, but Sadie leaned forward in her chair and reached out for his hand. “Frank, I think you’re just fabulous. In fact, I’d love nothing more than to spend another evening with you.”

Frank leaned in and gently kissed her. The warmth of her mouth seeking his initiated an electrical charge between them. The hum of conversation, the gentle clink of glasses and the bustling noise of the waitstaff all faded into a muted background score.

Sadie was the first to break the spell when she pulled away and leaned back in her chair. Frank, seeing the look of confusion on her face, was unwilling to let the moment to end. He inched closer to her ear and seductively whispered, “May we continue this somewhere more private?”

Seemingly aware of the obvious need now between them, Sadie nodded, just as the waiter appeared tableside with the bill. They’d likely created a spectacle of themselves, Frank thought, but he couldn’t have cared less.

Paying the bill—while imagining what it would be like to wake up in the morning with this woman by his side—Frank could only wonder at this moment if his craving was matched by hers.



Hours later, after Frank and Sadie had made it to his house and into each other’s arms, Sadie woke up with the realization she wasn’t in her own bed. Startled by a muffled buzzing noise somewhere nearby, she rolled over and glanced at the nightstand to find the source. The bright globe of the June full moon, hanging high up in the night sky and visible through the expansive windows at the foot of Frank’s bed, provided the only light.

The muffled buzz began again and Sadie traced it to Frank’s cell phone on the floor. Neither the noise nor the flashing red light had woken him. She put the pillow over her head, relatively certain it was either too early or too late for anyone to need anything. The night

before had lasted well past what was a normal bedtime for her, and she wanted to luxuriate longer in this wonderfully large bed, wrapped in what she was certain were sheets of an exorbitant thread count.

She couldn't remember the last time she had this sort of connection on a first date. Nor could she recollect ever sleeping with someone so soon after having met him. The thought of her unrestrained zeal the night before now embarrassed her. No doubt—this man had literally charmed the pants off of her. She only hoped she hadn't misjudged Frank as she had others.

Frank stirred and rolled over. Now aware of her there next to him, he smiled broadly. "What are you doing awake? Something wrong?"

"Your phone woke me."

"Sorry—thought I shut it off."

Sadie looked around the room. Her bra hung from the doorknob; Frank's trousers lay in a pile outside in the hallway. And, when she felt with her toes what she was certain were her panties rolled up in a ball under the covers, she laughed out loud. "At what point do you think you had the wherewithal to even think about turning off your phone?"

Frank looked around at the haphazardly strewn clothes and laughed as well. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I just must have meant to turn it off. Sorry," he said, kissing the top of her nose.

Frank climbed out of bed and, as he picked up his cell phone, it began to vibrate again. Looking at the phone's display, he quickly shut it off and threw it back on the floor. Sadie thought she saw a bit of annoyance in his actions but, when he literally jumped back into the bed, she didn't give it another thought.

"Now, where were we when you so rudely fell asleep on me?" He asked, throwing the covers back to get to her.

Frank's hands explored her nakedness. She squirmed in pleasure when he found her warmth. Wondering if her appetite for this man could ever be satiated, she impetuously allowed her legs to open up

to him once again. Now, grabbing a hold of him, she discovered that Frank was more than insatiable himself.

The phone on the bedside table rang, startling them and momentarily putting their exploration on pause. When Sadie heard Frank sigh she let go of him. But, in one smooth and rapid movement, he grabbed her around the waist and used his other hand to reach for the phone. It rang one last time before he was able to swat it off the table. Flying as far as its cord would allow, it crashed abruptly on the floor and went silent.

Frank never missed a beat. He pulled Sadie closer and moved his head down the length of her torso, exploring her nakedness with his mouth. When he passed her navel, she let out a seductive moan.

Her back began to arch in response to the pressure Frank applied with his tongue.

Cee

It was nearly seven a.m. when Frank woke up a few hours later. With the bright sunshine now peering in through the open bedroom drapes, Frank tossed the tangled sheets aside, sat up in bed and realized he hadn't slept that soundly in years. He ran his hand through his tousled, slightly graying hair and noted the musky smell of spent passion that clung to him. The strewn-about, hastily discarded clothes, serving as reminder of the evening before, fueled his desire to go another round. The sound of running water in the nearby shower heightened his need.

"Sadie, come back to bed and let me have my way with you again!"

"If you want to make a deal on a building today, we had better get moving," she answered.

Frank picked the phone up off the floor, cursing himself for having not had the foresight to anticipate its ringing.

Why had Citra called in the middle of the goddamned night?

Shaking his head at the thought (and not for the first time, he

realized), he stood and stretched in an attempt to work the kinks out of his back. A hobby runner of some frequency, he prided himself on his fitness level, but a night of Olympic-caliber sex and little sleep had left him feeling a bit worn out. The good news was that it hadn't brought back his aching balls of the day before. Interpreting that as a good sign, he hurried into the bathroom, hoping to catch Sadie still in the shower.

The steamy glass shower doors revealed Sadie's tantalizingly curvy silhouette. Now keenly aware of his pulsating groin, Frank reached for the door handle and carefully stepped in beside her. Her body glistening from soap suds as she stood under the cascade of warm water, Sadie opened her eyes and smiled.

This was just the feel-good remedy he needed.

Ce

A few miles away in another part of town, Billy Harwood cursed in a deep angry tone when Sadie didn't answer her phone for the third time in as many hours. He slammed down the receiver and kicked the sleeping Rottweiler that lay at his feet. The stunned yelp of the startled animal made him feel only slightly better.



IT TOOK that entire day and much of the second before an agreement for the new MineWare building was reached with the seller. Agreeing to pay only slightly less than the twenty-four-million-dollar asking price, Frank was nonetheless thrilled with the outcome. The majority of people working for him were creative types, not performing well when boxed up in little cubicles in rooms with low ceilings and little chance of seeing daylight. He didn't either, so the building would be a good fit for everyone.

While sitting at his desk that evening, after all the contracts were signed, he realized how tired he actually was. The adrenaline that had been pumping the last couple days had waned and, combined with his recent lack of sleep, he was exhausted.

The phone rang, interrupting his thoughts, and he pushed the blinking button for Line Four, "Frank Campelletti."

"Hi."

Citra. He hadn't returned any of her calls.

"Hey, how are you?" he asked, trying to sound cheerful in spite of the guilt creeping into his thoughts.

"I'm okay. You sure have been a hard man to get a hold of these last couple days."

"Sorry, I've just been swamped."

"I bet." The sarcasm in her voice was palpable. "Heard you've been involved in a building deal."

Despite the fact there had been no formal announcement, Frank assumed that Citra, as one of his employees at MineWare, had obviously heard of the deal through the extraordinarily efficient company grapevine. *Where is she going with this?* He decided to answer carefully.

"Yes. It finally concluded an hour ago."

She had worked for him since the beginning, starting back when the first MineWare product was preparing to go to market. Having heard of Citra through a business associate, Frank had convinced her to work for him. With her software background, coupled with a great deal of sales experience and contacts, she had been a gift from the gods at the time. Being young and beautiful hadn't hurt either. Much of MineWare's early sales successes were a direct result of her tenacity and loyalty. Consequently, she was more than reasonably compensated.

"You haven't returned any of my calls," Citra flatly pointed out.

"Sorry. It's just been crazy."

"Well, now that the deal's done, would you like to take me to dinner and celebrate?"

Sadie had just left his office to catch up on some personal business, but they had made plans to meet for dinner in a few hours.

"I'm sorry, Citra. I've made plans." Frank wasn't certain where this thing with Sadie was going, but he was smart enough to know not to share it with Citra. "I'm meeting up with some of the guys working with me on the deal. They've been going at it real hard." Choosing to let his lie linger, he said no more.

"Well," she said, her tone turning noticeably somber. "How about tomorrow? It's Friday night."

Frank had not had two women in his life at one time in a very long time, if ever, and was uncertain how to go about it. Though he had tried to break things off with Citra several times in the past, it had been difficult for her to comprehend his lack of commitment to the relationship. She wanted more than he was ready or willing to give.

He had also overheard bits and pieces of water cooler gossip over the last few weeks about the effect their relationship was having on the work environment, and he realized she had begun to take liberties she wouldn't otherwise have been entitled to had they not been dating. The other employees were beginning to resent her. This, combined with her sudden interest in departments and procedures unrelated to her duties, made him question her intent. She seemed to want more of what was his already nonexistent free time, sulking when he was unavailable. It was heading in a direction he wasn't prepared to go.

"How about if I give you a call tomorrow, when I know better how things are working out?" He hoped she didn't see right through his attempts to put her off.

"Sure."

Citra hung up before Frank could say another word. She was obviously upset, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He'd have to deal with it—and her—at a later point in time.

Cee

A week passed and Frank never called Citra back. Busy with the details of the new building purchase, he had Sadie by his side for much of it. Sharing lunches and dinners and each other's beds, he was immensely happy with the way things were progressing. Sadie had brought a sense of new excitement to his days and nights. She was warm and kind, yet not clingy or needy like so many of the other women he had known. Frequently surprised by her candor and sincerity, Frank felt himself incredibly attracted to this woman and

unsure what it all meant. His common sense told him these feelings were too much, too fast—yet he was certain he had to go forward.

It was now Thursday and there were few people remaining in the trendy little diner Frank had chosen to take Sadie for lunch. Most patrons, with work schedules demanding their return long before, had come and gone, leaving the waitstaff and kitchen workers to go about the business of cleaning up. Frank and Sadie, now finished with their meals, were enjoying the last of their coffees.

“Hello? Is anyone in there?” Sadie asked, realizing the story she was telling Frank was falling on deaf ears.

“Oh, sorry. My mind was wondering for a second,” he answered.

“Am I already boring you?”

“Of course not. I was actually thinking just the opposite,” he confessed.

“Just the opposite? You mean you were thinking of what a fabulous woman I am and that you never want to lose me?” she teased. Her attempt at humor was interrupted by a woman’s booming voice.

“Well, Frank Campelletti. What a surprise to find you alive and well.”

Sadie witnessed Frank’s posture stiffen as a slender, statuesque, long-haired brunette approached their table.

“Uh—hi Citra,” he said, immediately standing up and giving the woman a somewhat awkward hug. He hastily began introductions. “Citra, this is Sadie Roderick. Sadie, this is Citra Banks, one of my employees at MineWare.”

Citra confidently extended her perfectly manicured hand with its cherry red nails polished to a high gloss. “Well, well, so nice to finally meet you. I heard Frank was seeing someone new.”

It was hard to miss the tone of disdain in her voice. Sensing Frank’s sudden discomfort, Sadie opted to be gracious in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“Nice to meet you as well. You must be excited and proud to

be part of such a great company. I've been so busy with this deal that I haven't had the opportunity to meet many of the MineWare employees."

"Yes. I've been with the company—and Frank—since the very beginning," Citra candidly offered. Her blatant emphasis on wording hung clumsily in the air between them.

Sadie was immediately intimidated and unnerved by Citra's physical presence. With her long, sleek dark hair containing hints of coppery shimmer; her brilliant, straight white teeth surrounded by sexy, pouty lips made more pronounced by a ruby-colored lip gloss; and porcelain skin that appeared nearly translucent, Citra could have been the cover girl on a men's magazine. Noticing the curves testified to by the dress, Sadie surmised Citra's closest competition could only have been a Barbie doll. Her sudden and larger-than-life presence, combined with the accusatory tone in her voice, gave Sadie every reason to believe that she herself was now the intruder at this little party.

Frank quickly spoke up in what seemed to be an attempt to shed light on Citra's explanation. "Citra has been an employee for a long time. We were just finishing up, Citra, or we'd have you join us."

"Actually, I'm not hungry. I was just trying to find you to discuss something. Your assistant told me I might find you here. I was wondering if you might be able to spare just a moment of your time for me."

Sadie, sensing the escalating discomfort, wiped her mouth with her napkin and began to gather her things. As she stood to slide her chair back from the table, she noticed that Citra hadn't taken her eyes off Frank.

"Here, take my seat. You guys stay and I'll head back to my office. I have piles of things to catch up on. We were done here anyway," Sadie said, uncertain if either was listening, both clearly absorbed in a private moment.

“Sadie, are you sure?” Frank asked. Sadie suspected he was actually grateful for her departure. Citra quickly moved to take her seat.

“Yes. Yes, I’m fine.” Sadie turned to go. “Thanks for lunch.”

“I’ll call you.” Frank settled back into his chair across from Citra and motioned for the waiter. Citra said nothing as Sadie headed toward the exit. Sadie turned to catch Frank’s eye one more time, but he’d already begun having a conversation with the waiter.

So much for the perfect man.

Once outside and on the street, Sadie raised her arm to flag down a taxi. Unsure of what to think about Citra’s sudden appearance, she knew, as only another woman would, that there was something besides work linking those two. Just as the taxi pulled up, she glanced across the street and noticed an impressively long black limousine parked there. Limos were a dime a dozen in Los Angeles, but this one was familiar. She wasn’t sure until the window on the back passenger side quickly rose up, drawing her attention to a peek of Billy’s trademark blond hair. The limo quickly pulled away before Sadie got into the taxi. She shuddered at the coincidence, telling herself once more that L.A. just wasn’t big enough for the both of them.

Cee

Back in the diner, with Sadie now gone and the waiter having taken their order for two coffees, Frank turned to Citra, his obvious frustration straining the lines of his face.

“W-what is this about?” he asked as calmly as he could manage. He knew instinctively this was not work-related, but he desperately wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt. “What is so important that you had to track me down like this?”

“What *is* this?” Citra mimicked, allowing her emotion to get the best of her. “You don’t return my calls for an entire week. You virtually disappear from the face of the Earth. How else was I supposed to talk to you?”

When tears began to well in Citra's eyes, Frank's guilt started to gnaw at his softer edges. He had been ignoring her and, when faced with the facts, he acknowledged she honestly didn't deserve that kind of treatment. After all, he thought, she is a nice girl and they had lots of fun together.

"I'm sorry, Citra. I told you I've just been swamped with this building stuff." The look on her face said his assurances weren't working.

"Yes, and I can see why now," she said.

"Come on, that's not fair."

"Everyone knows you're becoming involved with her. You could have told me before I heard it from someone else in the office." Her tears, bottled up for days now, slid down her cheeks.

Unable to deal with the direction this whole thing was taking, Frank pleaded with her to stop, but she'd have none of it.

"What happened to us? Aren't I good enough for you anymore? Now it's on to the next one? Is that how it goes?" She was now openly crying and some of the waitstaff were beginning to look their way.

"Citra, please, not here." Frank gently tried to coax her, reaching out for her hand to lend some comfort. "You know I care about you. You should also know by now how much I respect and appreciate everything we have shared. It has just gotten so awkward at the office." He intentionally let the remainder of his thoughts trail off.

Trying her best to compose herself, Citra blew her nose, fumbling with the Kleenex and trying to save her makeup. The waiter arrived with their coffees and, in an attempt to be as inconspicuous as possible, quickly set down their mugs and placed the fresh creamer and sugar between them. Before the waiter had a chance to sneak away, Citra responded to Frank, practically hissing, "Awkward? Now our relationship is awkward?"

"We have had this discussion before. What more can I say to you?" He was becoming more and more frustrated with her lack of

understanding. “I was wrong not to call you all this time but, as I said, I was very busy.”

“So what is going on with you and this woman?” The words were spit out as if she had a mouth full of dirt.

“Citra, come on.”

“Tell me, Frank. I want to hear it from you.”

“She’s the building broker and we’ve been spending a lot of time together.” He was going to evade the truth as long he could.

“Well, is she earning her commission?” The bite of her sarcasm nipped at Frank’s conscience.

“Stop. You should know better than anyone how busy I can be at times. You know what’s going on with the company. You know how nuts it is. This building acquisition has just doubled the intensity.” He tried to speak in terms she would understand. “I won’t lie to you. Yes, we have seen a lot of each other, but it’s been business,” he lied. He hated doing it, but he couldn’t stand the hurt he saw in that beautiful face of hers.

“So were you blowing me off on purpose?” She clearly wasn’t going to let it go.

“Uh, no. It’s not like that.” The wind was dying in his sails. Missing his opportunity to be honest with her, he was now angry with himself for not having the balls to deal with her emotions. It seemed there was always something she could say or do to make him waver. He realized, in all honesty, that most times Citra simply just had to be there. Her tight little body drove him mad with desire.

“So, stay with me tonight and we can try to make up for lost time.” A seductive smile spread across her face and her eyes hinted at a scenario he couldn’t resist. She still had the power to make him weak in the knees.

Reaching for his coffee while trying to locate his common sense, Frank considered her offer. It was important to keep his star performer happy, to keep her on his side, he told himself, while all the

while trying to rationalize what he knew he was about to say. He waited a few minutes to give the impression that his decision had taken great effort, hoping he didn't live to regret his decision.

"Alright, then," he finally conceded. "Dinner it is."

Citra showed her gratitude in a manner she suspected he'd appreciate, unhurriedly sliding her hand up his thigh and stopping only at a point that would leave him wanting for more. Giving in to the electricity of her touch, Frank was now fully aroused.

She was a beautiful woman, he told himself. There could be worse things.

The waiter appeared tableside with the bill. Frank pulled out a hundred dollar bill and, to acknowledge the waiter's discretion, told him to keep the change. The waiter, guiltlessly profiting from his customer's predicament, discreetly nodded and walked away.

Left completely spineless and now anxious to leave, Frank turned and addressed Citra, "I need to get back to the office. How about you?"

"No, I have an appointment I have to get to. That Metro deal needs my attention," she said, referring to one of her newly acquired accounts.

Rising to leave, they agreed Frank would be at her place to pick her up at seven o'clock. When they got outside to the sidewalk, intending to remind him just how good she felt in his arms, Citra tightly pressed her firm, shapely body against him. She allowed her lips to briefly brush against his before slowly pulling away. With a wink and smile holding a promise for later, she tossed the brunette scarf of her hair over her shoulder and headed east toward her parked car.

Frank watched her purposefully stride down the sidewalk in what he knew she called her "fuck me" shoes as he tried to discreetly adjust himself in his pants. Likely fruitless—at least for the next few minutes—he attempted to refocus his thoughts on business as he headed in the other direction toward his office.