

Erased

OTHER BOOKS BY
MATTHEW DUNN

Day One

The Dummy Sign

The Good Silver

Bingo Bango Bongo

Visit Matthew at:
www.matthewdunn.net

Erased

By

Matthew Dunn

This book is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2007 by Matthew Dunn

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Published by Onondaga Hill Publishing

ISBN-13: 978-0-9794908-4-2

ISBN-10: 0-9794908-4-7

Printed in the United States of America

ONONDAGA HILL PUBLISHING

Acknowledgements

This, my fifth novel, could not have happened without the tireless faith of my wife, Judy, the support of my family and friends, along with the hard work and candid advice of my friend, Matt Hotham.

1

Sparkling Stars

Sunny had a funny feeling about this gig. Having just stepped away from a taxi, she stood frozen at the curb gazing up at the towering New Yorker Hotel. Actually, it was short by Manhattan standards—only about fifty stories high—but every building in New York City looked tall to the twenty year-old from Maine, even after six months.

A pyramid, Sunny thought. It's shaped like an Egyptian pyramid. She took a few steps back to get a better perspective, looking like an awestruck tourist. A little skinnier, but a really cool pyramid. She'd never seen a pyramid in person, only pictures in the book she kept next to her bed depicting the Seven Wonders of the World.

The sidewalk before her was jammed with anxious people, a bustling parade seemingly bent on separating her from the hotel entrance, as if to remind her to stay on her side of the tracks. But that was in *her* mind, not theirs. Tonight, she looked every bit a big city woman. A little young—she couldn't hide that—but sexy and sophisticated none the less. Tonight, men would rush to open doors for her, crawl over each other to buy her drinks, thump on their chests and empty their pockets to capture her eye. *A movie starlet, passersby were guessing,*

or perhaps the heiress to an overseas fortune. Sunny understood the mirage, but inside was the tomboy who grew up in a little town along the Appalachian Trail.

What am I doing here? She asked herself for the second time since pulling up in the cab.

"It's an easy spin, one hour, tops," Marko had assured her some weeks ago when he first approached her with the opportunity. She had believed him then, but her flip-flopping stomach wasn't so sure now.

Sunny's intuition was rarely wrong. Her premonitions had saved her skin at least a dozen times but yet here she was shaking her head at the realization that she was about to put herself in yet another ticklish situation. And for what, a short stack of one hundred dollar bills? It didn't seem like so much money now that she was standing in front of the hotel with the clock ticking down. But the truth was, a grand *was* a lot of money, ten times what she could make these days dancing in the laps of drunken stock brokers and horny, traveling salesmen. Business had been slow at the club for months and Sunny's ten year plan to save enough getaway cash to buy a horse farm upstate was falling behind schedule. She had promised herself she would retire before she was thirty and that was only going to happen if she softened her rules of engagement. *I'll do the job, Marko, she resolved, but you better appreciate it more than this damn watch.*

Holding out her wrist, she wondered how much she could get for the newly acquired adornment, a slim, gold Gucci with Roman numerals that half the girls at the club couldn't read. *Marko probably stole it from Macy's, she reasoned. I could buy a good riding mare with a saddle thrown in if I returned it for a refund.* Tilting the band toward the glimmering hotel lights, Sunny checked the time. It was 9:45 p.m. and after searching up and down the block, Marko was no where in sight.

"Whatever happened to punctuality?" Sunny mumbled to herself.

Tidying up the full-length, black leather trench coat she'd borrowed from one of the girls to keep the night's intentions hidden from what Marko had called the "tight-assed hotel management," she took a deep breath and walked toward the golden double doors.

"You'd look a lot classier walking in on my arm, babe," Marko said as he reached for the door. A tall, slender man in his late twenties with tightly cropped hair and a perpetual five-o'clock shadow, Marko looked older in the crisply-tailored Armani suit he only wore on special occasions. He was also short of breath, having just darted across Eighth Avenue where he narrowly escaped an angry deluge of horn-blaring cabs and limousines. Smiling, he apologized for being late and then escorted his willing companion inside.

Marko was what *he* called an "independent businessman" and the sponsor of tonight's "outing," as he referred to the freelance work he routinely proposed to the girls at the Sin City Lounge, one of the many topless clubs located in and around Manhattan. As far as anyone knew, he had no last name and no known address, but he never cheated a girl a dime and, more importantly, never hit on them. With Marko, it was strictly business and regardless of the nature of the deals he arranged, he had a reputation for always playing it straight up. It was the one reason Sunny committed to the gig in the first place—her first with Marko.

"Not a bad joint to pop your cherry, hey Sunny?" Marko said, nodding his head in admiration of the three-storied, grey-marbled lobby.

"I'm not having sex with anyone," Sunny replied. "I was very clear about that." She then gazed up at the biggest crystal chandelier she had ever seen. *This is a ritzy*

place, she thought. *Maybe it's just nerves that are kicking my anxiety into overdrive.*

"A figure of speech, babe," Marko said. "This is your first outing."

"With you," Sunny replied with a wry grin. *It was* her first outing, but she didn't want him to know that. She was younger than most of the other girls at the club—they called her *Baby-cakes*—and she hated that they treated her like some naïve little sister. "I've been around the block a few times," she would argue to disbelieving eyes. She never elaborated, and they never asked. Like Marko, the dancers at the club lived and breathed anonymity, competing shamelessly for the almighty dollar with every wink and wiggle they had. And like wolves, only the strong were allowed to run with the pack where loyalty vanished as soon as the prey bellied up to the stage. Sunny knew in her heart she could never be like them—a wolf—but tonight she wanted Marko to believe he had one on his arm.

Feigning disappointment, Marko said, "And here I am all excited, thinking that you were a virgin."

"In your dreams," Sunny said.

"Yeah, with you and Diamond and Barbie."

"I didn't know you were into the group thing."

"Hey, the more the merrier," Marko chuckled, attempting to keep the mood light. He could tell that Sunny was nervous and he knew from experience she might trip the deal he'd worked very hard to set up if she didn't loosen up. Tonight, he was looking at a five figure payoff—the biggest of his back-alley career—and he wasn't about to kiss it goodbye because *Baby-cake's* stilettoed feet were getting cold.

"So," Sunny said. "What room are we in?"

"You in a hurry?"

Sunny didn't answer. The truth was, she *was* anxious

to get it over with. Giving a customer a private dance in the safety of the backroom at the club with a bouncer and ten other dancers a single scream away was one thing, but to do it in some guy's hotel room was something different altogether—something a little more...ticklish. And there was that funny feeling again, scratching at the back of her mind like the stray cat she'd found at her apartment doorstep the week before. It was the cutest thing she had seen in the months since moving to New York City, a matted clump of orange and white fur. When Sunny opened the door, it just sat there shaking, begging for a meal and a home with its big brown, lonesome eyes. Without another thought, Sunny picked it up and took it in. Now, hearing the sudden ting of the elevator, a rush of dread washed over her. *Don't go up there*, her inner voice warned. *Go home and curl up with Garfield*.

Thinking a short detour might salve her growing apprehension, Marko asked if she would like to have a drink at the bar first. "But only one," he added abruptly. "You need to bring your A-game tonight."

Sunny didn't know it, but Marko was counting on far more from the young beauty than her best bump and grind. He didn't know exactly what that was; only that it was making *him* twitch for a shot of Jack Daniels.

Is it my imagination or is Marko a little tense? Sunny thought. It wasn't like him, but then she hadn't been on an outing with him before. She had only seen him at the club where he was Mr. Calm, Cool & Collected, the self-proclaimed title he did a helluva job living up to. *Am I being paranoid?* Knowing she needed to get a grip if she was going to pull this off, she calculated what her bank account would total tomorrow after she presented the teller with the one thousand dollar deposit slip. *Don't listen to the voice, girl. Get back on schedule*.

"I don't drink, Marko," Sunny said. "I thought you

knew that."

"Well, I thought, maybe under the circumstances," he replied. He knew more than he was telling but being the crafty chameleon that he was, he quickly changed colors. "Did I tell you how gorgeous you look tonight? Black leather really suits you, Sunny. I mean, *wow!*"

"Thanks, Marko. Diamond let me wear it."

"Are you wrapped in that red-laced number I suggested?"

With a giggle, Sunny flipped open her coat lapel, flashing the single crimson spaghetti strap snaking over her bronzed shoulder. Enjoying the moment, she continued her tease right down to her Sapphire pierced belly button. As heads turned and whispers stirred, a wave of goose bumps washed across her soft skin, excited by the in-rushing cool lobby air and suddenly spellbound eyes.

Marko took a step back and then, looking more like a farmer inspecting his tomatoes than a voyeuristic playboy, studied her glitter-peppered cleavage levied tightly by a glimmering satin bra. He nodded in approval.

"Perfect," he said as he pulled the coat back up to her chin. "Johnny's gonna go ga-ga over you."

Any uncertainty Marko may have had vanished. Sunny was *exactly* what Johnny wanted. She was young and had that elusive girl-next-door appeal—strikingly attractive but with a wholesome, seemingly untouched grace. But more importantly, she had the key ingredient that had cemented the deal. Sunny Dai had fire in her eyes.

"I don't want a bimbo who'll drop to her knees at the snap of my fingers," the man had told Marko several months ago in the alleyway behind a Brooklyn bar. "I want a fighter who'll spit in my face when I grab her and force her hand down my pants. Give me that and I'll

happily hand you ten grand.”

That night Marko sat in the bar sipping a beer wondering why someone would pay that kind of money for a lap dance and a blow job (if they were lucky) when they could get it for a hundred bucks at any club in town. He knew there had to be more to the deal than the guy was saying, but Marko had ten thousand reasons not to ask. Eager to make the score as soon as he could, he visited every strip joint in town that night looking for a match, finding his girl at the very last stop of the night at the Sin City Lounge.

“Put *any* appendage in the wrong place with her, honey, and I guarantee you’ll lose it,” Diamond laughed after Marko had made a wise crack about the “high school virgin” stepping onto the stage. Five minutes and one black-eyed patron later, Marko knew Sunny was the one who could triple the wad of cash hidden in his mattress. All he had to do was earn her trust, Marko’s only natural talent.

“Is that the guy’s name?” Sunny asked. “Johnny?”

“It might be, I don’t know. I don’t ask. They don’t tell. So, they’re all Johnny as far as I’m concerned.”

“That keeps it simple.”

“That’s the name of the game, babe. KISS—keep it simple, stupid. You ready to start the show?”

It’s now or never, Sunny thought. “Lead the way,” she said, thinking only of horses and rides into the sunset. She then hooked Marko’s arm once again and they sauntered off toward the elevators.

“Here,” Marko said as he handed Sunny an old, banged up cell phone while the evaluator hummed its way to the 21st floor. “Clip it where you can get at it in case you run into trouble. Press 1 and it’ll speed dial me down in the lobby.”

Sunny took the phone and snickered. “It’s kind of big,

don’t you think.”

“It’s the only extra one I had,” Marko replied. He then pulled open her leather coat and gave her the once-over. “Stick in your garter,” he said.

She scrunched her nose and shook her head.

“You’re right, that might kill the mood.” He took the phone back and then tried to stuff it into her bra.

“Hey,” she growled, slapping his hand away. “I’m jammed into this thing as it is.”

“All right, all right,” he said backing off. Frustrated, he then stuck it her coat pocket.

“What makes you think I might run in to trouble,” Sunny asked. Her intuition was nagging again and if Marko had called the whole thing off right then and there she wouldn’t have argued.

But Marko had no intention of missing this payday. “This one’s a walk in the park,” he said, though his gut was churning a different tune. “Walk in, give him that gorgeous smile of yours and cowgirl him until he wet his pants.”

“You sure that’s all he’s looking for?”

“That’s the deal, signed and sealed.”

“And it’s just the one guy, right?”

“I’ve seen you in action, Sunny. You could handle ten guys.”

The elevator jerked to a halt as Sunny punched the emergency stop button. She jutted her index finger into Marko’s face. “One, Marko. One and only one,” she said.

Marko retreated, instinctively covering his crotch with one hand and his wallet with the other. “It’s cool, babe, its cool. There’s only one guy waiting for us. I’ll walk in with you to be sure if it’ll make you feel better.”

“Yes, you will,” Sunny said. Feeling empowered, she lowered her menacing finger and pressed button twenty-one to resume their ascent.

As he had promised, Marko escorted Sunny into the predetermined rendezvous, a small, single bedroom tucked away in the corner of the west wing of the hotel. It certainly wasn't the nicest room in the place—Marko had been to *The New Yorker* many times before—but he didn't give it much thought as he made the introductions and scanned the room for a reason to cancel. Other than the fact that Johnny wasn't the Johnny he'd talked to in the alleyway, everything looked normal. The guy was an average, harmless looking dude in a business suit and there were no gang-bangers hiding under the bed or in the bathroom. Satisfied, he helped Sunny off with her coat—slowly unveiling her—and set it on the chair next to the bed.

Johnny watched but exhibited no emotion. It was the one tiny clue that could have saved Marko's life.

"You kids have fun now," Marko said heading toward the door. He gave Sunny a wink and left, his voice trailing off as he walked down the hallway. "I'll be back in an hour with your pumpkin carriage."

The moment the door clicked shut Sunny felt a chill scurry up her back. The room felt cold—icy cold—and not just because she was nearly naked. She spotted the heating and cooling unit tucked into the bottom half of one of the windows and walked over to it. The glow of light beyond caught her eye. Glancing outside, she saw that the room was situated in a tiny u-shaped alcove, a line of illuminated windows stacked along the façade like pantry shelf cans. *Cape Cod Bay*, Sunny thought. She'd been there only once a long time ago but still remembered sitting on the beach at night, marveling at the "sparkling stars" on the distant shoreline. They seemed close enough to touch, and tonight they were, the opposing wall of rooms being only about twenty feet away. Cape Cod was one of her good memories and as she considered pulling down the

shades she decided to leave them open and fill her head with "sparkling stars" for the next hour.

Johnny abruptly cleared his throat. It was time for Sunny Dai to take the stage.

"You don't mind if I...warm things up a bit, do you stud?" she asked as she bent over to examine the controls.

The man Marko had introduced as Johnny just looked at her blankly and said nothing.

The strong silent type, Sunny thought as she fiddled with the temperature knob. Turning it to high, she then peered back at him and wiggled her round, smooth, g-stringed ass. "You hear that bell ringing, baby? That means it's time to find your seat. Class is about start."

Robotically, the man sat down on the end of the bed. He then glanced out the window, locking his stoic eyes on something unseen. Sunny didn't notice. She was dancing on a quiet beach somewhere, squishing the frothy sand between her toes, happy she had found a momentary refuge.

Down in the hotel bar, Marko ordered a second shot of whiskey. As the bartender set it in front of him, he asked for the time. "Two minutes later than the last time you asked," he answered.

After returning to the lobby, Marko had gotten a call from Diamond, Sunny's co-worker at the Sin City Lounge. There was a guy at the club running his mouth about some Spielberg wannabe he knew who had just gone online with a freaky-sex website specializing in movies staring unsuspecting dancers. He was encouraging other customers to check it out. Diamond said he called it "Manhattan Uncut," a Candid Camera kind of thing with some really "wild shit."

"What kind of wild shit?" Marko asked. He was thinking of Sunny and the ten thousand reasons he'd been given to keep his mouth shut.

Diamond said she didn't know.

Wrestling with thoughts of aborting the outing, Marko decided not just yet, reasoning there were hundreds—maybe thousands—of lap dances going on in New York City that night. What were the chances of Sunny's date being the perv? He didn't look like a perv. Marko needed more details.

"Well, go stick your tits in his face and find out!" he snarled into the phone.

An old woman walking past threw him a disgusted scowl.

"Who am I, James Bond?" Diamond replied. The two exchanged obscenities before she finally agreed and abruptly hung up. It was then that Marko spotted the hotel lounge, went inside and ordered his first drink. The next hour was going to be a very long one, even longer without a full glass for company.

"You got a girl?" Sunny asked. She was sitting in Johnny's lap, facing him, rolling to the ocean waves in her imagination as he sat stiff-backed like an old wooden chair. Her arms were draped over his shoulders, her heavily scented breasts inches from his nose.

She was ten minutes into her routine and he hadn't touched her yet. Not anywhere. In fact, his hands hadn't left the mattress where they sat flaccidly like two spent condoms. *Timid*, Sunny thought as she quickened her pace. *Or a homo trying to convert*. During Sunny's first week at Sin City, Diamond had explained that sometimes the "limp" customers were actually gay men desperate to go straight. "They come to the club searching for the North Pole," Diamond told her with a snicker, "inspiration of sorts, if you know what I mean."

If he was gay, Sunny didn't care. If he wasn't, that didn't matter either. They weren't going to have sex, not if she had anything to say about it. And if he wanted to play

possum for the next hour that was fine with Sunny, she could slow dance on a mannequin all night. At a few minutes past ten that evening, she began to think that Marko had been right, that this gig *was* going to be a walk in the park and all her worries had just been first time jitters. Her horse farm wasn't going to be just a dream after all. She was getting back on schedule. As Sunny closed her eyes and swayed in the silence, she didn't see the red, blinking light in the darkened window directly across the alcove from theirs. Or the shadowy figure that stood beside it, peering back at her, smiling a devilish smile. She was on the beach, rolling with the waves, thinking she would call her first horse Pilgrim after the monument she'd seen in Cape Cod. *Pilgrim, that's a good name...*

Suddenly, Sunny was underwater. She couldn't breathe and for a split second, her daydream was pulling her out to sea, hooked by the ocean's undertow. *I'm drowning!* Her mind screamed. Panic raced through her veins. Opening her eyes she instantly remembered where she was—the hotel room, the lap dance, the man Marko kept calling Johnny. She wasn't drowning. She was being choked. Johnny was on top of her and his no-longer-flaccid hands were wrapped around her neck, squeezing with inhuman strength. Her arms flailed, punching helplessly into the air. But his arms were too long and she couldn't reach any vulnerable flesh. Her eyes began to water and just that quickly his electrified face began to fade into a darkening blur. She was blacking out. Then, with her consciousness hanging by a thread, she felt a terrifying poke between her legs. Sunny knew all too well what it was.

This wasn't the first time Sunny had been pinned down on a bed. Her stepfather had tried and his brother too one night when her mother had gone to the casino with several of her drinking partners. She was all of fifteen

at the time but still chased the two from her room, hunched over and wailing. She had her mother's temper and some of her natural father's brute strength. And both were beginning to swell up inside her now. *Damn, if this son-of-a-bitch is going to rape me!*

As Sunny gathered up her resolve for one determined assault, the vision of the first pony she'd ever ridden flash across her mind. It was a feisty, tan and white pinto named Arson (named for the fire in his eyes) which had bucked her over the fence five straight times before realizing Sunny wasn't going to quit and gave up, the horse that is. Arson had taught her one thing that day; a well-placed kick hurts like hell.

Knowing she would only get one good shot at it, Sunny jerked her hips upward with everything she had, catching Johnny square in the balls with her pelvic bone. Stunned, he released the grip from her throat, wobbled for a moment and then looked down at her in agony before falling off her and onto the floor. Cupping his crotch with both hands, he curled into the fetus position and began kicking at nothing.

Sunny gasped for air. The room was spinning and she tried to sit up but that only made it worse. Fighting back her fear, she laid there for a minute, taking deep breathes until finally the ceiling came back into focus. *You're all right*, she whispered. *You're all right. Take a minute and then get the hell out of here!*

Above the fallen man's pathetic groans Sunny thought she heard the sound of a cell phone ringing. It was Beethoven's Fifth Symphony...da da da *dah*...da da da *dah*. Turning her ear toward the sound, it was coming from her coat pocket. *Marko!*

Staggering to her feet, she stepped over Johnny and picked up the coat. She glanced at the door, thinking she should take it and leave, but it was whirling like

everything else around her. *You'll never make it. Get Marko up here!* She frantically searched the pockets as Beethoven played, finding it in time to read the screen; "Missed Call—Caller Unknown!" She groaned in frustration.

Focusing her still watery eyes on the tiny display, Sunny scrolled to the address book and scanned through the names. Angel, Aurora, Bambi, Blossom...nothing but exotic dancers. Then she remembered Marko telling her to speed dial him. But which button did he say? Frantic, she started pressing them all, which only froze the old phone's obsolete computer chip.

"Shit!" Sunny exclaimed. She shoved the phone back into the coat pocket and took a deep breath. *Calm down, girl. Calm down.*

"That wasn't very nice," a voice said. "Kicking me in the balls like that."

It was Johnny. It had to be, uttering his first words of the night. Sunny turned and looked down at the floor. It was empty. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted him standing between her and her way out. His shirt was off, his pants were around his ankles and his erection looked no worse for the damage she had inflicted. Damn if he wasn't a muscular son-of-a-bitch. The suit hadn't done him justice.

"When somebody tries to rape and kill me, I fight back," Sunny said defiantly. "I'm funny that way."

"I wasn't going to kill you," the man said flatly.

"Ok, for arguments sake we'll just call it rape then," Sunny replied. She was buying time while her hands rummaged through every pocket in Diamond's coat, desperately hunting for the bottle of mace Diamond swore she never left home without. But all she was finding were stray mints and condoms, lots and lots of condoms.

The funny thing was Johnny appeared indifferent to her frenetic search. In fact, it was almost as if he wasn't

aware of her actions at all. As Sunny examine his detached gaze, she realized he was looking right through her and out the window. *He's hypnotized by the "sparkling stars?"* She turned and scanned the row of windows lining the alcove. All were lit but oddly empty. All except one. It sat directly across from theirs and it was dark, a black hole in a galaxy of stars. A shadow moved; a tiny red glow flickered. *A cigarette?* Sunny thought. *Someone's watching us.*

Before she could reason it out any further, Johnny was yanking the coat from her hands. "We need to finish this," he said. "He wants a pop shot."

"A pop shot?" Sunny asked, involuntarily. Her mind felt paralyzed, her limbs like icicles. She stared back at the murky shape draped in the darkness. *He?*

From behind, Johnny grabbed her arms and forced her down onto the table, bending her like pretzel while he forced her legs apart with his knees. Then, using his weight to hold her down, he slid one hand around her throat while the other tore at her thick blond hair, pulling her head back and her terrified face toward the invisible peeping tom. She rocked and squirmed, praying the table would tip over and give her a chance to break free. But it didn't budge. It was bolted to the floor.

"Hold still," Johnny demanded. He was panting now and frustrated that he still hadn't penetrated his prey. "I don't want to have to hurt you."

No, you just want to kill me! Sunny's frantic mind screamed. *And rape me!*

At least now she could breath—his one hand wasn't nearly as effective as two—and that was helping her think clearer. But bent over the table as she was, she couldn't get any leverage to buck him off again. And even though her hands were free she couldn't reach his testicles or twist her shoulders enough to go at his face. Knowing she had

no other option, Sunny closed her eyes and lay still, relaxing her hips in hopes that it might save her life. But before she did, she took one last look at the darkened window across the alcove. A face was visible now, illuminated by the New York City neon as it pressed closer to the glass to watch her suffer. And it seemed to brighten when it saw that *she* could see. It was an ugly face, an evil face, a face Sunny knew she would never forget.

The shivering came swiftly as she felt the bulbous head of his penis forcing its way into the depths of her soul, stealing the virginity she had never told the girls at the club she still possessed; fought against her stepfather to keep; hid from the mother who wouldn't understand. In the next few horrifying seconds it would be gone...forever gone. As Sunny lay helpless, praying to God for intervention, she wanted to cry but couldn't. Even though her mind had all but surrendered, her body had not. Transforming itself into a desert wind, it was revolting against its attacker who now, in a momentary retreat, had removed his hand from her throat and was spitting into the palm for lubrication.

"Damn, you're a dry bitch," he grumbled, "and tight, too." He was working saliva onto his sluggish erection now, eagerly stroking it back to life. The struggle had taken a toll on Johnny as well, and as his focus *and* weight shifted off Sunny, he unwittingly presented her with an unintentional offer she couldn't refuse.

With a quick and sudden spin of her upper torso, Sunny turned on the man, catching him in the jaw with her elbow. There was a loud crack and a flash of fire. It was blood, Johnny's blood, shooting from his mouth like a primal ejaculation. Not exactly the pop shot he'd wanted but he was in no position to complain as he fell backward from the blow, tripped over a chair, careened off the edge

of the bed before smacking his head down hard against the thinly carpeted floor.

Lifting herself off the table, Sunny could tell he wasn't out, but he didn't appear in any hurry to get up either. *Get out! Get out now!*

Sunny took two urgent steps toward the door and fell to her knees. The battle and sudden rise to her feet had made her dizzy again and short of breath. And she was cold, so very cold. *Crawl if you have to, damn it!* Her inner voice screamed. *But get out of here!*

Minutes passed. Minutes that, to Sunny's frazzled mind, seemed like only seconds.

I just need a few seconds, that's all, Sunny convinced herself. But then, Johnny was sitting up, wiping the blood from his chin and mumbling obscenities that told Sunny ready or not, here he comes. Using the bed as a crutch, she struggled to her feet, took one step and stopped dead. The room was spinning wildly and she knew if she took one more step she'd land face first on the floor. Recognizing that she would never make it to the door, she clenched her fists, preparing to fight for her life.

"Sunny!" Marko said. "Are you all right?" He was standing in the doorway like a hazy vision of Christ in an Armani suit. *Mr. Cool, Calm and Collected to the rescue.* But before Sunny could utter a word, a shot rang out and then a second and she watched in horror as her savior fell to the ground. The last remaining drop of adrenaline raced into Sunny's veins and without thinking she pulled the sheet from the bed, knelt over Marko and desperately tried to dam the blood pouring from his chest. Pressing down with all her strength, she then turned toward Johnny, expecting to see his enraged face coming toward her. But he wasn't there. *Could he have run past me?*

She looked out the door held open by Marko's sputtering body and searched the hallway. It was empty.

Where did he go?

Marko's blood was filling the sheet in a fury, puddling in the folds and running down onto the carpet like a waterfall. Sunny didn't have time to think about Johnny, she needed to stop Marko's bleeding. Hurriedly, she gathered in the clean corners of the sheet and pressed harder, using both hands and all of her one hundred and ten pounds, but within seconds her fingers began to glisten red. She knew she needed help or she would lose him. She peered down the hallway again. Still empty. *Didn't anyone hear the shots?*

Then, a groan drifted into the air from the dark side of the bed. Cautiously, she turned just in time to watch the gun fall from Johnny's lifeless hand. She couldn't see the rest of him sprawled out on the floor, or the life spewing from his heart.

"Did I get him?" Marko said in a low, raspy voice.

"Yeah, Marko," Sunny replied. "You got him." It was then that Sunny noticed the gun in Marko's hand.

"Good," Marko said. He winced in pain. "Some Lone Ranger I turned out to be."

Sunny tried to smile, but she couldn't. Marko was dying and there wasn't a thing she could do about it. She slid up against the door and gingerly put his head in her lap.

"How did you know?" she asked quietly.

"Diamond called," he said. "She tripped over something at the club. Thought it might involve your outing tonight. That girl is always looking out for you."

My big sister, Diamond, Sunny thought. And the tears came, slow and deep.

Marko was squeezing her hand now and if she had been able to feel anything it would have hurt terribly, but she was numb. *Why is this happening? Why is Marko lying in my arms bleeding to death?* Her thoughts jumped to the

shadowy figure in the window.

"I'm sorry, Sunny," Marko whispered. "I should have sniffed it out. The price was too good to be true..."

"Shhh," Sunny said. "Just lie still and hold on." She tried to quiet him but he kept on.

"When Johnny didn't notice you as I took your coat off, I should have seen it was a ruse." He coughed and winced again. He was slipping away but he wasn't going to go until Sunny knew the truth.

"They always gasp and swallow hard. You girls are so damn hot, how could any man not?" Even as the world was fading, Marko still wanted Sunny to know how beautiful she was. "But Johnny wasn't here for you," he said, half choking on his own blood. "He was just doing a job."

Puzzled, Sunny gave him a look that begged him to stop. She didn't want to hear anymore. But Marko knew he had to keep going if he had any chance of completing the rescue. It would take his dying breath.

"A snuff scene, Sunny, that's why Johnny was here; to play the role of your lover and murderer."

Sunny couldn't believe her ears. *My murderer?* The whole thing had been a setup, a pre-scripted play with her as the lead actress and a final act that would climax with her death.

"But why?" she asked. "Why me?"

Marko shook his head. "Not you, babe. Just any pretty young thing who would fight back. And you sure did, didn't you?"

Finally, Sunny smiled a tiny smile. *Yes, I did.*

Marko was staring up at her now, his eyes as serious as she had ever seen them.

"You've got to run, Sunny," he said. "Get out of Manhattan—get out of this whole fucking city. And don't tell a soul about this. Don't go back to the club and

whatever you do, don't go to the cops. Hide, Sunny. Hide somewhere where he'll never find you."

"Who?" Sunny asked, thinking only of the shadow in the window. "So who won't find me?"

"Caesar," he said. And then Marko was gone. Seconds later, so was Sunny.

2

I Believe, therefore, I am

If all the world's a stage, it would appear that my part has been written out. I am no longer a player—my entrance forgotten, my exit seemingly absolute—and the final curtain now stands poised, eager to drop with nothing more than my own sanity to prevent its release.

Let me say right now that this is not amnesia. I have memory, full and clear. The road taken; the journey made; my footprints still hollowed in the sand. Clear images that even now as I recall them are slowly being swept away by an invisible surf. *Am I really who I think I am?*

Am I really?

"Yes!" With every ounce of strength I shout, "Yes!" But for how much longer? How much longer can I hover above my own identity, worn and wondering? How much longer can my fractured thoughts and beliefs stand alone while my splintered, probing fingers reach out into the emptiness?

I must make a choice: reclamation or transformation. In the alluring eyes of the former, I see hope and vindication; in the dark gaze of the latter, isolation and potential madness.

What if I am not who I think I am?

What if...I am not?

"I believe my name is Daniel Rayne," I said to the young woman standing before me.

"You believe?" she asked, her face twisting with tickled bewilderment. She nodded as though she understood and sat down at the table across from me, a bowl of hot bean soup erecting a wall of steam between us. She didn't know it, but I had been watching her since I'd walked into the place, fluttering like an exotic butterfly from table to table, salting each man's meal with a smile and a chat. She was too young to be in this place, too beautiful, I thought, but then I didn't think that I belonged there either. Not in a homeless shelter that reeked of rotting pride and overcooked bean soup.

"Just call me Rayny," I said. "Everyone else does." *At least, they used to...I think.*

"That'll be easy," she replied, "because that happens to be my name too. My first name, that is. Although I'll bet I spell it differently than you do. R—A—E—N—I, Raeni. You know, like *I love a rainy night.*" She sang the last part, sounding a little like Bonnie Raitt—gritty, but sexy—as she swayed back and forth in her chair.

As Raeni hummed a few more bars, I couldn't help but smile, my first in the past several days—several very long days. Her inquisitive brown eyes were like soft leather and she didn't wear a spot of make-up, not that I could tell anyway. Her hair was so short I couldn't tell if it was brown or black. The rest of her, well, I was having trouble getting past her eyes. "You got a last name, Ms. Rainy Night?" I asked.

"Not officially," she said. "Not here, anyway," she added with a wink.

Looking around at the sorry souls scattered about the dining hall like discarded beer bottles, I couldn't help wonder if she was this direct with everyone. When she announced with unflinching confidence that she was

going to call me Daniel, and not Rayny like *everyone else*, I actually allowed myself to fantasize that she had picked me out of the crowd, that she was sharing secrets with me and only me.

“Daniel is such a strong, earthy name,” she said. “It suits you much better than *Rayny*.”

“Well, you know,” I said, eager to cement our bond, “since we’re on the subject, Raeni doesn’t exactly suit you either. You should be a Star or a Daisy, something that compliments the way you sparkle.”

Raeni blushed and giggled modestly. She was obviously uncomfortable and I could only guess that flattery didn’t sober up long enough to pay her many visits here.

“No, I have a better name,” I continued. “I’m going to call you Sunny. I’ll let you call me Daniel, if I can call you Sunny.”

And just that quickly, the warmth drained from her face as she abruptly stood up and combed a suddenly shaky hand through her hair. “You’re always welcome to come back again if you ever need a hot meal,” she said with a vacant gaze. And then she fluttered away, taking with her the only connection I’d made with the rest of the world in the past three days. Watching her settle at another table, I began to wonder if she had really been sitting with me at all. *Was she just a mirage?*

I *believe* my name is Daniel Rayne. And either I have gone mad or I am *my own* mirage.