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Irresistible

“Just this one drink,” he told her, smiling sadly. “That’s all it can be between us.”

She was baffled by this, and intrigued. The two feelings went together so very often, she’d found; the first was the match that lit the fuse of the second. “How about *two* drinks?” she bargained playfully. She wanted to undermine his melancholy pronouncement, sabotage him with gaiety.

“Okay,” he chuckled. “Two drinks, then.” His eyes drifted off into space. “But that’s all it can be between us.”

She was a bit annoyed, now. “I wish you’d stop saying that.”

He shrugged, his soulful eyes projecting sincerity and regret. “You’ll have to take my word for it,” he said gently. “I’m no good for you.”

“That sounds like a line out of some horrid romance novel,” she said sulkily.

The remark made him flinch, but he recovered quickly. “Sorry, no one’s ever called me wildly original,” he confessed sheepishly.

The sheepishness won her over again. “Originality is not on my list of requirements,” she told him, smiling. “It’s a plus, of course, but other things are more important.”

“Such as?” he asked her.

“Oooh,” she thought out loud. “Sensitivity, naturally. The willingness to listen and care. Kindness. Gentleness.”

“I’m none of those things,” he told her.

“Well, then,” she shrugged. “Then what *are* you?”

“I’m someone you shouldn’t get involved with.” He managed to look sincere, regretful *and* sheepish all at once.

“Married?” she guessed.

“No.”

“Gay?” she ventured.

“No.”

“Sick...?”

“Not in body.”

“Hmmm.” She might be close to something here. “Sick in some *psychic* way? Sick of life? Sick to your soul? Homesick? Heartsick?”

“I really... I should go.” He started to rise and she caught a glimpse of something wildly unhappy in his eyes. Choosing between two birds, a hungry cat will instinctively stalk the one with the broken wing; Jane had been hungry a while now and her instincts were sharp.

“Wait!” She grabbed at the sleeve of his jacket. He shook his head and started to mumble something, but she interrupted him. “Listen,” she insisted. “Whatever it is, it can’t be as terrible as you think. Maybe... Well, maybe if you talk about it, that’ll help. I know we just met, but...” She shrugged encouragingly, while managing not to let go of his arm. For a long moment he seemed very much torn within, but at last he gave a small, defeated smile and sat back down.

“There!” she said, relieved. She was not necessarily a woman who relished challenges; a challenge meant that things were not going as smoothly as they should be. But the possibility of romance changed things, and this was a good-looking man, indeed. She’d stopped in at this small, noisy bar after work on a whim. She’d spotted him sitting off at the back of the room by himself and forced up the nerve to approach him. An attractive single man alone in a bar was a rarity, and she knew she had to act quickly.

She was proud of herself, now, for being assertive, because it appeared to have worked. He still had that vaguely tormented look, but her forceful tone seemed to have a pacifying effect on him.

“Let’s grab a table in the corner before it gets too crowded,” she suggested, taking charge now. As though suddenly overpowered by her determination, he rose and followed her deeper into the bar. She was already feeling triumphant and ignored the desperate way he kept glancing toward the doorway.

“This is better,” she smiled, and fluttered her hand at the waitress for drinks.

“You’re determined to keep me here, aren’t you?” he asked, with the same sad smile that had first caught her eye and made her think of cats and wounded birds.

“Sorry,” she said, trying to look contrite. “I guess I came on a little strong. I don’t act like that usually. But you really looked like you needed a friend.”

“I don’t know what I need,” he told her in the melancholy tone that so intrigued her.

“Maybe you just need to talk,” she ventured. “Sometimes that’s all it takes.”

For what seemed the very first time, he looked at her closely, his woeful smile widening very slightly, his eyes reflective. “You’re a very special person, you know that?”

She carefully hid her elation. “Not so special,” she said almost demurely. “But I thought we were going to talk about you...”

He looked troubled. “Hey,” she said, reaching over and boldly putting her hand on his wrist. “Remember what I said? Nothing’s as bad as it seems.”

He shook his head. “I wish I could believe that...”

“*Believe* it,” she urged him, letting her hand stay on his wrist.

“I’m not someone you should get involved with,” he said dismally.

So they were back to *that*. It had been about ten minutes since she’d first walked up to him; he was encouraging her to blow him off, and instead she was pondering whether the encounter had the seeds of a relationship in it. She sipped the drink that the waitress brought, thinking. She had always tended to overlook many flaws in the men she’d known, and

afterwards been deeply bitter – as though she'd been tricked into disregarding these flaws and then been burned by them. It was clearly a pattern. Now here was a man who plainly had a load of baggage and was warning her off -- and here she was hanging on to him for dear life. She did not just fall into the pattern, she obviously lusted after it.

“Why are you so convinced I shouldn't get involved with you?” she asked him.

“I can't really... If you only knew...” He broke off, overcome by his tortured inner struggle.

“I can tell you want to talk to me,” she said calmly, fearful that he was about to jump up from his chair again. She couldn't let him slip away from her. This was a delicate operation and she had to move very, very carefully. No sudden moves. “You need to talk,” she repeated.

“And I'm a very good listener.”

He looked into her face, his eyes mournful. “There's something about you...” he said, suddenly staring so deeply at her that she felt thrilled and on edge. “I feel like I *can* talk to you... I think that... that maybe you *would* understand.”

“You *can* talk to me. I *will* understand,” she swore, the triumphant feeling returning. “You can talk to me about anything.”

“You know,” he said slowly. “I think I believe you.”

She now put both hands over his, smiling. She was touched by his desire to trust her. “Now, what is it?” she asked him gently. “What is it that's bothering you so badly?”

He looked deeply at her again, in that *way*, as though looking for a trap. Finding none, he said into her eyes, “I’m a serial killer. I’ve never talked about it with anyone, but... I don’t know, you’re *different*. I somehow feel that I *can* talk about it with you...”

She cleared her throat, glanced blindly around the bar. “What?” she asked.

“I feel I can talk to...”

“Serial killer?” she repeated carefully.

“Yes,” he nodded.

“What *is* that, exactly?” she asked him. She had the sudden idea that ‘serial killer’ must be some new slang, maybe for guys who were great at sports, or were snazzy dressers, or made lots of money on Wall Street. “That guy’s going places,” she could imagine someone saying, “he’s a regular *serial killer*.”

“Well,” he began, “it’s like this...” But then he broke off with an endearing smile. “I just realized we don’t know one another’s names. I’m Don.”

“Jane,” she said, staring.

“Funny for you to know I’m a serial killer and not know my *name*,” he laughed lightly.

“You were going to tell me what ‘serial killer’ means,” she prompted him.

“Well, basically, it’s like, fish gotta swim, *I* gotta kill,” he explained earnestly. “The compulsion is completely overpowering. My reasons for killing make absolute sense to me, but would sound like, well, insanity to you. Or,” he broke off thoughtfully, “or maybe not...”

Her hands had slipped limply onto the table and now he plucked them up, held them tenderly between his own. “Maybe it *wouldn't* sound like insanity to you,” he murmured. “You know, before when you said I could talk about anything and you’d understand, at first I didn’t believe you. Then like a flash of lightening it came to me – You *are* capable of understanding me. You’re a very special person. You’re not like anyone I ever met before.”

“Serial...”

“Before when I kept telling you you shouldn’t get involved with me, well... I’m so glad you wouldn’t listen to me.”

“I...”

“You’re one special lady,” he smiled that charming smile, then chuckled. “You couldn’t get me to talk before,” he said ruefully, “now just try to shut me up!”

“Shut...”

“The thing about the killing,” he continued, “it’s so much more than it seems. Let me see if I can explain it right...”

“Oh, that’s... You don’t have to...”

“No, I *want* you to understand,” he assured her, squeezing her hands lightly between his. “The thing about the killing is, I won’t even think about it for weeks. Then I’ll wake up one morning and it’s like written in stone: I have to kill. When I say ‘have to’ I really mean *have to*. I don’t think most people understand how necessary it is. As for the pattern...” He leaned back

and stared thoughtfully into his drink. “I know the papers have tried to link it to the cycles of the moon...” He shook his head and gave a derisive little snort of laughter.

“You’ve read about yourself in the papers?” she asked, her eyes huge.

“Oh, not in *this* city,” he said, patting her hands. “Are you ready for another drink?”

“Remember,” she said, with a jittery laugh, “two drinks and that’s all there can be between us, as you yourself...”

“Things have changed,” he told her, his voice momentarily edgy.

“Oh, yes!” she said quickly. “That’s just fine. Now, I think I’ll dash to the little girl’s room. I won’t be a minute.” She groped for her purse.

“Jane,” he said quietly. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Why, yes,” she nodded jerkily.

“Are you afraid I’m going to kill *you*?”

She could not seem to answer that.

“Because I’m not,” he said soothingly. “The first and foremost reason I don’t plan to kill you is that I *like* you.” He paused to gaze into her eyes a moment so that she would see how sincere he was. “But there are other reasons,” he went on. “For one thing, you’re not wearing nail polish. For another, you did not use the phrase ‘or what’ during the first five minutes we spoke.”

“‘Or what?’” she repeated, puzzled, then slapped one hand over her mouth, horrified.

“Oh, it’s alright,” he laughed. “It’s only if you say it during the first five minutes.”

“What does it... I mean...”

“You know,” he shrugged, “it’s when someone says ‘Is it crowded in her *or what?*’ or ‘Is this band wild or *what?*?’” His face clouded with sudden rage. “I *hate* when people say ‘Or what!’ It’s unnecessary! It’s *meaningless!*” He pounded one fist on the table and she felt faint. “Well, anyhow,” he sighed after a moment. “If they manage to not to say it for at least five minutes, they’re off the hook.”

“So that’s it?” she asked. “All you do to pick the... the right person is see if they don’t say... that phrase within five minutes?”

“I should have said ‘off the hook’ till they slip up some other way,” he amended, smiling gently at her. “And let me tell you, there’s a hell of a lot of ways to slip up!”

“My!” she smiled back, squirming in her chair.

“Here’s something a lot of people do,” he told her, leaning back but still holding her hands. “They don’t wear nail polish. Fine. They don’t say ‘Or what?’ Again, fine. *Then*, just when I decide to leave them alone and let them live their lives, they go and glance at their watches!”

“Now, what is it about that...?”

“What do you mean, ‘What is it about that?’”

“Nothing.”

“Plenty of times they *don't* glance at their watches, so again I think, ‘Okay, I guess I’ll leave ‘em alone, no problems here.’ But then – and you’ll be surprised how often this happens – they’ll come right out and *ask* me to kill them.”

“Is that right? They just up and ask you?”

“Come right out and ask, yep.”

“I have a, uh, a question...?”

“Of course, darling. Anything.” He leaned forward again, attentive. She gulped.

“How exactly do they ask, usually. I’m just curious. You know, this is pretty fascinating to me.”

“Of course it is, precious. How do they ask? Well, I get this cool breeze playing around my left ear. Then I know they’re interested. In being killed. Sometimes I give them a chance to change their minds. I do this by going silent, staring intently at them, tapping my fingers on my knee. If they really, *really* want me to kill them, they’ll say something like, ‘Is anything wrong?’ That’s when I know they’re serious about wanting me to kill them.”

“Time to powder my nose!” Jane chirped, rising from her seat. She fully expected him to lunge after her, snarling like a wild beast. Instead, he gazed at her with obvious admiration, a serene smile playing about his mouth.

* * *

In the empty ladies room, Jane leaned against one of the sinks, smoking a cigarette. She’d desperately wanted a cigarette to go with her drink, but had been terrified of lighting up

out there. It was quite possible that, to Don, the lighting up of a cigarette was a request to be killed. She turned and stared at herself in the mirror. Chances were she was swarming with ‘signs.’ Had this particular shade of lipstick saved her from a savage death? Was the fact that she had only the top button of her blouse undone rather than two or three of them keeping him from tearing her apart?

And right now, she wondered, was he plotting her death because she was taking so long in the ladies room?

The last thought prompted her to glance at her watch and, upon realizing what she had done, she almost swooned. What if she’d glanced at her watch out there? Quickly she tore the watch from her wrist and stuffed it into the trash bin in the wall. Then she took a long, slow breath, gave herself one last glance in the mirror, and marched back out into the bar.

This was kind of exciting.

* * *

“...so if two red cars in a row go by and the next woman I see is wearing beige, then I...”

“Then you know you have to kill that woman?” guessed Jane.

“No,” he held up a finger, correcting her. “No, then I have to kill the next man I see who is wearing any type of sports jersey.”

“How do you keep it all straight?”

“Honey, it’s like breathing to me,” he told her, slinging a companionable arm around her shoulders. They had left the bar and were now walking the city streets aimlessly. “Jeez,” he

said, shaking his head with the wonder of it. “I can’t believe how I can talk to you about this stuff. You’re really something, you are.”

Jane *did* feel special. Somehow Don made her feel like she was more than just a thirty year old woman with a fairly good job and a rented apartment. He saw something in her that even *she* hadn’t seen, and she felt her confidence and self-esteem rise slightly each time he smiled at her.

He walked her right to her building and did not insist upon coming up with her; she thought it was tactful and considerate of him not to put her on the spot. They lingered briefly out in the cool evening.

“Can we meet again tomorrow night?” he asked her, gazing down into her face.

She did not want to play coy, but neither did she want to – God forbid – *say the wrong thing*. She stared up at him, hoping he would read the correct answer in her eyes.

“How about dinner at seven?” he asked, caressing her shoulder.

“Th...that sounds wonderful,” she murmured. Was he going to kiss her?

“Seven it is,” he smiled. “I’ll let you go get your beauty sleep... Not as though you need much of that!”

Jane was horrified to hear herself giggle. Her nervous, titillated laughter was cut short, however, as Don sharply swiveled his head around to watch a woman about Jane’s own age walk briskly past. His eyes grew deep and alarmingly intense; following his gaze, Jane saw that it was

the woman's tote bag he was staring at with such concentrated attention -- more particularly, it was the big yellow happy face emblem emblazoned on the bag that was riveting him.

“Don...?”

“Have to...stay after class... Teacher says...”

“Don, what are you...”

He dropped his hands from her shoulders and with robot-like precision he turned on his heel and vanished into the night after the woman.

Jane stared after him, feeling hot tears well up in her eyes. For a moment she felt almost faint with horror, frustration and helplessness. She hadn't had a chance to give him her number.

* * *

The next day was Saturday and Jane spent it mooning unhappily about her apartment. She'd slept poorly the night before, having been wakened several times by dreams. The dreams tended to feature Don crashing through her bedroom door, snarling and spitting like a... well, like a maniac. She couldn't believe she'd let him get away last night without making absolutely sure they were on for tonight.

She flopped miserably down on the couch. It was terrible having to spend the day on pins and needles. He'd left so suddenly! She wished terribly that there was someone she could confide in, some friend she could spend an hour on the phone with, describing how exceptional Don made her feel, how thrilling it was to know he could kill her quite easily but chose not to because she was different, she was special to him. And then there was the strangely exciting

challenge of figuring out what he approved of and what would drive him into a homicidal frenzy. And there was, each time she managed *not* to drive him into a homicidal frenzy, the deep satisfaction of having it confirmed again that she was rare and unique in his eyes.

But she knew she could not confide in anyone. She wasn't *stupid* or anything.

* * *

As it turned out, her day of moping had been unnecessary. Don showed up at her door at seven o'clock promptly. She tried not to let her breathless relief show too plainly.

“Don't you look beautiful!” he exclaimed, holding her at arms length to survey her, a wide and affectionate smile on his face. There was no sign from him that the evening before had ended oddly. She was not about to mention it.

“I wanted to look nice for you,” she said almost shyly. In fact, she'd put together an outfit that was as close as possible to the one she'd worn last night. Who knew what switching from a blue blouse to a red or yellow one would signal to him? Needless to say, she had not only avoided using nail polish but had thrown away every bottle of it she had. The watch had already been disposed of. And although she was fairly certain she did not own a single item decorated with a yellow happy face, she'd searched anyhow and would have destroyed any she'd come across.

As they stepped out into the lovely spring evening, she could only pray that no cool breeze troubled his left ear. And if one did, she would bite off her tongue before saying, “Is anything wrong?”

* * *

Jane and Don had a very happy few weeks together. The shaky thrill of continually sidestepping death kept Jane stimulated and, well, aroused. She was flattered, even honored, that he confided in her and no one else about the complex mind patterns of a serial killer. So as not to disturb her peace of mind, she stopped reading the paper and would immediately switch the channel if the news came on. And she learned quickly how to see things through Don's eyes, knowing that this ability amounted to a matter of personal survival. For instance, a pleasant afternoon browsing through a flea market ended abruptly when Don became fixated on a woman who was examining an antique candle stick. When the woman moved away and was swallowed up in the crowd, Don wordlessly, and with an expression of frozen rage, trailed after her, leaving Jane to find her own way home. By this time, however, Jane was not distraught or fearful of abandonment. Instead she brought up the image of the woman in her mind and scrutinized it carefully. Was it the candle stick that had seized his attention, or perhaps the way the woman had been *handling* the candle stick? The woman hadn't been wearing anything offensive – or none of those items, at least, that indicated a desire to be killed. Mulling over the memory of the woman's face, Jane hit upon something. The woman had not only been *chewing* gum, she'd been aggressively *snapping* it. And with her newfound ability to see the world through Don's eyes, Jane realized how inflammatory such behavior would seem to him. Jane thus knew that she ought never to chew, let alone snap, gum in front of Don.

Jane hitchhiked home, content in the knowledge that she understood her man.

* * *

Jane was used to men who thought ‘communication’ meant grunting a compliment or two as advance payment for sex. Don was so different.

“Is a serial killer the same as a psychopath?” she asked him as they cuddled together in bed one Sunday morning.

“They’re all just labels,” he said lightly. “Psycho. Maniac. Lunatic. The way I see it, I just march to my own beat. Let the world beware.”

“Mmmm. Do you ever watch movies about serial killers?”

“Oh, sure.”

“Do you think they’re depicted authentically?”

“In general, I’d say they’re surprisingly accurate,” Don told her. “You know what the biggest fallacy is, though?”

“What?”

“In the movies, the serial killer usually gets caught.”

They giggled together. Jane felt content. “Want to go out for some breakfast?” she asked him.

Don yawned and stretched hugely. “Not this morning, cupcake,” he said, kissing her once more. “I’m gettin’ the push.”

“Huh?”

“I gotta kill, babe,” he said, getting up and raking a hand through his hair. “I gotta kill.”

So he was tied up most of the day. But he reappeared that evening and they went out to dinner.

* * *

Jane did not have good luck in romance. She knew something was going wrong when she saw Don staring at a tall red-head whom he had no intention of killing.

“Excuse me,” Jane said testily, “I’m here, too.”

Don returned his attention to her. “Sorry,” he said, looking a little embarrassed. “But a woman wears a dress that tight she’s going to get some stares.”

“I suppose,” Jane sulked. They approached a hot dog vendor.

“Two with everything,” Don ordered for them both. The vendor smiled and began slathering two frankfurters with a variety of toppings.

“Is it hot out today, or what?” he asked them as he handed them their orders.

“It’s just right for me,” Don said genially, paying him. He and Jane wandered off into the park. Jane fumed in silence for a few minutes, then finally burst out, “Don, have you been straight with me?”

“What?”

“Didn’t you hear what that man said?”

“Hot out today?” Don was confused.

“Hot out today *or what!*” Jane repeated. Don just continued to look baffled. Jane tossed the last bits of her hot dog to the pigeons. “Don, I’m asking you if you were truthful with me about your M.O.”

Don slapped his forehead. “Okay, I got you,” he said. “‘Or what.’ Right. Listen, sweet pea, I can’t kill every single person who asks for it. Heck, I’d be one busy serial killer!”

“I thought you *had* to kill them when they asked for it,” she insisted, not letting him off the hook.

“Okay, listen,” Don said, finishing his hot dog and turning to her. “You want me to go back there and kill him?”

“No, not necessarily,” pouted Jane. “The issue is that I thought you confided everything to me. To *me*. That made me feel special, like I was different from everyone else in your eyes. Not just another victim.”

“Honey, you *are* special. You *are* different. I’d do anything for you, and to prove it, I’m going right back there and killing that guy.”

“Don, never mind,” she said wearily, restraining him. “Let’s go to a movie or something.”

“Whatever you say, honey bun!”

* * *

Feeling defensive and suspicious turned Jane into a bit of a nag; she heard the shrill quality in her voice but couldn't seem to control it. She snapped at Don for the littlest things and could see him drifting away from her. In the end, it was really her fault that things didn't work out.

They'd spent the night at his apartment. Don was sitting up in bed drinking coffee and watching her dress. "...like I need this kind of aggravation," Jane was saying, fairly confident he was not listening to her. "...been doing everyone's work for them at that place and you just know when raises come around, I'm not gonna... Where the hell did I leave my slip?"

She found the slip under a chair and wriggled into it. "Anyhow, if they just *once* acted like they appreciated all I do, it would at least... Are you even *listening* to me?"

Jane put her hands on her hips and turned to look at Don. He was still sitting in bed but he'd stopped drinking his coffee. He was staring with intense concentration at Jane's left ankle. "Don?" She looked down, puzzled and saw that it was a run in her panty hose that had him fascinated. "Oooh..." she murmured, slowly looking from the torn stocking back to Don's cold glower. "I... Oooh..." She felt an icy knot suddenly form in her stomach.

Don continued to stare at the run in the stocking. His concentration was so powerful that his body began trembling slightly. As Jane watched with mounting fear, the coffee cup broke in his fist. "...Uncle Paulie says he wants to show me something..." he said dreamily, eyes still riveted. "...Come back here, Donnie. Come..."

Jane yanked her dress on over her head and snatched up her shoes. She began backing towards the door.

“Must... Have to...” Don began slowly rising out of the bed. Jane shrieked once and fled.

* * *

“Hey, Bert,” the bartender said cheerily.

“Hey, Johnny. The usual.”

“Here you go, buddy. Slow in here tonight.”

Bert sipped his drink, looking around the dark bar. “Yeah,” he agreed. “Hey,” he said, jerking his chin toward the back of the room. “See that guy over there? With the blond?”

“Uh huh. Don. Comes in here pretty often.”

“That guy’s got no trouble with the ladies, does he, huh? Every time I see him he’s with a different one, seems like.”

“Yeah,” nodded the bartender, staring across the room at Don. “He’s got a line you wouldn’t believe. I’ve thought of trying it.”