

A BEGINNING

Russell locked his studio's door behind the last of the staff, leaned his back against it, and turned off his camera.

He knew it was good. The images were there; he'd really captured them.

But something was missing.

The groove ran so clean when he slid into it. First his Manhattan high-ceilinged loft would fade into the background, then the strobe lights, reflector umbrellas, and blue and green backdrops all became texture and tone.

Image, camera, and man then became one and they were all that mattered—a single flow of light, beginning before time was counted, and ending its journey in the printed image. One ray of primordial light traveling forever to glisten off the BMW roadster still parked in one corner of the rough-planked wood floor worn smooth by generations of use. Another ray lost in the dark blackness of the finest leather bucket seats. A hundred more picking out the supermodel's perfect hand dangling a single shining and golden key—the image shot

just slow enough that the key blurred as it spun, but the logo remained clear.

He couldn't quite put his finger on it...

It would be another great ad by Russell Morgan, Inc. The client would be knocked dead—the ad leaving all others standing still as it roared down the passing lane. This one might get him another Clio, or even a second Mobius.

But...

There wasn't usually a "but."

And there definitely wasn't supposed to be one.

The groove had definitely been there, but he hadn't been in it.

That was the problem. It had slid along, sweeping his staff into their own orchestrated perfection, but he'd remained untouched. That ideal, seamless flow hadn't included him at all.

"Be honest, boyo, that session sucked," he told the empty studio. Everything had come together so perfectly for yet another ad for yet another high-end glossy. *Man, the Magazine* would launch spectacularly in a few weeks, a high-profile mid-December launch, and it would include a never before seen twelve-page spread by the great Russell Morgan. The rag would probably never pay off the lavish launch party of hope, ice sculptures, and chilled magnums of champagne before disappearing like a thousand before it.

He stowed the last camera he'd been using with the others piled by his computer. At the breaker box he shut off the umbrellas, spots, scoops, and washes. The studio shifted from a stark landscape in hard-edged relief to a nest of curious shadows and rounded forms. The tang of hot metal and deodorant were the only lasting result of the day's efforts.

"Morose tonight, aren't we?" he asked his reflection in the darkened window, stories above the streetlights of West 10th. His reflection was wise enough to not answer back. There was never a "down" after a shoot; there was always an "up."

Not tonight.

He'd kept everyone late—even though it was Thanksgiving

eve—hoping for that smooth slide of image-camera-man. It was only when he saw the power of the images he captured that he knew he wasn't a part of the chain anymore and decided he'd paid enough triple-time expenses.

The next to last two-page spread was the killer—shot with the door open against a background as black as the sports car's finish. The model's single perfect leg wrapped in thigh-high red-leather boots was all that was visible in the driver's seat. The sensual juxtaposition of woman and sleek machine served as an irresistible focus. It was an ad designed to wrap every person with even a hint of a Y-chromosome around its little finger. And those with only X-chromosomes would simply want to be her. He'd shot a perfect combo of sex for the guys and power for the women.

Even the final one-page image, a close-up of driver's seat from exactly the same angle, revealing not the model but instead a single rose of precisely the same hue as the leather boot, hadn't moved him despite its perfection.

Without him noticing, Russell had become no more than the observer, merely a technician behind the camera. Now that he faced it, months, maybe even a year had passed since he'd been yanked all the way into the light-image-camera-man slipstream. Tonight was a wakeup call and he didn't like it one bit. Wakeup calls were supposed to happen to others, not him. But tonight he could no longer ignore it, he hadn't even trailed in the churned-up wake.

"You're just a creative cog in the advertising machine." Ouch! That one stung, but it didn't turn aside the relentless steamroller of his thoughts speeding down some empty, godforsaken autobahn.

His career was roaring ahead, his business' growth running fast and smooth, but, now that he considered it, he really didn't give a damn.

His life looked perfect, but—"Don't think it!"—his autobahn mind finished despite the command, *it wasn't*.

Russell left his silent reflection to its own thoughts and went

through the back door that led to his apartment—closing it tightly on the perfect BMW, the perfect rose, and somewhere, lost among a hundred other props from dozens of other shoots, the long pair of perfect red-leather Chanel boots that had been wrapped around the most expensive legs in Manhattan. He didn't care if he never walked back through that door again. He'd been doing his art by rote; how god-awful sad was that?

And just to rub salt in the wound, he shot *commercial* art.

He'd never had the patience to do art for art's sake. Delayed gratification was his idea of no fun at all. He left the apartment dark with only the city's soft glow through the blind-covered windows revealing the vaguest outlines of the framed art on the wall. Even that almost overwhelmed him tonight.

He didn't want to see the huge prints by the *art* artists: autographed Goldsworthy, Liebowitz, and Joseph Francis' photomosaics for the moderns. A hundred and fifty rare, even one-of-a-kind prints adorned his walls—all the way back through Bourke-White to Russell's prize, an original Daguerre. The Museum of Modern Art kept begging to borrow his collection for a show...and at the moment he was half tempted to dump the whole lot in their Dumpster if they didn't want it.

Crossing the one-room loft apartment—as spacious as the studio—he bypassed the circle of avant garde chairs that were almost as uncomfortable as they looked and avoided the lush black-leather wrap-around sectional sofa of such ludicrous scale that it could be a playpen for two or host a party for twenty. He cracked the fridge in the stainless-steel-and-black corner kitchen searching for something other than his usual beer.

A bottle of Krug.

Maybe he was just being grouchy after a long day's work.

Juice.

No. He'd run his enthusiasm into the ground but good.

Milk even.

Would he miss the camera if he never picked it up again?

No reaction.

Nothing.

Not even a twinge.

That was an emptiness he did not want to face. Especially not alone, in his apartment, in the middle of the world's most vibrant city.

Russell turned away, and just as the door swung closed, the last sliver of light—the relentless chilly blue-white of the refrigerator bulb—shone across his bed. A quick grab snagged the edge of the door and left the narrow beam illuminating a long pale form on his black bedspread.

The Chanel boots weren't in the studio after all. They were still wrapped around those three thousand dollar-an-hour legs: the only clothing on a perfect body, five foot-eleven of intensely toned female anatomy, right down to her exquisitely stair-mastered behind. Her long, white-blond hair lay as a perfect Godiva over her tanned breasts—except for their too exact symmetry, even the closest inspection didn't reveal the work done there. She lay with one leg raised just ever so slightly to hide what was meant to be revealed later.

Melanie.

By the steady rise and fall of her flat stomach, he knew she'd fallen asleep while waiting for him to finish in the studio.

How long had they been an item? Two months? Three?

She'd made him feel alive...at least when he was actually with her. Melanie was the supermodel in his bed or on his arm at yet another SoHo gallery opening. Together they journeyed to sharp parties and trendy three-star restaurants where she dazzled and wooed yet another gathering of New York's finest with her ever so soft, so sensual, and so studied French accent. Together they were wired into the heart of the in-crowd.

But that wasn't him, was it? It didn't sound like the Russell he once knew.

Perhaps "they" were about how *he* looked on *her* arm?

Did she know tomorrow was the annual Thanksgiving ordeal at his parents? The grand holiday gathering that he'd rather die

than attend? Any number of eligible woman would be floating about his parents' house out in Greenwich; anyone able to finagle an invitation would attend in hopes of snaring one of *People Magazine's* "100 Most Eligible." They all wanted to land the heir to a billion or some such; though he was wealthy enough on his own, by his own sweat, to draw anyone's attention. He ranked number twenty-four on the list this year—up from forty-seven the year before despite Tom Cruise being available yet again.

But not Melanie. He knew that it wasn't the money that drew her. Yes, she wanted him. But even more, she wanted the life that came with him—wrapped in the man-package. She wanted The Life. The one that *People Magazine* readers dreamed about between glossy pages.

His fingertips were growing cold where they held the refrigerator door cracked open.

If he woke her there'd be amazing sex. Or a great party to go to. Or...

Did he want "Or"? What more did he want from her?

Sex. Companionship. An energy, a vivacity, a thirst he feared that he lacked. Yes.

But where was that smooth synchronicity hiding, like the light-image-camera-man of photography that he'd lost? Where lurked that perfect flow from one person to another? Did she feel it? Could he ever feel it?

"More?" he whispered into the darkness to test the sound.

The refrigerator door slid shut—escaping from his numbed fingers—which plunged the apartment back into darkness, taking Melanie along with it.

His breath echoed in the vast darkness. Proof that he was alive, if nothing more.

It was time to close the studio—time to be done with Russell Incorporated.

Then what?

Maybe Angelo would know what to do. He always claimed that he did. Maybe this time Russell would actually listen to his

almost-brother, though he knew from the experience of being himself for the last thirty years that was unlikely.

Seattle.

Damn! He'd have to go to bloody Seattle to find his best friend. There was a possible upside to such a trip—maybe there'd be a flight out before tomorrow's mess at his parents'. He slapped his pocket, but once again he'd set his phone down in some unknown corner of the studio and it would take forever to find. He really needed two—one chained down so that he could always find it to call the other.

Russell considered the darkness. He could guarantee that Seattle wouldn't be a big hit with Melanie.

Now if he only knew whether that was a good thing or bad.

West Point Lighthouse

Discovery Park, Seattle

First lit: 1881

Automated: 1985

47.6617 -122.43499

Chief Boatswain's Mate Christian Fritz served as the lighthouse keeper for many years in the early 1900s. One of the reasons he chose the West Point lighthouse posting was that the terrain from the keeper's cottage to the lighthouse was relatively level. This allowed his blind wife to freely stroll the station's grounds accompanied by her guide dog, a boxer named Cookie.

In 1985, it was the last lighthouse in Washington State to be automated despite its close proximity to Seattle.

JANUARY 1

If you were still alive, you'd pay for this one, Daddy." The moment the words escaped her lips, Cassidy Knowles slapped a hand over her mouth to negate them, but it was too late.

The sharp wind took her words and threw them back into the pines, guilt and all. It might have stopped her, if it didn't make this the hundredth time she'd cursed him this morning.

She leaned in and forged her way downhill until the muddy path broke free from the mossy smell of the forest. Her Stuart Weitzman boots were long since soaked through, and now her feet were freezing. In a last gasp effort before the chill trees would let her go, a root snagged two-inch heels again and tried to flip her into the mud.

Free at last, Cassidy stared at the lighthouse. It perched upon a point of rock: tall and white, with its red roof as straight and snug as a prim bonnet. A narrow trail traced along the top of the breakwater leading to the lighthouse. The parking lot, much to her chagrin, was empty; six, beautiful, empty spaces.

"Sorry, ma'am," park rangers were always polite when telling

you what you couldn't do. "The parking lot by the light is for physically-challenged visitors only. You'll have to park here. It is just a short walk to the lighthouse."

The fact that she was dressed for an afternoon lunch at Pike Place Market safe in Seattle's downtown rather than a blustery mile-long trek on the first day of the year didn't phase the ranger in the slightest.

Cassidy should have gone home, would have if it hadn't been for the letter stuffed deep in her pocket. So, instead of a tasty treat in a cozy deli, she'd buttoned the top button of her suede Bernardo jacket and headed out onto the trail. At least the promised rain had yet to arrive, so the jacket was only cold, not wet.

Finally free of the trees, a new problem arose. Beyond the lighthouse ranged a vast expanse of Puget Sound and it was being whipped into a frenzy like someone desperate to make a towering meringue rather than a smooth zabaglione custard. Whitecaps tore off the tops of waves, dark clouds scudded low over the water, and the far shore might as well have been the North Pole rather than Bainbridge Island for how inviting it looked. The towering heights of the Olympic Mountains scraped at the clouds with glacier-clad peaks.

Her jacket's stylish cut had never been intended to fight off these bajillion mile-an-hour gusts that snapped it painfully against her hips. Her black leggings ranged about five layers short of tolerable and a far, far cry from warm.

Approaching the lighthouse across the exposed—and utterly vacant—parking lot, any part of her that had been merely numb slipped right over to quick frozen. Leaning into the wind to stay upright, tears streaming from her eyes, she could think of a thing or two to tell her father despite his recent demise and her general feelings about the usefulness of upbraiding a dead man.

"What a stupid present!" Her shout was torn word-by-word, syllable-by-syllable and sent flying back toward her nice warm car and the ever-so-polite park ranger.

A calendar. Her dad had given her a stupid calendar of stupid lighthouses and a stupid letter to open at each stupid one. He'd been very insistent, made her promise. One she couldn't ignore. A deathbed promise.

Cassidy leaned grimly forward to walk through the onslaught only to have the wind abruptly cease. She staggered, nearly planting her face on the pavement before another gust rescued her but sent her crabbing sideways. With resolute force, she planted one foot in front of the other until she'd crossed the open pavement. There weren't any handicapped people crazy enough to come here New Year's morning. No people at all for that matter.

The empty lot and the lighthouse were separated by a short path along the top of a rocky breakwater. Boulders the size of her car had been piled up to resist the pounding of the sea. The top had been made into a solid path, so her footing was sure even if the wind continued to buffet her wildly.

The building's wall was concrete, worn smooth by a thousand storms and a hundred coats of brilliant white paint. With the wind practically pinning her to the outside of the building, she peeked into one of the windows. Her hair blew about so that it beat on her eyes and mouth trying to simultaneously blind and choke her. With one hand, she smashed the unruly mass mostly to one side. With the other she shaded the dusty window.

The cobwebbed glass revealed an equally unkempt interior: no lightkeeper sitting in his rocking chair before a merry fire with his smoking pipe and a lighthouse cat curled in his lap. There was some sort of a rusty engine not attached to anything. A bucket of old tools. A couple of paint cans.

A high wave crashed into the rocks with a thundering shudder that ran up through the heels of her boots and whipped a chill spray into the wind. Salt water on suede—Daddy now owed her a new coat as well.

Cassidy edged along the foundation until she found a calmer spot, a little windshadow behind the lighthouse where the

wind chill ranked merely miserable rather than horrific on the suck-o-meter. Squatting down behind one of the breakwater's boulders helped a tiny bit more. She peeled off her thin leather gloves and blew against her fingertips to warm them enough so that they'd work. Once she'd regained some modicum of feeling, she pulled out the letter.

She couldn't feel his actual writing, though she ran her fingertips over it again and again. His Christmas present: a five-dollar calendar of Washington lighthouses from the hospital gift store and a dozen thin envelopes wrapped in a old x-ray folder with no ribbon, no paper.

In the end he'd foiled her final Christmas hunt. It had been her great yearly quest—the ultimate grail of childhood—finding the key present before Christmas morning. There was no present he could hide that she couldn't find. Not the Cabbage Patch Kid when she was six; the one she'd had to hold with her arm in a cast after falling off the kitchen stool she'd dragged into her father's closet to aid the search. Not the used VW Rabbit he'd hidden out in the wine shed thinking that she never went there anymore. And she didn't, except for some reason that day before her eighteenth Christmas.

A part of her wanted to crumple the letter up and throw it into the sea. It was too soon. She didn't want to face the pain again.

Too soon.

She looked out at the crashing waves. With a sudden howl of wind, a slash of spray roared by mere feet from her face, barely averted by the staunch tower of the lighthouse. Clearly someone wasn't happy about her desire to avoid the task at hand.

The rest of her body did what it supposed to do. The dutiful daughter opened the envelope and pinned the letter against her thigh so that she could read the slashing scrawl that was her father's. Even as weak with sickness as he must have been, it looked scribed in stone. His bold-stroke writing gave the words a force and strength just as his deep voice had once sounded strong enough to keep the world at bay for a little girl.