

THE SUPER QUEEN OF GRANITE, CA

The summer morning had become bristling hot and still Byron worked on his Mustang. He took off his shirt. He checked himself out in the car window—the dumbbell set he'd bought was paying off and the hours and hours of yard work for extra money had tanned him. Drinking from the hose, he looked at his watch and tried to remember where he'd be at 11:30 if he hadn't graduated. Probably smoking butts at the gate and rating the tits of every girl who walked by. What a waste.

He got at the hubcaps with a soapy toothbrush. After the wash and wax, he buffed the black exterior. In three months, this baby would be all his. He would drive it down Granite's strip one last time before hitting the highway and heading west for 'Frisco, the sun setting in his eyes. His dad wouldn't own even an ounce of it.

That afternoon he installed his new stereo; then he ate lunch in some shade in his mom's driveway. If it weren't for the neighbors, he would have liked to hear what his new stereo could do. "At any volume," the company's brochure claimed, "our understanding of acoustic physics provides a richness and clarity known only in your dreams." He would blast it to do his neighbors a favor; for once in their lives they would commune with a thing of real quality and beauty, if only to know they should expect more out of life than a transistor radio with a busted antenna. But he knew about drawing attention to himself. Now that his dad was in trouble, Byron feared the new Sheriff—not the look-the-other-way one of ten years—would haul him in for anything.

After a cool shower and a close shave, he checked himself out again. He was pretty sure he was the fantasy of many local girls, even if he needed a different hairstyle. He had his own car that he knew how to fix and he was cut—the only two things Granite girls seemed to care about.

But he had a different girl in mind and there was no way she could be local, not from the looks of her. For one thing, she wore her hair in a long thick braid, while the local girls teased theirs into knots and sprayed them stiff. For another thing, her eyes weren't all gooey and black with make-up, and she had little muscles in her arms. Also, she looked kind of hippy-ish—that's what it was—like a hippy, but a clean one. She looked like she belonged in a clean and windy town like 'Frisco, just walking the streets and whistling. And if she was local, then he needed to have his radar checked immediately, because it was only yesterday that he'd laid his eyes on her.

In his four years of working check-out at the Super Queen, he'd been able to make conversation with even the prettiest girls, but this one had paralyzed him.

It was Tuesday's shift around 4:30pm when he saw her in his line. She had three cartons of reduced fat milk and six of the reddest tomatoes in her basket. From this, Byron imagined that she was health-conscious and the type to consider what was in season. She read *Time* magazine in line, not *People*. She let old Agnes with one frozen dinner and a bottle of Black Lightning go ahead of her. When it was her turn, she greeted Byron and made eye contact with a pair of deep baby blues.

He then noticed the delicate bones of her fingers and wrists, the color of the skin below her neck, and the two perfect points of her top lip. Looking at her bare neck made him excited, like he was looking at her inner thigh. Even through her colorful poncho dark, he could see that the cold air of the Super Queen had hardened her nipples. He forgot to ask paper or plastic, but she asked for paper. When she wrapped her arms around the bag and lifted it off the counter, he thought he saw her wink.

He'd always felt free to watch a girl walk away, to watch the sway of her backside carry her out through the double-glass doors. Late at night in bed, he

would thrust his body into that image again and again until he was done. But in the case of Tuesday's girl, he allowed her to vanish.

In last night's fantasy, he was the kind of guy who caught her eye as well: She liked that he took care of himself, that he was obviously bright and nice and fair, that he had a decent job. She liked his average height and his bulking shoulders, the way he looked more mature than others his age. She liked his tanned skin and the curly blond hairs that covered his arms. Then there were the things she would learn about him and adore: A guy who fixed cars, but wanted more out of life was sexy. A guy who yearned to know what mysteries lay beyond Granite's limits was one who planned to find out. A guy with a crooked dad could be straight.

She'd grip his thigh while he drove them out of town.

He had a little time to kill before his shift at the Super Queen. He drove the strip and fooled with the bass on his stereo. Seventy-five watts of power would be merely loud without the system's signature ability to articulate all the subtleties of a recording: a guitarist's grazing fingertips, the otherwise hidden hoarseness in the lead singer's voice, rain falling on a live audience.

As he waited for a truck to turn into the lumber yard, Byron reached for his CD case and of the few inside, he plucked his newest: A ska-funk-rock band from 'Frisco he'd seen last summer in Laytonville. He had room in his case for 25 other discs and he wanted to buy them all at once, peel away the plastic film and place them in alphabetical order. His friend Chicky had a not-so-decent player hooked up to a pair of junker speakers and didn't even own a car, but he had over 200 discs, all of which he'd gotten through the CD clubs. Chicky used different aliases and addresses; his mother's house, his father's house, his job at the hardware store. At Byron's weekly visit to the jail, his dad would ask, "Tell me Chicky's latest. That boy is so damn enterprising."

Being enterprising like Chicky was something Byron watched from afar. The legitimate route would take longer, but in time, Byron knew he would have the works: a better job, his own apartment, a college degree, a great girl who would someday be his wife. He didn't get all righteous about it, in fact he hadn't completely let on that he was any different from the rest of the guys and girls in Granite. Like his mom had said about him once, he kept his cards close.

It was cool to think about the soundtrack of his future: some reggae, a little jazz, the latest "Living Angel" release. Maybe something moody, just in case.

Byron stopped at the only light in town, in front of the Giddy-Up Diner-Bar. He had five minutes until work. Then, like in a dream, the girl from Tuesday's shift ran in front of his car, her long, thick brown braid flying, her eyes wide and serious. She clutched a Super Queen bag to her chest. Byron fumbled with the volume sensor, up then down; his heart was beating in his hands. Before he could do anything, she had disappeared into the Giddy-Up.

He slammed his hand on the steering wheel; he had missed her. He tried to cool down. Tuesday was not the first girl in his life, not by a long shot. There had been others. That was the only cool thing about school for a really long time. First, there were the Lindas. They were neon-sign hot, and always ready for action. Every guy—from the losers to the dudes—wanted a Linda. Not to have and to hold, but to screw to the wall. Byron had his turn—it started and ended with a mind-blowing afternoon romp. Then there were the Rebeccas, who were cute underneath their pimples and chubby cheeks and always had a joke to tell. The Mary Janes were shy and would go white or green every time you looked their way. And finally there were the Shelleys who were athletic and seemed to hate you, but with all of their heart. With the naming, Byron and the guys never got confused. But what could Byron say about a girl like Tuesday? What could anyone say about a dream come true?

He had to park on the street. He hated to do it, but he'd gone the face plate route for just this reason. A more expensive decision, but a totally smart move. Plus, he'd soon be living in the big city and having been there once on a fieldtrip, he knew there were certain precautions to consider. He put his CD case in the trunk and walked toward the Super Queen.

He whisked through the produce section and high-fived old Matty, who was stacking red delicious apples. He punched the clock at 3:59 pm, stooped to see himself in the employee mirror, and washed his hands in the sink. He reached for his apron without looking and didn't find it where he'd left it the night before.

"Damn it, White!" It was the third time in a week that Randy had stolen his apron.

"Hey, hairdo—hop to. Time's a tickin'." Randy's nasally voice always made his skin crawl. He lassoed Byron with his own apron. It smelled like Randy. Like cigarettes and grape gum.

Byron straightened the apron and tied it around his waist. He re-pinned his name tag. Getting Randy a job was stupid, but his mom had told him it was important that they all try to get along. He knew what she meant, but that didn't make him like the situation any better.

"Randy, maybe one brain cell could tell the other to bring your own apron to work someday."

"Hey, careful, man. Anything you say can and will be used against you!"

Randy punched out and grabbed three apples from the box of damaged fruit on the table. He got real close to Byron and bit into an apple, squirting juice on Byron's shirt.

"You're such a child," Byron said, grabbing a paper towel.

"Ooo. You're such a man."

Randy walked out into the store and held the door for Byron. "Happy Super Queen employees share. Aprons and all. Don't you read the board?"

Eight years ago, when Byron's dad first met up with Randy's father, he needed the money pretty bad. He'd been laid off from the local logging company for the third time—despite the union representation—and he was tired of it. First, it was just the occasional bag. Then Randy's father got sick from all of his drinking and Byron's dad took on a lot of his work. Really dumb stuff: Late-night drop offs; phone calls to other middlemen; trips to the fields. If Byron's mom was scared, she didn't let on, but Byron was always thankful when his dad walked through their front door. He knew what his dad did was illegal and it didn't make him feel any better that some of his friends' dads did the same thing or that, as his dad often said, "This business is never short on demand." When the logging company started hiring again, Byron's dad wasn't interested. Then the old Sheriff died suddenly and a new one was brought over from another county and elected just like that. It didn't take him long to find a reason to put Byron's dad and Mr. White behind bars.

Randy let the swinging door go, but Byron caught it with his foot.

"Hey man, a bunch of us are gonna kick it with some brew-ha-ha later at the River," Randy said.

"Yeah, I'll think about it," Byron said, straightening his collar. He would have liked to say he had something better to do.

Randy walked backwards ahead of him in the aisle, dragging his feet and making black streaks on the linoleum floor. "You install your stereo?" Randy asked.

"Nah, there was some problem. They're sending me another one. I'm making them throw in a remote for my trouble."

"Whoa, the Negotiator," Randy said. "Maybe your dad should take some lessons from you."

Randy pivoted and hooked his thumbs on his jeans. His head bobbed to some watery love song coming through the speakers. "Later at the River," he said over his shoulder.

"Hey Randy, you work the register today?"

Randy spun around on his heel. "Like what's new?"

"Did you see a girl...," Byron paused. "Ah, forget it."

He glanced at his watch and started walking toward the front. Everyone knew Randy couldn't be trusted. What the hell was he thinking? Their junior year, Randy had turned Chicky into the principal for playing music over the loudspeaker during lunch block. And with the recent bust, anything having to do with the Whites had a big dose of voodoo.

He'd made it to the bulk foods aisle, when Randy cut him off.

"You'll have to give me a few more deets on the chiquita, if I'm gonna help you out, man."

Byron first got stuck on Randy's eyes; they were swimming in their red-rimmed sockets and in need of a fix—whatever information Byron had would probably do. Then, his hair, which had been the same since they were boys: long and stringy in back, short and puffy in front. Then on his gut; he was getting one just like his dad and, in the same way, he didn't seem to care.

Then Byron saw Randy as an old man—his back rounded and a drag in his right leg. The same white button-down shirt was yellowed in the armpits and frayed at the collar from the stubble on his chin and neck. His dream of taking over his father's drug dealing business had been dashed many, many years before. He was well past his retirement, but he had begged the Super Queen to keep him on. They were trying to find jobs for him the way they found jobs for old Matty. One day they'd take him off carts because he was denting cars, then off bagging because he made the bags either too heavy or too light, then off apples because he was making

stacks that fell down. They would give him a duster, but he would dust things right off the shelves. One day they'd find him scooping up mayonnaise and hiding it in the pocket of his apron. They would try to let him go, but he would cry bitterly. They'd ask him to leave finally, give him a party, thank him for his many years of service, but he'd still hang around and try to get his employee discount. The River would dry up because of the drought and the dams and the loggers would go further north and east in search of trees to cut and the store would go out of business and so would all the others, and so would the town. Randy would be hit by a trucker one day who would take the exit off Interstate 5 remembering a town and a hearty breakfast at some diner or bar with a funny name. In the trucker's hunger and shock at the boarded-up stores and weeds, he'd plow right over Randy without noticing.

"You don't mean Marilyn Rogers, do ya?" asked Randy, smirking.

"What?" Byron ran a hand through his hair. "Who?"

"What? Who?" Randy imitated him. "C'mon man! The new girl with the braid and the nice chichas?"

Byron nodded slowly.

"She's Sheriff Rogers' daughter!" Randy clapped him on the shoulder. "Get this!" He used a girl's voice. "She goes, 'I go to Cal. I'm just summering here before next semester. Working at the Giddy-Up for spending money.' Can you believe that shit? Summering here? What the fuck?"

"No," was all Byron could say. He felt blood leaving his head. He started to walk away.

Randy followed. "You got a hard-on for her or somethin'?"

"Shut up," Byron said.

"Oooo! Byron's living on the edge! Sheriff Rogers' daughter!" Randy was prancing around pretending to start up a motorcycle. "Vroom, vroom..."

Byron looked up and down the aisle quickly and then grabbed Randy's arm and pinned it behind his back. He was at least six inches shorter than Byron and his legs about the circumference of Byron's arms—there was no question who would win in a fight, physical or otherwise.

"Jesus! All right, man! I was just playin'!" He struggled and Byron released him, afraid he would scream.

"Byron, check, please," said Millie, over the loudspeaker.

Byron pushed him. "You're a dirt bag, you know that? Just like your father."

"Look who's talking," Randy sneered, rubbing his arm. "Fuckin' weirdo."

Byron walked quickly toward the front, staring at the floor. He might as well have been handcuffed and shoved around by a probation officer. It was like he was serving some parallel term to his dad's. Forced to give his mom part of his paycheck, forced to get Randy hired, and now this? It seemed he couldn't get out of Granite soon enough. Could it be true? If Randy wasn't lying big time, Byron was probably already a criminal in Tuesday's eyes. Her Sheriff father must have given her the whole who's who in Granite, and with its population of 4,000 it wouldn't take him that long. How had he described Byron? Nice kid, clean record, but, like father like son? Byron shook off his thoughts and took a deep breath. Forget the girl. There'll be girls in 'Frisco. He'd throw himself into his work, keep his head down, lay low until his car payments were through. Then get out of Granite.

He straightened the magazines in his check-out lane and unhooked the cord blocking the entrance. Then he tapped a smart-looking, muscular guy with a great haircut on the shoulder.

"I'll take you right over here, sir."

He liked bumping customers up in line. He'd choose the people who looked like they'd be grateful, not those who looked like they felt entitled to be served quickly. And there were lots of people who came up from Sac and 'Frisco on their way to the mountains or the river who thought they deserved not to wait at all. He saw it in the way their eyes rolled as they approached a line or in the way they sneered when he had to check on a price or get a wad of ones for his drawer or in the way they constantly checked their watches as if the employees at the Super Queen were keeping them from getting on with their lives. Byron knew how they felt about Granite—that it was full of uneducated folk whose best skills were working cash registers and driving trucks and maybe they didn't even do those things too well. But Byron didn't want people to see him that way—he had what it took to be just like them: smart, successful, busy. That's what he was thinking he would have said to Tuesday, if he'd been given half a chance.

But this guy looked nice: tan, clean-cut, and wearing sandals. He unloaded a loaf of bread, a tomato, and a jar of mustard from his arms.

A small, equally tan girl glided in and plopped a roll of film and a box of condoms on the counter. She squeezed the guy's arm.

"You two up from 'Frisco?" Byron asked, feeling good with the thought that they could have no idea of his dad's record, not like folks the county over who bought food from him every week and just had to ask: "What's the jail cell like?" "Does he get to eat normal food?" "Can he at least watch TV?" "How's your mom holding up?"

Even if the guy and the girl ventured to assume the wrong stuff about him, they didn't look the type to remark on it. He rang their items through.

"Is it that obvious?" She and the guy laughed.

"Nah, it's just that I know everyone here."

"Wow, that sounds nice." The guy leaned toward him and fixed his eyes on Byron's name tag. "You fish the Yuba much, Byron?"

"Nah. I swim in it. I guess I stare at it a bunch, too," he said and they laughed. The guy started bagging and the girl paid. She looked so damn happy, like there was music playing in her head.

She said, "It's like Alcatraz, you know. Never been, but I stare at it every day from my office."

"Yeah, right, same thing." Byron gave the girl her change. "Hey, quick question. How much does an apartment go for down there?"

"In a good neighborhood?" the girl asked.

"Well, yeah."

"Ah, God, it's pretty ugly. What would you say, honey? Like \$900, a thousand?"

While waiting for his next customer's money, Byron looked into the parking lot and saw the couple getting into a truck. A thousand dollars a month? There was a big dog in the front seat. Even the dog looked happy.

Byron spent his dinner break in his car, looking at *GQ*, fishing for a good haircut, and listening to music. It seemed the right style could make any old mug look good. But how important was that? He could have a killer haircut, a rockin' stereo, nice pecs, and a sweet car and still be talking to road-tripping city folk in his apron. He tried to calm down; he knew that the thought of paying so much rent every month had made him a little nervous. Maybe he could live in a not-so-good neighborhood, on the condition that the apartment had a garage? Maybe he could share a place with someone else? He glanced over at the Giddy-Up more than once. All he could see was the neon red galloping horse on the roof of the building. It suddenly occurred to him that if Marilyn really worked there, she was getting a daily

dose of Granite's worst. What did her Sheriff father think of that? Keeping her company every day were grizzled loggers with wood chips in their beards and often without a finger or a thumb, gravel pit guys whose skin was nearly purple from so much sun, and then the regular Joes who would take any work they could find and often that meant they were at the Giddy-Up all day, drinking coffee at first and then moving to beer by mid-afternoon. The danger was they all assumed that while they were at the Giddy-Up, the waitresses were their private property. Lots of butt-pinching and "honey this, honey that" and straight-up come-ons. It was legendary like that the county over. Men wanted to eat and drink there for the action, just as much women wanted to work there for the tips. Even though his mom made a good deal of cash there many years ago, his dad forced her to quit when he found out how the customers treated the waitresses. Being that upright was a rare thing for Byron's dad, so Byron liked to remember it was possible whenever he found himself getting too critical. And to think the Sheriff would let his beautiful daughter work in such a zoo! What sort of man was he?

Forget the girl, right? You can't go after the Sheriff's daughter. Just stick with the plan. He put down the *GQ* and grabbed the City College catalogue out of his glove compartment. The courses were cheap and offered throughout the day. He figured that he'd get a few shifts at some Super Queen down in 'Frisco and take a few classes to see what he was interested in. Maybe next year, he'd apply for a scholarship to a good school, like Cal or SFSU.

Flipping through, he thought a writing course would hit the spot—he liked expressing himself with words the way songwriters did, but he wasn't sure it was practical, given what his English teacher had said about writers: most are frustrated and poor. All he had to do was stay in Granite for too much longer and he could be that! Running a business seemed cool to him and he had dog-eared the introductory Business Administration courses. But when he used his imagination about what type

of business he might run, only luxury car garages and gourmet supermarkets occurred to him. He was still thinking about calling that English teacher to get her opinion. He wrote her name down on a small pad under the title To Do.

"Just a cup of coffee, please," Byron said, his eyes roving the Giddy-Up for a long brown braid.

"How's your pop, Byron?" Gloria asked, squinting a little and running a rag over the counters.

"Just fine, Gloria," Byron said. "Thanks."

"All right then. For here or to go?"

It wasn't that he didn't hear Gloria in her old western uniform above the clattering of silverware and laughter. It was like she was asking whether he wanted paper or plastic.

"Hey, Byron, before Christmas? You see my crowd of guys here? They know `zactly what they want."

"Right, right." He was going to whisper something in her ear about the girl. "Ah..." He stopped himself.

"What?"

"For here," Byron said.

"Well, sit yourself down then." She frowned. "You all right?"

Byron sat down at the bar, farthest away from a group of three loggers who were smoking and drinking beer. From his stool, he had a good view of Main Street and the front door. He sugared and creamed his coffee so it tasted like a warm milkshake. He felt strange there, just watching, but he knew he could stand it for the eight minutes he had left in his break.

After a few sips Byron saw the Sheriff's cruiser pull into the parking lot. He picked up a menu and opened it to hide his face. The cow bell above the front door then rang and he heard a guy say, "Hey Marilyn."

So far, it seemed Randy had not lied, not that he had enough imagination to make up a story like the one he told anyway. Byron peaked over the menu and saw Marilyn talking to a trucker sitting at a table near the door. All the truckers at the table were looking up from their plates at her; some even had their forks in midair.

From what Byron could tell, the Sheriff was just sitting in his cruiser in the parking lot and had no intention of walking into the Giddy-Up. He put the menu down. He watched Marilyn walk around the other side of the bar and go into the back. He stirred his coffee and looked at the television above his head. There was a commercial on he'd seen before for a powder called Pecs Perfect; he chuckled again when he saw the huge man selling the product. He looked like he belonged in a circus.

"I know you."

Byron quickly turned toward the sweet voice of Marilyn Rogers. Thoughts sputtered in his head, like failed fireworks. She had a pot of coffee in her hand.

"Topper?"

"Sure," Byron said, pushing his cup toward her, checking the parking lot. "I'm Byron."

"I know. You're from the Super Queen," she said without looking at him. Her smell was like the inside of the stores on Haight Street. She set the coffee pot down on its burner and extended her hand. "I'm Marilyn Rogers."

"I know," Byron said in a voice he might use if he didn't want to wake someone up. He took her hand and she shook his firmly, making the beaded fringes on her uniform slap together. The sound reminded him of dice. She smoothed some hair away from her face and her eyes flashed open wide and locked. He tried to keep

his eyes there and not on the heart shape her cleavage and breasts made under her uniform. Whatever her father or anyone else had told her about him, it seemed she was going to make up her own mind.

To get it over with he blurted out: "I'm headed to 'Frisco in the fall." Sweat immediately broke out on the back of his neck.

She exploded into laughter and then quickly covered her mouth with her hand.

"What?" Byron asked, his eyes scanning the room.

"Oh, nothing, nothing." She waved her hand and then grabbed the pencil and pad from her apron and scribbled something down he couldn't see. "I've just never heard it called that!"

"Oh," Byron said, and picked up his spoon.

She patted his hand and nodded. "That's great, though. It really is. That you're going to 'Frisco."

"And you—"

Gloria threw a wet rag at Marilyn's back. "Get movin', little lady," she said.

"Right there, Glo," Marilyn said and then turned back to Byron. "She's the only one here who's got the nerve to flirt with me!" Then she picked up the coffee pot and winked.

The smell of French fries followed him out onto the street as he quickly crossed over to the Super Queen, hoping that he was not seen by the Sheriff. Even though things seemed all right—they had just talked like anyone else who sat at the bar would have—he wanted to play it cool. His dad had always said he was glad to have a son in Byron and not a daughter. A daughter he would have to worry about, he said.

Evening was moving in on a warm breeze and smeared in pink. He changed his mind. This was the hour of day he would drive west. The sun wouldn't get in his eyes; he would put something moody in his stereo. Maybe he would even have some company.

For the next few hours Byron jammed. Ring, ching, ding. He didn't know why it was such a busy night, but he liked it that way. He sent old Matty for prices, while he authorized checks and handed out books of stamps, but he reserved space in his brain for going over the scene at the Giddy-Up. Gloria hadn't been protecting Marilyn from him, had she? No way. Byron was a good egg in her eyes—she'd even said just that once. He looked up at the clock. Closing time was not far off. Peering out the front windows, he noticed the cruiser was still parked where it had been a couple hours before.

The phone rang and Byron dug up his cheery, professional voice. "Good Evening, the Super Queen. Byron Dunkirk speaking."

"Hi, honey, you done my shopping yet?" His mom asked.

Byron carded a kid who looked younger than he did. The kid wasn't from Granite, but one of the neighboring towns: Lindyville or Marshall. Byron knew the scam.

"I need to add something to the list." She sounded tired.

Byron shook his head at the kid, who protested with a hand on his hip. Byron shook his head again and pretended to look around for his supervisor to show him the fake I.D. The kid kicked the check-out stand, grabbed his I.D., and left. Byron was silent, digging in his pockets for his mom's grocery list when Chicky showed up at the register, drinking a Coke. Byron mouthed the word, "mom."

"You've got my list, don't you?" He could hear that she was pacing—her big clogs clunking the floor. A made-for-TV movie blared in the background; Byron could

tell by the bad music. His mom watched them like crazy now; she said she liked seeing people in bad situations because they made her own seem bearable.

"Yep, yep. What else can I get for you, Mother Dearest?"

Chicky tore open a bag of potato chips with his teeth.

"Cool it, charmer," his mom said. "Add two pints of vanilla ice cream for the cake."

"Cake?"

She sighed. "You know it's your father's birthday tomorrow."

Byron had forgotten and now he dreaded the visit even more. How could he look his father in the eye and say nothing was new?

"Jesus Christ, of course, mom. I was just thinking...ice cream cake? It'll melt on the way there."

Chicky distracted Byron with his I'm-ready-to-party outfit, a fancy wide-collared shirt, perfectly slicked-back hair, and black spit-shined shoes. Byron's t-shirt and jeans sat in his bag, twice worn. He knew he would have to think about fashion at some point, but his plan was to examine what went for style in 'Frisco before buying anything new; same with his haircut, he decided. Upon first impression, it might appear that Chicky was the one dying to get out of Granite, but Byron never forgot how he'd once said: "I'm the odd cat of Granite; in 'Frisco, I'd be wallpaper."

"Byron, are you listening? You know it's his favorite."

"Right. Okay. Gotta get back to work."

"Byron, do I need to remind you to drop the groceries back home before you go out tonight?"

"No."

"Good," she said and hung up.

Chicky offered him a chip.

"You pay for those, swinger?" Byron asked, searching his pockets a second time for the list.

"Are you kidding me? Chips and a Coke, man. The Super System owes you! And you owe me!" Chicky said. "So? Tell me!"

"Oh, you were right. Total audiophonic authority!"

"Would I steer you wrong?" Chicky spanked his knapsack. "I'm packing major tunes for the River. Lemme get a preview." He held out his hand; grease and flecks of chips glistened in the fluorescent light.

Byron fingered the face plate in his back pocket. "I've got a better idea. If we wanna get outta here on time..." Byron wrote down what he could recall of his mom's list and thrust it at Chicky who picked a piece of food out of his teeth. After a second, he grabbed the list and wandered down the center aisle.

"And not the cheap ice cream!" Byron yelled after him.

As they walked to the car, Byron was half-listening to Chicky's latest enterprising idea: something involving the Internet and fake merchandise. He noticed that the Sheriff's cruiser was gone, but what could he do about it now? The Giddy-Up was still jumping, but could he really walk in there again? They got in the car and Byron pointed it toward Yuba River Road, ten miles outside of town, and as far as they knew, still a safe place to party. Byron was not looking forward to another night of drinking and trying to keep Randy and anyone else who could be talked into it from swimming against the current. He was afraid also that word would get out about his stereo and soon he'd have loads of wasted kids crawling in and out of his car with their muddy feet.

And then, like Byron had willed it to happen, Tuesday was five feet away, crossing in front of his car. She was in her Giddy-Up uniform. Instead of the boots,

she wore sneakers. Byron honked and she jumped and then quickly moved to the other side of the road.

Chicky interrupted himself to yell: "What are you doing?" He looked confused. "Dude, do you know who that is? That's Rogers' daughter!"

"You know already, too?" Byron said, slapping the steering wheel. He watched her and then quickly checked for the cruiser.

Chicky stared at him, like he didn't recognize his friend.

"So what?" Byron pushed Chicky with the heel of his hand. "Let's invite her!"

"You're nuts!" Chicky said. "She's way hot, but her dad's a fuckin' cop, and you're a punk-ass drug dealer's son and I'm... Whatever! Step on it!"

Byron yelled out the window. "Hey, Marilyn. What are you doing tonight?"

"Are you crazy?!" Chicky whined, smacking Byron on the arm.

Marilyn turned and came forward a little, smiling. Her face was open, excited.

"You again! I was wondering who that was," she said, bending in toward the car. "And you." She looked at Chicky. "You're Chicky, right?"

Chicky shook his head.

"Don't worry about him," Byron said. "He's not feelin' too good tonight." He turned back toward her and smelled that smell again. It was like incense. "Uh... if you're not doing anything, maybe come down to the River. It's a real local's hangout, but..."

Marilyn dusted her nose with the tail-end of her braid. While her eyes wandered above the car, she nodded slightly. "And what does a local do there when a local hangs out?"

Byron could feel Chicky's eyes on him, but he didn't dare turn around. At any moment, he expected him to takeoff and slam the car door.

"A local hangs out by..." Byron just couldn't say. He just wasn't sure what she would think.

"Does a local, by any chance, hang out and drink beer?" Marilyn asked, twisting her braid around her finger.

"Sure do! Does, I mean..." Byron blurted out.

"Oh, man!" Chicky sighed.

Marilyn's eyes grew big and she jumped up and down. "I am there, boys. Just tell me where!"

Byron started to draw a map, but she said she had a superb memory for directions. When she walked away Byron turned to Chicky for a high-five.

Chicky's arms were folded. He was staring straight ahead and spoke very slowly. "You've sold us, man. And all for some pussy." He faced Byron and in the dark his perfect hair looked like a helmet. "How do you know she's not gonna tell her daddy everything?" He swung his shoulders from side to side and put on a girlish voice: "'I'm superb with directions.' Well, I'll just bet she is and her daddy, too. Do you know how fucked up this is?"

"What are you talking about? Chill out. She's cool. I can tell," Byron said, thinking Chicky just didn't get it—he and Marilyn were already friends.

Byron parked away from the other cars under some trees. At times like these he was glad he had waited for the black Mustang to come in—it was more easily hidden. When Byron turned off the engine, he heard Randy's voice echo up from the River.

"Drive this puppy in!" Chicky urged. "We're under oath, man. I told 'em we'd be packin' tunes."

"Nope. Not interested," Byron said, adjusting things, checking himself out in the mirror.

Chicky crossed his arms. "Not acceptable."

"It's my car," Byron said, leaning on the steering wheel.

"It's my stereo," Chicky said, as he grabbed the face plate, and got out. He ran backwards on his toes in the direction of the River.

"Get back here!" Byron yelled, getting out of the car. He could beat Chicky up for the face plate, but he didn't need to. He let him go. He locked the car.

"You know, I don't ask for much," Chicky yelled, pointing back at him. "A Coke here and there. Maybe a ride once in a while."

He turned away and then back again, his feet spitting gravel and dirt. "You are one stupid, moody mother fucker! You're... you're a traitor! If Rogers finds his way down here...!"

Byron leaned against his car. He cupped one ear to make out the current better, but he could hear only voices. The sky was clear, moonless, and packed with stars. He knew from Astronomy class that the light reaching him was light that had already happened. It had hurt his brain to grasp that fact, but now it occurred to him more plainly: he was staring at the past, and he did it every single day, and the longer he stayed in Granite, the more he would do it. He laughed at that weirdness, but felt smart for seeing it that way, and made a mental note to tell Marilyn. Because, really, who else in his life could understand something like that?

When her car pulled up, he liked that her headlights revealed him contemplating the stars. She left them on and walked toward him. When she got close enough to touch, he had to hold himself back from putting his arms around her and pulling her in.

She had changed out of her uniform. Her thick brown hair fell heavy on her shoulders, and was wavy where her braid had been. She was wearing jeans and a pair of those Birkenstock sandals. Her toes were painted. Her Mexican shirt had

flowers sewn around the neck and he wondered if he would be able to see through the thin cloth. She wore a gold necklace and he took a deep breath to inhale her.

"You found it," he said.

She laughed like she had in the Giddy-Up. Big and unexpected. Hearing it again, he realized the effect on him was something he remembered from being a kid, but couldn't place. It made him a little uncomfortable.

"It was three turns!" she said. "After living in New York, this is pie."

"New York City?"

"Right. Grew up there with my mother."

"Granite must seem really small to you."

Laughter shot out of her mouth again.

"Of course it does," she said, nodding and chewing gum. "That's why I just loooove it!" She threw her hands up in the air. "Everyone's a regular wherever they go!"

"Like at the Giddy-Up?"

"Well, of course, there! That place is full of regular and juicy characters." She put her hands on her hips. "And that name just kills me!"

Byron drove his hands into his pockets and fidgeted with some change. "So, your father lets you stay out late?"

"He doesn't know. He's working tonight," she said, her eyes opened wide again and locked, like they had at the Giddy-Up.

"Oh." Byron cleared his throat. "So, how would he feel if he knew you were out... with me? I mean, he..."

"Hmmm..." She ran her fingers through her hair. "Let's not worry about that."

He thought about it. She knew the situation. She was smart—not like the Granite girls who couldn't see how some things affected others. She was going to

Cal, for God's sake. If she said not to worry about it, then it didn't need to be worried about.

"I won't if you won't," he said to her, but her eyes were looking elsewhere.

"Where is everyone?" she asked, knitting her brows.

"Down by the water."

Byron looked in that direction and Marilyn did, too. "Sounds like a party's goin' on!" she said.

"Yup, but I've got a secret place to show you first," Byron ventured and then added, "If you want."

"Really? I love secrets." She squeezed his leg. "Let me just get my bag."

Byron wasn't sure he'd be able to walk, but he was. He grabbed a flashlight from his car. Marilyn seemed happy. She stumbled occasionally and had a funny way of saying things. She was following so close behind him that he could feel her warm breath on his neck and the curves of space her body took up in the night.

"So, your parents are divorced?" Byron asked.

"Ha! They were never even married! Drunken party scene somewhere in Tahoe, circa 1970. My mother kept me because her very Catholic parents threatened to take away her inheritance if she had an abortion. Did I mention very Catholic, very strict and very dull? I wasn't even allowed to meet my dad until I came out here last year for school."

"Sorry," Byron said and then, "This is where the path ends. Be careful. There's tons of poison oak." He offered his arm to her and she fell into him.

"Whoops!" she said, breathless. "Guess I'm a little unaccustomed to the dark."

"We don't have to go fast," Byron said, hearing the sound of beer cans opening. He cleared his throat again. "So, you're going back to Cal in the fall?" he asked.

"Seems you've been doing your homework as well."

"What do you mean?" Byron asked, turning around, even though he thought he knew.

She put her hand on his arm. "You think I don't know about your dad, Byron?" Her voice was soft.

Byron kicked a few rocks. "I figured you knew."

She squeezed his arm. "It's nothing to be ashamed of. We all have something." She touched his face. "You can talk to me about it."

"Thanks," he said, feeling his ability to stand still much longer wane.

He led her to a sandy area surrounded by boulders, overlooking a small, deep eddy. Beams of light swung through the sky. The party was growing in size. He heard driftwood being thrown in a pile. Randy still held the floor, his voice sharp above the current.

"This is it," Byron said. "My favorite spot."

"Wow, it looks deep enough to swim." She went over to the water and put her hand in. "Oh! It's definitely cold, but we're supposed to be brave and stupid at this age, right?"

"I'm not that brave and stupid. You can get hypothermia very easily!"

"Very well. Maybe a drink will entice you! Shine the light over here."

Marilyn bent down and started pulling things out of her bag: a blanket, some plastic glasses, and a bottle. Byron looked over his shoulder, in the direction of the party. He scratched his knee and tried to get used to his quickly beating heart.

She then took his flashlight and moved some sticks and rocks out of the way, making a flat spot for the blanket. He stood there, watching, unsure of what to do.

Then there was a splash and lots of cheering. It seemed too early, but Byron figured Randy was making his way upstream. The cheering turned into hooting and

many voices began chanting Randy's name. He recognized Chicky's voice and that of this girl who was definitely a Linda, but not the one he'd been with. Byron wished they weren't so loud.

"What's he doing?" Marilyn put her hands on her hips.

"Who?"

"What do you mean, who?" She shined the light in his face. "Randy! The guy whose name they're yelling."

"Swimming against the current."

"Really! On a dare?" She turned around toward the noise and shined the light there.

"No, he just does it to see how far upstream he can get."

"That's whacked!" Marilyn said, and slapped her thigh. "That kid is such a specimen. I have got to write that down! Let's go cheer him on!"

"We just got here," Byron said, able to focus on only the most pressing of her comments. If he could just keep her here, he thought things would not get out of hand. Or something like that. He knew, at the very least, he wanted to keep her away from Randy.

Marilyn held the flashlight up in the space between them, creating a tent of light. He could see everything. Her shirt was very thin. She spoke slowly and smiled, "Well, all right, Mr. 'Frisco."

Byron chuckled a little and took the flashlight so she could see to pour. Then she held her cup up to his for a cheer.

"To new friends," she said, and shot the whole thing. She filled her cup again.

"To new friends," Byron replied, copying her. The alcohol bit him at first, and he coughed, but as it spread on his tongue, it was good and kind of smoky. "What is it?"

"Some stuff from daddy's bourbon stash," she grinned, and raised the bottle to pour him another. "A nearly full bottle! But not for long!"

He accepted more and for an instant wondered how she held her liquor. If she was anything like that Linda girl down by the fire, she'd be puking pretty soon. But, no, he didn't really think she was anything like that Linda girl. He sat down against a log and she came down next to him, the smell of incense and bourbon now trapped between them. Sitting there, he felt like they had settled down; she seemed happy to stay as she rearranged her bag and slipped off her sandals.

"So, you must be pretty smart," Byron said. "To get into Cal."

"Smart?" she asked, backing away.

"Well, yeah..."

"Smart?! I'm fucking brilliant!" she yelled, and splashed a little scotch on her shirt. "I've even been told I am IN-TIM-I-DAT-ING."

Marilyn shot out a laugh and moved her body closer to his. Byron responded with a chuckle and put his arm around her, and then almost removed it. If she noticed how much he wanted her, she had to understand that it wasn't intentional; it was just what happened to guys his age. They could ignore it and talk about other things quite easily.

"I just want you to be warm enough," he said.

"I see," she said, turning a little in his arm, her lips wet. "Where do you small town boys learn your chivalry?"

Byron wasn't sure what to say, and he tried to keep his mind off kissing her. He smelled the driftwood burning, but could not yet see any smoke.

"Because those guys at the Giddy-Up are just the same as you. She pressed her free hand to her chest. "To me, anyway."

She threw her hair back and rubbed her neck. "I wish I didn't get that special treatment, though. I can't get anything firsthand that way, you know. Plus, I looove getting my ass pinched!"

"Cut it out," Byron said, finally thinking he understood her brand of humor.

"No, seriously. That shit doesn't happen at Cal. Everyone's so concerned with being *politically correct*. It's stifling! Up here, people are just like animals—they do what comes naturally. I love it! I'm taking notes like crazy. Gotta write down that thing down about swimming against the current. That is so small-town fun, don't you think? I mean can you imagine people doing that in 'Frisco?"

She finished what was in her cup and poured herself some more. "I'm a terrible waitress, though. I started just a few days ago and I've already broken three plates—once because I dumped a full breakfast on some trucker's lap. He didn't act like he minded, of course. He was probably getting a good look down my shirt as I cleaned up his eggs!"

Byron realized she was serious. She really liked the Giddy-Up and she hadn't even mentioned the great tips. It all seemed kind of weird. What would her father say if he heard her talking that way?

"Enough about me. Let's hear about your life as a small-town boy. What makes Byron tick?" She pointed at him and finished her scotch. "You know, ever since you told me about your dreams, I've been thinking...."

"Yeah?"

"I've been thinking, Byron Dunkirk, you have an incredible story to tell!"

"What?"

"Oh, Byron, see. That's what's great. You aren't even aware of the jewel you're sitting on. That naiveté is golden. Of course it would take someone else to point it out to you! But, my dear, you are living the classic: *Is There a Way Out of My Narrow Life?* story." She got within an inch of his face. "Did you know that?"

"No."

"If it were my life, I would have hit the computer yesterday! Especially with this memoir craze the way it is! Do you know what some people would give to have a story like yours to tell: A bright, small-town boy wants to get out of dodge and make a new life for himself in the big city? His dad's in jail at the hand of the Sheriff for dealing dr— and... oh my god..." She sat up. "Get this... at the hand of the Sheriff whose daughter he cannot help but be attracted to!" She faced him. "It's like it's already written! Don't you see?"

He gulped down some scotch and gagged a little. "Um. I've been thinking about taking some writing classes."

"Well, that's good, Byron, but I think this needs get written NOW." She poured herself more whiskey, shot it, and then offered him some. "I've got it! I'll write it. I'm doing this other article for school anyway, so—"

"About what?"

"Life in a small town," she said.

"But you grew up in New York City."

"What does that have to do with it? I'm a writer," Marilyn hissed. "You just have to observe. It's easy! Now, keep up, partner," she said and pointed to his glass.

"Your father isn't going to wonder where his bottle is at, is he?" Byron asked, as she filled his cup. She shook her head no.

He was half-listening to her impressions of his small town life and half not when he heard the drumbeat sound of a few failed fireworks. He knew that soon some would succeed. He sat up. He remembered his mom's groceries in the back of his car. He remembered the ice cream and his dad. He hadn't even bought him a birthday present. The last few years he'd treated his father to a day at the county fair, which was coming up in a few weeks. They'd go to the 4-H pig competitions, shoot targets, and eat a lot of fried dough. This year there would be no reason to go.

"...but, seriously, I mean, if you stayed, would you like end up marrying a second cousin or something? Looks like that was the only choice for some, if you know what I'm sayin'..."

And then some fireworks did succeed. Huge blasts of red, white, and blue exploded above the River.

"Holy shit!" Marilyn yelled, sitting up. "This is the best!"

She turned him then, her eyes wide and a rollercoaster-ride-type look on her face. She tossed her cup over her shoulder and knocked his away. Then she threw herself on top of him and stuck her tongue in his mouth. She kissed him fast and awkward. She pushed him down. Her hair brushed against his skin. Her lips, her nipples, the small bones of her fingers, the skin below her neck were all against him. He couldn't keep up.

"Wait," Byron tried. "Can't we—"

But she wanted to go all the way. Right there. Her hand was on his zipper. He hadn't told her anything, except that he wanted to get out of Granite. Now, he wondered if she'd known all along. Not like someone had told her, but like she'd just guessed it because his life couldn't possibly play out any other way. She probably had a little page in a notebook for every person she'd met in Granite. Nice Gloria had a page, just as easily as Randy did. Byron wondered what his page said, but then realized he didn't care.

Marilyn's hand was in his pants now; Byron pushed her away and sat up.

"What the hell?" she slurred.

He zipped up his pants. "You can't have everything, Marilyn."

"Huh?" She rolled onto her back and tried to support herself on her elbows. She blew the hair off her face.

He grabbed her arm and looked into her eyes. "Tell me you can get home without wrapping yourself around a tree."

She dropped her head back and let out that laugh. "Where are you going!?"

Byron stood up, straightened his clothes, and brushed himself off. He looked toward the River and found Randy walking toward them.

"Well, well, well... what's this?" His voice made Byron feel the nasty edges of the bourbon.

"Randy!" Marilyn sang.

He was dripping with river water. His t-shirt clung to his gut and his hair stood in clumps, like a wet dog's. Purple and red fireworks burst behind him.

Byron had never been so glad to see him. He laid a hand on Randy's shoulder. "She's all yours."

Randy flinched at Byron's touch and backed away.

"What the fuck?"

"And Marilyn, here's your story," Byron said, and presented him like Vanna White might.

"Byron, c'mon back!" She motioned with her finger. "Where are you going?"

He stared at her, and then said, "Frisco. Remember?"

When he heard the blast of her laugh, he closed his eyes and finally remembered the Jack-in-the-Box he was given as a birthday present when he was a kid. He cried when his dad turned the crank and the scary clown exploded out of the box. They had to give the toy away.

Byron shook his head and then started running. He ran at full speed until he got to his car. The bonfire had gotten so big, he thought he could feel the heat and it made him dizzy. Bracing himself against his bumper, he puked up the bourbon. He waited there, for another wave of nausea to hit, when another series of fireworks rifled through the sky. He quickly unlocked his car and then remembered that Chicky had stolen his face plate. It would be stupid to go beat him up for it now. Byron got in and spun around on the gravel. He was not so crazed that he didn't notice the

car's magnificent control. In his rear view mirror, he saw more fireworks and wished he had his stereo to drown out the blasts.

When he saw the Sheriff's cruiser on the road coming out of the trees, he was relieved he hadn't told Marilyn his thought about the light of the stars and the past and all that because she would probably have found a way to ruin that, too.