

Coffee, Shopping, Murder, Love

a novel

Carlos Allende



Coffee, Shopping, Murder, Love
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En Guise de Prologue

Traumatic incident from my childhood number forty-two—when I am as sad as I am now, I tend to reflect on the reasons for my failure: Mr. Oatley, my music professor, flinching as if he had just been cut open with a samurai sword at my attempts to reach a high note . . .

I cannot sing. I know that now. Why, I sound vicious when I speak: a really deep vocal fry that soon transforms into a wailing crescendo. When I sing, I sound as if a drunken harpy had married a southern gentleman—which is not far from the truth, Aunt Gaynelle has always referred to my mother as a drunken harpy because my mother, well, she likes her hooch, and she isn't always the kindest, while my father has a drawl so thick you could cut it with a knife and make yourself a sandwich. It makes you want to turn on the subtitles. But anyway, I digress. Where was I? Oh yes, sunk in the depths of despair, wearing these fabulous camo pants and these hyper-chic hiking boots from Salomon Quest (50 percent off at Neiman Marcus), but also without a lamp, on a very dark night, lost in the Mexican desert, wishing that I had never crossed paths with Jignesh, that I had never fallen in love with his wealth and with his ravishing South Asian skin color, then agreed to become his accomplice, and remembering, right after failure number forty-one—calling Mr. Connelly “daddy” in fourth grade—of the time when Mr. Oatley, that awful, awful, horrible, terrible old man, winced as if an eagle had been eating his entrails at my attempt to sing *Der Hölle Rache* so that I could be chosen for the school chorus . . .

You would have thought that by the tender age of ten-and-a-half winters, having been called a fag since pretty much my first day at preschool, my self-esteem would have already developed a thick callus. Well, it hadn't. It hurt seeing him shudder. It hurt seeing my music professor dismiss me as if I had been some importunate beggar instead of a little girlie boy full of enthusiasm, dreaming of one day becoming the next Kate Bush . . . Mr. Oatley's rejection should have prevented me from ending my act with a swirl, but I was already in character. I forgot that half my classmates had relatives in the Ku Klux Klan . . . *Ouch!* I keep bumping into these stupid cactuses . . . *Sweet, Southern, baby Jesus*, I cry. Will this be my demise? Will I die of hunger and thirst, alone, or will a rattlesnake bite me first and put me out of my misery . . . ?

No, I should have neither spun nor attempted a gymnastic curtsy, but after a whole two weeks wondering what should I sing so that my peers would be so impressed that they would stop spitting on my food in the cafeteria, and a full hour of really practicing, I couldn't just drop the invisible gown from the Queen of the Night to the floor, stick my tongue out, and scratch the back of my head like Tommy did when he too was rejected. He looked incredibly manly, yes, but I had to do my swirl. It was part of the act. It was necessary . . . Oy, talking about what's essential, I think that Charlie—that would be me, Charlie Hayworth, from Leitchfield, Kentucky, at your service; I tried to go by Chuck in seventh grade, but it didn't go well. Boys didn't like it—I think that Charlie should stop here and take a rest. These boots are fabulous, but they aren't really my size. My feet hurt a little. Where would be a safe place to stop and die of infinite sadness?

Traumatic incident number fifty-six, I reminisce, snuggling my head on the sand: being shoved into the girls' room and once there, getting punched unconscious by Samantha Hogg . . . You would think that self-loathing doesn't help, but it actually does. Ask any gay person. It is as if, when you're terribly sad and disheartened, as I am right now, waiting to die, lost and forgotten, betrayed by the man whom you hoped would

pull you out of poverty, something inside your own body soothes you. The more you feel sorry for yourself, the better it feels. There's beauty in sadness. Why else would we keep watching reruns of *Old Yeller*? It must have something to do with the chemicals in your brain. Self-pity is addictive.

Six months earlier . . .

Murder

I'm looking at Charlie's texts, still labeled as "unread" on my iPhone. *How's your Sunday going, Jignesh? Any plans?*

For God's sake. Our date was on Monday. If I haven't responded to your many texts in six days, I think, taking a slurp from my Frappuccino, it must be pretty clear that my future plans don't include you, Mr. Charlie Hayworth.

Here comes another one. *Let's meet again soon . . .*

I'm tempted to reply with a *STOP! PLEASE STOP BEFORE I KILL YOU!* but I'm afraid that acknowledging receipt will only encourage Charlie to text even more. He knows I'm alive. I made the mistake of accepting his Facebook friend request a minute before meeting him in person, and now he can track all my movements. I'm tracking his at this very moment . . . Good God . . . The things he posts . . . A video of Geena Davis's Oscar acceptance speech for *The Accidental Tourist* . . . A meme mocking Romney's attacks on PBS—I'll share that, we cannot lose this election—then another one of praise to Malala . . . I mean, as a full-figured gay man of color, I am a confirmed feminist. I know what women and members of minorities go through. I know of the abuse, the rage, and the injustice. I know what it is like to be judged and ignored. But just look at those fucking eyebrows. No wonder the Taliban wanted to kill her.

Charlie's selling a freezer too . . . Almost new, I scroll down . . . \$650.

That's not a bad price, but I have no use for a freezer that size. I haven't killed anyone yet, I giggle.

I thought I had fallen in love with the little white boy from Kentucky, I sigh, looking out the window. I honestly did. Charlie had a nice little ass framed in a miniature swimmer's body. Blue eyes, a turned-up nose. I thought of putting him in my pocket, that cute he was—but his voice, dear Jesus! An ultra-feminine southern drawl with an insufferable nasal timbre. *Is Fran Drescher here?* I turned around, looking for the hidden camera. He starts really slow, but then gains speed and applies to his discourse a rather unsettling crescendo, full of highs and lows, and gasping and crying and sudden snorting, which make him sound as if he were either possessed or having a seizure. Charlie's aware of how bad he sounds and apologized a few times. As a matter of fact, he apologized every time he lifted his fork.

Anyway, that's all in the past. I toss my empty Frappuccino cup into the trash bin. Artists as sensible and well educated as I am have no time to lose looking for sex online. I have decided to delete my Grindr profile and remove myself indefinitely from the dating pool. Let's be honest. Middle-aged Indian fatties like me don't attract the best male exemplars of the species. Therefore Charlie. Even he couldn't hide a grimace of surprise when he saw me enter the coffee shop instead of the airbrushed and much slimmer version of me that I sent him . . . Now, winsome Celt women with a wispy mane of red hair like Princess Salmonella McFallog? They do. They attract the best male exemplars of the species. She's the heroine of my latest fantasy novel: *Catacombs of the Shining Fear*. I wrote the prologue last night and decided to come to the office this morning to write in peace the first chapter. Typical of every Sunday, my brother brought over his horrendous family to visit our parents. One cannot write in a house full of gaudy Indians, especially a *Highlands* epic like Princess Salmonella's . . . I'm so in love with her already! I reach for the cup I just tossed so that I can chew on the ice. Who wouldn't be? Who wouldn't love Salmonella? She smells of moss and wild berries.

She rides horses, has impressive archery skills, a golden pistol that she received from a visitor from the future, and—

“What are you doing here?”

I turn around, instinctively taking a hand to my chest. Nina is standing by the front door, downstairs, carrying an oversized backpack that makes her twig-like figure seem about to fracture. She’s looking at me, sitting at my desk on the mezzanine, as if she had just discovered a turd floating inside a public toilet.

“What are *you* doing here?” I ask back.

It is Sunday, for God’s sake. Nina’s internship ended on Friday.

“I thought you had already left Los Angeles,” I say. “Forever.”

She had a farewell luncheon and all, the little bitch. Everyone brought her a present. Everyone, including Mike, our stupid boss. Everyone commented on how sad it was that our “best intern” was leaving. She said she would be going down surfing in Baja for a couple of weeks before going back to Germany. Everyone rushed to give her advice and warn her about how dangerous Tijuana is. Friday marked my eighth anniversary here as well. I am the Chief Financial Officer at this shitty vacation rentals company, for God’s sake. Well, more of a glorified bookkeeper and assistant to whatever fuckery Mike devises. Still . . . no one remembered!

“I came to print my train ticket,” Nina replies, dropping her bag on the floor.

“Don’t you have a printer at home?” I ask.

She shakes her head.

“Well, you are no longer an intern here,” I continue. “I’m afraid you cannot just come and use the company’s resources. Go to a Kinko’s.”

Nina gives me the middle finger and walks under the mezzanine toward the end of the office.

The nerve. So much changed in four months. From attentive little helper to aggressive cuntty witch.

“Print if you must,” I say, raising my voice, “but mind that I have important work to do too. Don’t interrupt me.”

Nina doesn't answer. I hear her start a computer . . . So fucking distracting. I heave a sigh, then return to my writing.

Princess Salmonella looked at the Roman mercenary feeling a vivid rage run through her flawlessly boned spine all the way to her head crowned with the wavy, red curls. She hated that man. That Roman soldier with thick, toned arms and incredibly dark eyebrows was the reason her father had lost his kingdom—

I hear Nina turn on the printer . . . My God. It is so vexing. Okay. Relax, Jignesh. Be divine. Don't forget you're basically a Jedi. She'll be gone soon. You're an artist.

'I thought you were dead, Princess,' said Claudius Julius taking a strand of Salmonella's hair. Salmonella pulled back, defiantly. Her eyes shone with the intensity of hot fire coming from a volcano—

A sudden snort interrupts me. What is that twat downstairs laughing about? Deep sigh. Keep on, Jignesh. Just ignore her.

'You Roman pig,' Salmonella spat on Claudius Julius's face.

Oy. Is it too early to start with bodily fluids?

Another snort from Nina.

"What's so funny?" I ask, raising my voice.

No answer. Okay, just relax, Jignesh. Don't let that German witch twitch your creativity . . . Every straight man lost his head over Nina. I never thought she was that pretty. She's only young. Who isn't beautiful at that age? I bet she's just another malnourished girl back in Germany . . .

'I'd sooner die than let a Roman pig touch me!' Salmonella pulled out a silver dagger encrusted with red emeralds that she kept hidden inside her tunic.

My, this is good! This is incredibly well written. I may need to raise the age group of my audience, however. This is turning into fine erotica . . . Poor Salmonella. How can one hate and want a man at the same time so badly? She's falling in love with Claudius Julius, I can tell. They were supposed to be enemies, but . . . those muscled-up Roman soldiers. Wearing miniskirts in the British Isles. In the middle of winter!

"I know what you're doing."

I turn around. Nina has come up to the mezzanine and is standing next to me with a sheaf of papers.

I cover the screen with my hands. "I beg your pardon?"

"You've been stealing company resources."

"Pardon me?" I manage to turn off the monitor.

"I am going to show this to Mike," she holds up the sheaf of papers.

Oh, shit. What is she holding? What does she know? I must have left something in the printer. Something incriminating . . . Miguel Hildago's receipts! Is that what she's holding? Miguel is my little Mexican hero. An expensive handyman, but worth every penny. He fixes problems before they're even reported. He fixes problems that never existed at all! Our homeowners love him. I love him too. He's cheap, sends his invoices via email, and gets paid whenever I have the time. If he existed, I'd marry him. He doesn't. Therefore, it is me who has to cash all his checks . . .

Nina must have found the receipts. I must have left them in the printer's queue, and they must have come up when she turned it on. I need a glass of water . . . I need air! She knows I've been stealing!

"I don't know what you mean," I manage to calm myself and laugh defiantly.

I've always been a wonderful actor.

"You know what I mean, you fatso."

It cannot be that much. Can it? Those receipts weren't even a hundred dollars. But if Mike learns they're fake, he may then want to check all of the others . . . Why do I worry? Mike doesn't even know how to turn on a computer. Then again, he may ask the accountant to check . . . How much has it been this month? Six hundred? More like sixteen hundred. About eight thousand for the year so far. I got a little greedy . . .

"Gimme that!" I leap out of my chair, trying to snatch the sheaf of papers.

"*Nein!*" Nina laughs, pulling back.

"Gimme that, you stupid twat! Gimme those fucking papers!"

"*Nein!*"

Oh, she's laughing now. She's enjoying it. How can she be so beautiful and so heartless? I'll go straight to jail if I get audited!

"Nina, give me those papers."

"No."

She's at the edge of the stairs. I could just push her. It wouldn't be the worst thing I did to her in the last four months . . .

"Nina, I know we have had our differences, but let's be civilized. Give me those papers. They're important."

"No."

I throw my pencil cup at her. She acts surprised. What did she expect? I won't let her ruin me!

"Give me those fucking papers!" I roar in anger.

Nina runs downstairs. I sprint behind her. She trips in the last two steps and falls. I reach for the papers. She resists, but I'm at least a hundred pounds heavier than her and finally snatch them . . . They're not receipts. They're the first pages of *Catacombs of the Shining Fear*. I forgot I had tried to print them earlier. I feel so silly.

"Princess Salmonella?" Nina asks from the floor. "Really?"

Did she read the first pages of my novel? I'm flattered . . . *A reader! At last!*

"Don't you know that Salmonella is a disease?" She continues.

"It's a name, too," I reply.

Nina tries to stand up. She can't. *Crap*. I pushed the intern down the stairs . . . No, I didn't push her. She fell . . . While I was chasing her. But she's not an intern anymore. Can she sue us?

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"I hurt my wrist, you asshole."

"I'm terribly sorry this happened."

"You're a paranoid idiot."

"You threatened to show it to Mike."

"So that he learns that you're wasting company paper."

"You came to print personal stuff, too," I remind her about her train

ticket. “And besides, you shouldn’t have read what was obviously not meant for you. It is a first draft. I’m sure it must have a few typos.”

“A few typos?” She laughs. “This is *Scheiße*.”

“What would you know about first-class literature?” I laugh.

“More than you do. Justin lent me one of your books—”

Justin lent her one of my books? Now I’m confused. Justin knows that I write? Justin, as in my worst enemy? Justin, the guy who refers to me as a “she,” the guy who photoshopped my face in a bukkake and posted it in the laundry room so that the cleaners could see it?

“—and it’s embarrassing.” Nina continues. “Your book was so bad, I almost felt sorry for you.”

“Justin bought one of my books?”

Three of my self-published novels are for sale on Amazon. *Princess of a Lesser Kind* has sold four copies.

“He bought all of them!” Nina replies.

All of them? Including *The Sky Beyond Tomorrow*? My heart starts beating fast. I’m baffled. *Justin?* As in Justin *Fuck-that-shit* Kettler? I thought that he hated me. He’s so arrogant and unpleasant . . . Could he be secretly in love with me? Oh, had I only known . . . Justin looks as if the Marlboro Man had used moisturizer. Tall. White. Twenty-nine. He looks twenty-seven. Maybe now that he knows my soul, he regrets the way he has been treating me . . . I must confess that Justin’s brown curls and his intriguing blue eyes inspired Julius Claudius. He inspired me to create Al’Kzum too, the rogue and sexy criminal from planet Argentaria in *The Sky Beyond Tomorrow, Book 1* in the *Beyond Tomorrow* series . . . Justin inspired all of the sexy and terribly mean villains in my books . . . and I am princess Salmonella!

“He never told me he loved my books.” I finally say, with a gasp. “I could have signed his copies.”

Nina starts laughing again. “He bought them as a joke!”

“*What?* Liar! He could have not disliked them.”

“*Mein Gott*, Jignesh. You are as fat as you are arrogant and stupid.

What you write is shit. *Scheiße*. Nobody in his right mind would like your writing. It's fucking crap. You're nothing but a pretentious elephant dreaming of becoming a princess. You're a loser, Jignesh, that's what you are. A fucking loser."

Okay. I may have been making Nina's life miserable for the last four months, continually breaking the coffee pot and forcing her to go buy coffees for everyone, never reimbursing her on time, messing up the files she had been working on. I may have led my beautiful Clara and that shoddy corn girl, Gabrielle, to believe that Nina had caught an STD that one time she called in sick. "Nothing too serious," I said, "but she's on antibiotics." And probably it wasn't too nice either when I asked Nina to trim a ream of legal paper that I had bought "by mistake," into letter size, and she had to use scissors because I hid the paper cutter. Still, she doesn't need to be this cruel. I know I'm fat. I've been fat all of my life. I am reminded I am fat every day by the continuous look of disapproval from random strangers; by the kind words of advice from baristas that recommend me buying a fruit cup instead of a scone; by the men I dare to contact online, who aren't kind at all, and by my parents and siblings, who think that they're doing me a favor when they say that no woman will ever want to marry a man my size. As if. And I know I'm not popular. I've got more than my fair share of shame to remind me.

I know, however, that I'm a terrific writer. Nina cannot take that from me.

"You are jealous," I say, turning away to hide my tears. "You are jealous because I write, and you don't. You are jealous because I have talent and imagination. You are jealous because you're a skinny German witch with no tits and bad taste, and I am a true artist. Justin must have liked my books. I am sure he adored them."

For a second, silence. Then Nina starts laughing again. Not a forced, bitter laugh, not the one you would expect from a villain lying on the floor, defeated, but actual crystalline, girlie laughter, the innocent laughter of someone who's still a child—and a goddess. Even I find this despi-

cable German witch charming. Her eyes are so blue, the skin is so even. Nina could be a model for a Pre-Raphaelite painting. And I am a fraud. I am not an artist. I am not a princess.

Nina is.

Nina is Queen Salmonella.

She's also every person that has ever mocked me, I realize, feeling the lower part of my body suddenly get cold while my face and chest are burning. She's every girl that ever made me feel unwanted. Every bully that ever smacked the back of my head, every white person who made fun of my name, my size, my nationality, and my skin color . . .

"And you're also a faggot," Nina insists. "A morbidly obese and pretentious fucking faggot. You should do the world a favor and kill yourself. Everyone hates you."

I sit on her face.

She beats me. I press harder. She kicks with her knees. She pinches my butt. She tries to bite me. I push harder. I stay on top of her, with my two-hundred and forty-five pounds of queer Indian fat, until Nina stops breathing.

Freezer

Well, Charlie, it is Sunday. Maybe it is time you accept it. Jignesh won't be replying to any of your texts.

Not that I wanted to see him again. As I told my friend Lucille—Lucille is my best friend and *confidente*. Ever since that year that we spent together in France in our early twenties, learning the language of Marguerite Duras and surviving on cheese and tetra-pack wine from the Super U on the *Rue des Hautes Marchés*, *nous avons été inséparables*—As I told Lucille, I didn't find Jignesh that attractive. Actually, I referred to him, and I read now, from my phone, as a *pompous sea monster from the depths of the Indian Ocean*.

Typical of her, Lucille texted back with a *you ruined it again, Charlie!*

I called her immediately and explained to her that no, that I didn't ruin it, that *Jignesh was a fucking whale*—I'm reading again—at least *fifteen years older than he had said he was and not at all like his picture hinted*. She asked me whether I had remembered to put a five-minute timer on my phone so that I would give others a chance to talk too, as she had recommended. I replied that I did set the alarm. Lucille didn't believe me. I finally confessed that I had forgotten. That led to one of Lucille's obnoxious harangues about my prolixity, a harangue that I had to swallow in its entirety and take notes on, for how could I argue with a woman who managed to trap a gorgeous biracial man like Marco, her husband, a man who works for SpaceX and drives a Lexus? But anyway, I digress . . . Lucille has a master's degree and, therefore, she can be a very difficult

person. I don't even know why we are still friends. She's such a bitch. Anyway, the thing is that I find it extremely impolite that Jignesh hasn't texted back yet. And I know he's alive because I've been following his every move on social media.

Maybe I should text him again, just to be courteous. I've only texted him twice since our date . . . Well, no. More like forty-seven times, I see. It doesn't matter, my parents didn't raise an apple knocker.

Let's meet again soon, I type. As in never, of course, I'm not a masochist.

I thought he had money. Not that money is important to me, I am by no means a gold-digger. However, I am twenty-two thousand dollars in credit card debt, still five years away from paying off my student loans, twenty-five years away from paying off my underwater mortgage, and in a dead-end job making ten dollars an hour plus commissions at a call center. I thought that an Indian American working in finance would be a step up from my long list of romantic involvements with the down-on-their-luck men I meet at the gas station . . . I'm only kidding, I stopped doing that since I moved to the City of Angels, where you can pick up college graduates at museums. Anyway, I'm utterly broke, and I need to come up with \$950 by the end of the month to pay my mortgage.

I serve myself a glass of Cinzano. I haven't had breakfast yet, but I need it . . . If only I liked pale skin. My chances to marry well would be better. My mother would be so happy. She's always been a tad racist. "My little Nancy-boy," she would say, clapping her hands and making her arms jiggle. "Dating a white southern Baptist with money . . . And he votes Republican!"

Not that I would like to see that vain hippopotamus from the Ganges ever again, I take a sip from my glass. Still, Jignesh could at least have sent me a text, something along the line of "I had a fantastic time. Thank you." We both would have known it didn't mean we had to repeat it. It is an unwritten code of gay chivalry. You write back to say thanks for a lovely evening, whether you had intercourse or not, but especially if you didn't, then block your failed hookup from your phone. Forever. Or you

remain friends. I stay friends with all of my previous dates . . . Well, no, I chuckle, taking another sip. Sooner or later, they all threaten a restraining order if I don't stop texting.

The only person who texted me today was Kurt, my ex-roommate. He sent a picture.

Sup, Charlie?

That jackass. His girlfriend looks lovely, though. She reminds me of Melanie from *Jackie Brown*. I hope she doesn't get shot in the parking lot of a Macy's.

Kurt left me with three months of unpaid cable bills.

"But Charlie," he cried. "I need Showtime!"

"Kurt," I remember I said in my calmer voice, the one I reserve for rational conversations with highly emotional people, "we can order *Nurse Jackie* DVDs through Netflix."

"But the mail takes too long! And they never have the latest season!"

Well, probably the one who cried for *Nurse Jackie* DVDs was me. Kurt is quite manly. He would never cry. He probably burped his response to my hysterical claims that we couldn't afford to continue paying for cable, then blew out some air forcing me to smell what he had eaten for breakfast.

I shouldn't have given him back his deposit. I shouldn't have fallen in love with his perfectly round, straight ass either. The tattoos on his big, bulging arms and the waxed mustache were a clear sign that he wasn't honest. During that first interview, four months ago, when I asked him what he did for a living, and Kurt said that he worked the register at the Wienerschnitzel in Ladera Heights, I shouldn't have replied: "You do? How intriguing!"

No, I shouldn't have opened the doors of my fabulous two-bedroom, 950-square-foot craftsman in West Adams to that half-black, half-Japanese, one hundred percent stud jughead.

"I don't have AC," I remember I said. "Will that be a problem?"

I had to be honest about that. You cannot begin what promises to be

a long and steady relationship with a man you're dying to fuck backward with lies, can you?

"When it gets too hot, I just strip to my underwear and open the windows," Kurt replied.

My, the vision of this racially ambiguous young man in his tighty-whities opening the fridge on a hot summer day, then turning around to say, "we're out of beer, Charlie," as he scratched his left butt cheek, crossed my mind like the vision of a flying saucer saving humanity must have crossed Ron Hubbard's. The vision of Kurt lying on the couch watching TV, his boxers rolled up on his legs well beyond decency, his hairy chest, the musky scent of his manly armpits filling up the room . . . The vision of Kurt swiping left and right photos of chicks on Tinder while reaching inside his basketball shorts to stretch his penis . . . I didn't interview anyone else. I immediately deleted the ad from Craigslist, forgot about Kurt's credit check application, and begged the Good Lord that he would have enough money to pay a deposit or at least let me give him a blowjob.

It took Kurt two months to pay his half-month deposit, and I never had the opportunity to see him walking around in his underwear, barely a couple of times shirtless.

He never washed a dish. He never cleaned the bathroom. He ate my food, drank my booze, and used all of my beauty products. He's twenty-six and straight, for God's sake. Why in the world would he want to use my *La Mer rejuvenating crème*?

Many a night I spent pressing a pillow against my ears while he had sex with those stiletto-wearing sluts he picked up at the clubs in Hollywood.

The one time I brought home a trick, he dared to judge me.

"You guys are gross."

Still, when he gave notice, my heart bled a little.

"Where are you moving to?" I asked, brushing a tear before he could see it.

“Hermosa. This girl I met has a pad right on the beach. She wants the meat, bro,” Kurt added, grabbing his crotch.

My eyes must have widened like Gary Oldman’s did when he saw the blood on Keanu Reeves’ razor blade in *Dracula*, for he started laughing. “What’s a man going to do?”

I wanted the meat too. I wanted the whole pig, not just the sausage.

In addition to \$350 in unpaid cable bills, Kurt left me a kit to grow marijuana using UV lamps, a box full of pamphlets, and a freezer that weighs a ton and occupies half my garage, which I bought online on a whim because Kurt suggested once that if he and I were going to work out together, I would need to start eating better, and who has the time to cook? He proposed cooking our meals in advance and freezing them. I agreed, thinking that one thing would lead to having showers together.

“Kurt, bro, what d’you think we should have tonight?” I imagined myself saying, drenched in sweat, wearing a band on my head, and my new hyper-expensive shorts from Lululemon. “Boeuf bourguignon or chicken piccata?”

We worked out together just once. Now Kurt is gone, the freezer is empty, and not a single person has replied to the ad I put on Craigslist and that I shared with all of my Facebook friends. I’m only asking \$650 for it, but I’m afraid I’ll need to lower the price a bit if I want to make enough money to pay my mortgage . . .

An hour later, the freezer is sold for \$150. It hurts a little. They’ll pick it up this afternoon. Now I’m only eight hundred dollars short of my mortgage.

I need to clear my mind. Otherwise, I’ll start crying.

I refill my Cinzano. Then, I fetch a bottle of body lotion, open my laptop, and visit Pornhub.com. I type “twelve men orgy in an eccentric European mansion” in the search field. You may not agree with me, but pornography always reduces my tension. Then, before I can choose a video that’ll suit my current mood—intense blue, in case you wonder, blue

as the eyes of Chris Evans in the first *Fantastic Four* movie—the phone rings. The caller ID shows Jignesh’s name.

“Jignesh,” I answer the phone. “What a surprise? How can I help you?”

“I’m calling about the freezer that you’re selling on Facebook.” Jignesh bursts out. “Do you still have it?”

“The freezer?”

I haven’t heard from Jignesh in almost a week, and now he calls asking about the freezer? I scroll down to check some more videos.

“I’m afraid I sold it,” I reply coldly.

“You sold it?” He cries.

My, he sounds desperate.

“I had to, Jignesh. I’m sorry, but no one wrote, so I was forced to lower the price a little. They haven’t picked it up yet, though . . .”

Jarek Fucks Christian . . . This might be worth checking out.

“I’ll take it!” Jignesh replies. “I’ll pay the full price.”

“But I said to this man he could have it.” *Oh, my.* Jarek is a rather big fella.

“I’ll pay nine hundred.”

“Nine hundred? Cash?”

“Check.”

“I cannot take a check, Jignesh, I’m sorry—”

“I’ll bring cash, Charlie, please don’t sell it!”

I apply some body lotion to my hands. The Vaseline brand smells like plastic, not too sensuous. “But this man is picking it up at four.”

“I’ll pay a thousand,” Jignesh insists. “I just need one hour to get the money.”

“Well, in that case . . . I guess I’ll call the other guy and tell him I’m sorry.”

“It’s a big freezer, right?”

“Oh, it’s quite large. Large enough to hold a human body,” I joke.

Sudden silence.

“Jignesh?” I ask. “Are you still there?”

Jignesh replies with a groan. I give him the address, and then we hang up.

Oh, my, *a thousand dollars!* Less than what I originally paid, but still pretty good. I won't be needing Jarek's video anymore, I think, closing my laptop. Then I open it again. Silly me. What else am I going to do on a Sunday morning?

Forty minutes later, Jignesh calls again. He may need an extra hour. He's renting a truck and picking up some guys at Home Depot to load on the freezer.

"Take your time," I say, focused now on cat videos. "As long as you're here before four, it'll be fine."