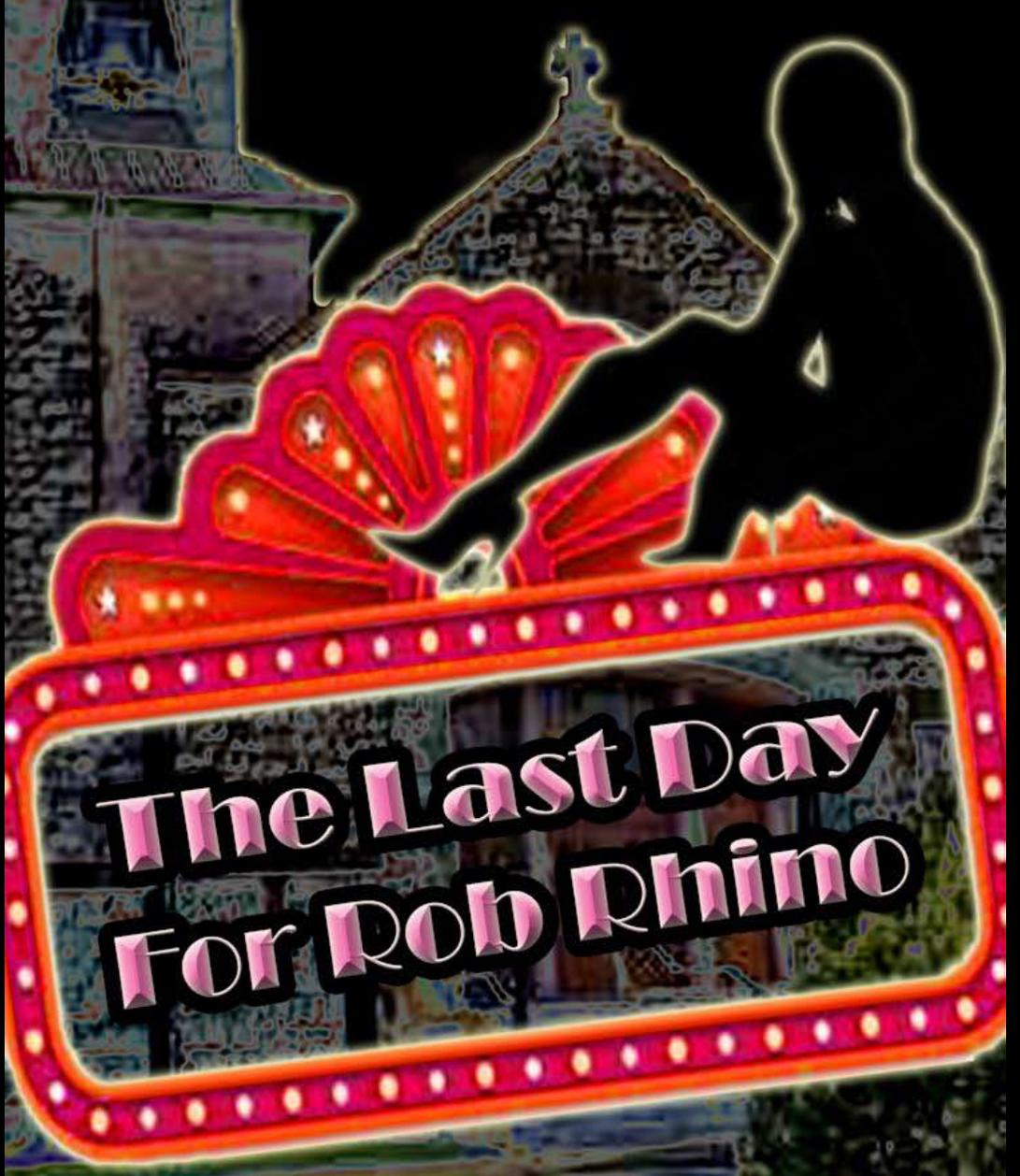


Nobody's Perfect.

Kathleen O'Donnell



**The Last Day
For Rob Rhino**

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Prologue

“Hey, it’s Frank. You had an appointment this morning?”

“Oh, I...ummm...I...what?” Claire almost fell, tangled in her bath towel, sopping hair slapping her cheek. The only reason she answered the phone in the first place was because she thought it was Guillermo.

“You were going to bring Liam’s Range Rover in this morning? The brakes,” Frank yelled over the mechanic noise in the background, the clatter in Claire’s head.

Does he think I’m a servant? “Conchita must’ve—”

“No, Liam said she was off today. You were going to bring it. I offered to send someone to pick it up, but he turned me down. Said you guys worked it out on your end?”

Shit. Crap. Forgot. “Yeah...well—”

She rummaged through the nightstand, halfway listening to Frank’s mechanic lingo. “Those brakes won’t hold up, the pads are about gone. I told Liam that the last time he was here. You know Liam never wants to take the time. He’ll be out of

time if he slams on those—”

“Sorry, Frank. I had a...a...thing. I’ll call you back in a few to reschedule.”

“Who was that?” Liam rushed in, Claire plonked down the receiver.

“Oh...ah...Jordan. He’s...he might come to town, wants to have dinner or something.”

“I gotta go. I’m late, as usual.” He grabbed his car keys but didn’t glance in her direction or even make listening sounds. “I’ve got that presentation.”

Claire picked up her empty wine glass. She would’ve met her husband’s eyes had he been looking at her. “Good luck with that.”

Chapter One

“I bought you the hat, because you’re scary bald.”

Claire held the phone away from her ear, nostrils flaring. “I wouldn’t wear a hat if Philip Treacy sailed it over himself on the Queen Elizabeth II.” She strolled the gateway to watch the planes take off through the windows. Her reflection in the glass mirrored back, her head shiny, embryonic.

Her step-daughter let out a puff of breath. “Claire, you know how much his hats cost. It’s just lying here on the floor.”

“I don’t give a flying—” Claire caught herself, counted to five. Annabelle meant well. “I don’t do hats. I do bald. It is what it is.”

“Listen, why don’t you take a vacation?” The wheedling commenced. “Instead of going wherever, to do whatever, you could go to that place I told you about in Hawaii.” Annabelle spoke in run-ons. “They have a state-of-the-art meditation center.”

A woman wearing sweats gawked as she went by, smiling and nodding. Claire’s condition elicited the sympathy of strangers.

Maybe, it was terminal. Whatever it was, it looked bad.

“That place where I can sit around all day touching myself?”

“You can get in touch with yourself, Claire.”

“I’m halfway to Pennsylvania, where I want to go.” Claire’s free hand pushed against the window. “Me and my bald head.” Airport foot traffic hurried behind her in both directions.

“Well, you look like crap. Please, reconsider Hawaii. It’s a luxurious place. The—”

“The ashram?”

“It’s not an ashram. It’s a...a—”

“Loony bin?” A harried traveler knocked her purse, sitting by her feet. The pill bottles at the bottom rolled and shook—cha-cha-cha—a druggist’s maraca.

“It’s a retreat center. Andrew sent Meg there for her birthday. He said she loved it.”

“Umm hmm...”

“Are you listening?”

Claire suffered in silence, as loud as she could.

Annabelle tried a different way. “I’m worried about you. Jordan is, too. Dad—”

Claire’s sudden tears annoyed her. She stabbed her phone off with one rigid finger and rammed it into her purse. Enough of that nonsense. You can cry yourself a river, but you can’t cry your hair back...or, your life the way you wanted it.

* * * *

Claire stared at the homeless looking guy sleeping on the airport floor and brushed the tears from her lashless eyes.

She looked around. There were serious looking men in expensive suits waiting for their flights, most poking at their BlackBerry’s Liam used to think every man who crossed her path wanted to sleep with her. Now, if they saw her at all, she repulsed them. Claire had been a beauty until she wasn’t. An “emerald-eyed, fair-haired princess,” her dad used to say. “A long, tall, drink of water.” Before, she’d been stared at, smiled

on, and envied. Now, she was stared at. Sometimes laughed at or pointed at, and almost always pitied

The wreck on the floor moved, propped up on his scaly elbows, nodding off, his mouth open, eyes closed. Even in his unwashed state, he looked familiar. Like someone who used to be famous. Claire scanned the crowded O'Hare terminal but didn't notice anyone else looking at him. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe he was just another loser. She looked at her Rolex and wondered how late the flight was going to be. She couldn't remember now what the voice said on the announcement. Between the noise and the sedatives, it was hard to keep up.

When she walked back to her gate, the boarding had already started. She hadn't heard the announcement...again. The man lying on the ground was gone. Maybe security shooed him away. She noted her seat number and got in line. Sweat broke out over her upper lip. Sweating was a problem with no hair—an added humiliation. She hoped they didn't dilly-dally too long with the drinks on the plane. Thank God for the three-hour jump in time going east.

She boarded then hunted for her seat—8B. She really needed to get some glasses. The plane was a small commuter with three seats across—a single on one side of the aisle, a double on the other. Claire found aisle 8 and was about to sit in her seat, one of the doubles on the aisle, when she saw him.

The dirty hobo from the airport slumped in the window seat, 8C.

He sprawled out over both seats, looking fatter up close and older. Late sixties at least, despite the desperate dye job and comb-over. A bushy moustache, like a squirrel's ass, wasn't big enough to cover his pock-marked face. His gut hung over his thighs. He looked either asleep or passed out. He reeked.

"This is a mistake." Claire stopped, twisted around, in search of a flight attendant. She couldn't see one. The teeming line of travelers behind her tried to keep her going. "This can't be right.

I can't possibly sit here," she said, like an Astor in steerage on the Titanic.

The Asian man behind her smiled, moved his head up and down.

She was about to indulge in a hurricane force panic attack when she heard, "This is a full flight. Please, find your seats. Make sure your carry-ons are stored below your seat or in the upper bins."

Claire swung her Louis Vuitton bag into her seat, hitting the filthy hobo's fat leg, hard. He jiggled up with a snort and scooted over to his side. She heaved her matching carry-on into the overhead bin, sat down, dug a little blue pill out of her bag, then swallowed it dry. She made a big show of settling into her seat, so she could turn her head to see what he was doing without seeming obvious. He leaned against the window, eyes closed, mouth open. She could hear him snoring.

Claire stuffed her bag under the seat in front of her then fastened her seatbelt with a click. When he opened his milky, blue-gray eyes, he looked at her with eyelids that appeared too heavy for him. All of a sudden, he had the hearing of a dog. One side of his mouth lifted in a lop-sided half smile. He leaned forward to make sure his ragged backpack was still there, fiddled with the seat-back pocket, and readjusted his seatbelt. Satisfied that all was as it should be in his area, he gave Claire another look—one that seemed to urge her to give hers another check just to be safe. She did. In seconds, he slept again.

It occurred to Claire her unwanted traveling companion hadn't noticed he sat next to a hairless woman. He didn't look her up and down, and then quickly look away, like most people. Nor did he insist on politically correct earnestness, meaningful, direct eye contact. Her grubby neighbor seemed to care only that seat trays were upright; all electronic devices were turned off and appropriately stored until takeoff. Claire shook her bald head. Whatever drugs he was taking, she had to get some.

The plane was almost full. Claire looked up to see a man, about her age—one of the impatient ones in a pricey suit in the aisle next to her seat. Staring. Oh, no. She could feel the color begin to climb up her neck.

“Hey, aren’t you that guy?” the man in the suit said.

Claire exhaled. She turned to her right, startled.

“Yeah, you’re the guy from that reality show, aren’t you?” The suit wasn’t budging without an answer.

“Um...huh. Yeah...I’m him,” Claire’s seatmate slurred, barely stringing the words together. His double chins fell forward onto his chest.

“Rob,” the suit said.

“Yeah, Rob.”

The flight attendant came up behind the man, prodding him forward. “I knew it,” he muttered before moving toward his seat.

That’s where she’d seen him. What’d he say his name was again? She turned toward him. Asleep, again. “Hey,” she elbowed him. “I thought you looked familiar. You were in a reality show. What else would I have seen you in?” She hardly ever watched reality television—at least, not on purpose.

He eyed her Rolex and ten-carat diamond ring. “Nothing.”

“I thought you were someone famous when I saw you in the airport.” She knew she was right. She almost always was. “What else are you famous for?”

His head swiveled toward her, jowls sagging. “My cock,” he said. “I have a thirteen-inch cock.”

Chapter Two

They stared at each other. She lifted her non-existent brows to meet her non-existent hair line. For what seemed like an eternity, visions of fat, pasty men all hideously endowed traumatized her. She cleared her throat and scratched her chin.

A grin split his face, as if carved by a machete-wielding lunatic. He was missing a front tooth. He leaned toward her, lisping, “Baby, I’m a porn star.”

* * * *

“Would you care for a cock—?”

“No.” Claire recoiled, like a vampire rejecting a cross.

“...a cocktail?” the flight attendant finished.

“Yes. Absolutely, yes. A vodka tonic, please.” Claire wiped her sweating upper lip with a wadded tissue. The porn star snored lightly again, mouth hanging open.

She swallowed a mouthful of vodka and sat back in her seat. *How could he be asleep already?* There’d been no more in-flight confessions from her pornographic neighbor. Just minutes ago,

he'd been like a monkey diving for lice on the scalp of his mate. He'd pounced on his backpack, dug out his mail, pulled out a pair of glasses.

"SoCal Gas," he'd said to himself, peeling open the envelope. With one cloudy eye, he sneaked up on the innards and tried to see what it said without taking anything out. "Highway robbery." He set it aside. "Verizon." Same routine, picking up another envelope. This one was yellow, heavily scented, definitely feminine.

"Ohhh...interesting." He kept talking to his pile of mail. He'd taken that fragrant, lucky winner out of the envelope, looked down the slope of his bulbous nose, and read. Every few seconds, he'd hoot and smack the tray. Loud.

"That's what I'm talkin' about." He picked at his remaining front teeth with the corner of the yellow envelope. "*Tsssst, tsssst...*" Every few seconds, he made weird gyrations with his mouth and tongue, like some kind of turbo teeth cleaning.

Claire moved to the opposite side of her seat, as far as she could go without falling into the aisle. Every time he opened his mouth, her butt sucked up more of the seat cushion. After regaling her with his genital dimensions, he paid her no more attention. No further information was forthcoming. Nor had he peeked at her or her hairless head. He wasn't interested in her story. She wanted to know his. She'd tried to see the name on his mail, but between her bad eyes and the pill/cocktail combo, no dice...not without getting into his lap. Not going there, for God's sake.

Without moving her head, she looked downward and sideways, at his crotch. She clamped her eyes shut. She'd read once that the Elephant Man had a huge penis. The final, cosmic cruelty. She wondered how many times he'd gotten laid. Like, zero, probably. The problem was, he'd been poor. If the Elephant Man had been rich, he'd have been called distinguished. A curved spine and a skull divided into triplicate would have been all the rage. No such thing as a rich man too

ugly to get a woman.

She hadn't worried about Liam's looks or his money. There was truth in that old saying: You could just as easily marry a rich man as a poor one. Not that it mattered. She'd have married Liam even if he'd been poor. Of course she would have. Definitely.

Claire grabbed for her bag and started digging for her pills, flinging whatever-the-hell out the top. Why was it so hard to find the damn pills? There was a whole bottle from Doctor Freidman, Doctor Edgemont, and Doctor Zucker, plus the one she got online. Not to mention one from her gardener's roommate—Guillermo from Mexico City, in case of an emergency. She unfastened her seatbelt and leaned too far out of her seat. She caught herself, feeling her stomach rise to the top of her throat. Her hands and feet tingled, going numb. Her skin felt pinpricked, icy. The sweat dripped.

"You're cool, you're cool." The porn star steadied her with his dirty hand. "Your purse exploded." He held up a pen, her cell phone, and a tampon with the wrapper torn half off.

"I'm...I'm...not...I'm not feeling well." Claire swallowed the sourness in her mouth, yanked the loot out of his grimy hands.

"You need crackers. They help with the puking." He held up his hand to get the flight attendant's attention.

"I...I don't have cancer. No chemotherapy," Claire croaked out. Her breath came too fast, too shallow.

"Uh, yeah. I figured," he said. "Too bad."

The flight attendant came. She rustled up some crackers and a brown bag. By the time she'd made the necessary inquiries about whether or not Claire needed assistance, the porn star passed out, again. After several minutes of breathing in and out of the paper bag, Claire stopped feeling like she'd die. She took a pill, bunched up the bag and the empty cracker wrapper in her hand, mopped her still sweating brow, and leaned back in her seat.

“I figured? Too bad?” What did he mean by he figured? How dare he? He couldn’t figure out the first thing about her. What’s too bad? Too bad she didn’t have cancer? Asshole.

He hadn’t asked her a single question. There’d been no conversation. He was too stoned for one thing. Low-life crack head. This was a commuter flight, or she’d be in first class... and he wouldn’t.

Claire poo poo’d the flight attendant’s over-solicitous ministrations. “I’m fine, I said.” Was the woman deaf? She kept hovering.

“I think these are yours?” The flight attendant with too much makeup on held out a wrinkled, stepped on piece of paper and a lipstick. She peered at the Wikipedia printout. “Your info on... um...*exhumation*? And a lipstick.” She turned the sleek, black tube over. “Chanel. You must’ve dropped them or something.” She frowned at Claire’s bag, sticking out too far into the aisle, then pushed it back with her airline-approved navy pump.

Claire mumbled a snotty thank you to Nosy Nellie Stewardess while she pulled her bag back out again, returned her belongings to it, and closed its clasp with a firm clack. She shot another peek at the slumbering, bad omen sitting next to her. Maybe he was a sign from the gods, who’d already proved to have a piss-poor sense of humor. Perhaps she should go back home. She pressed her palm to her sticky, naked scalp. Not a chance.

The “fasten seat belt” overhead lights went on while they prepared to land. Claire refused to look to her right. Under normal circumstances, she’d have thanked him for his chivalry, but he was not normal. He was a Neanderthal, not worthy of even the minimal social graces. The plane hit the runway with a screech and a hop. He made no effort to speak to her. Claire’s hearing improved when a velvet voice from the front of the aircraft gave them permission to disembark. She grabbed her bag and tried to race out of her seat, but her Courtney Love slosh through the friendly skies made her exit less than dignified.

Shit. She stopped, took a few wobbly steps back, then shoved the other passengers out of her way.

From the overhead, she grabbed the carry-on she'd left behind in her haste—the one with Liam in it.

Chapter Three

She was such a bad solo traveler. Liam always got their luggage. *Stop, Claire. Liam isn't getting the luggage. Liam's in the luggage.*

After a staggered stop in the ladies' room where her crackers, vodka, and a pill or two made a violent comeback, she floated down the escalator to baggage claim, pulling her carry-on behind her. She squinted to find her flight number above the carousels.

The bags dropped. Claire nosed around while she waited for her other bag to make its way out of the bowels of the plane. She searched for the porn star, hoping not to find him. Maybe he overdosed between the plane and baggage claim. Doubtful he'd have bags. By the smell of him, he'd been wearing the same clothes for weeks. He wouldn't need a suitcase, since he never bathed or changed his clothes. She wouldn't see him again if there was any justice. She'd suffered enough.

Grateful to see her luggage come whooshing down the chute, she yanked it off the carousel, pulled both Louis's behind

her, and went in search of the rental car dealer. She took one more glance around. No sign of him. Things were looking up.

* * * *

The clerk at E-Z 4U Luxury Rentals—where had her travel agent found this place?—looked up, saw her, looked down again, and said to the counter, “Can I help you?”

Claire stood in front of him for a few seconds, waiting for him to come back up. From the top of his platinum head with its pitch black roots, she guessed he was young. She tapped him on the shoulder. “I’m up here. You won’t turn to stone.”

He looked up, beet-faced. “I’m sorry. Really. I’m...I’m new.”

Claire cocked her bare head to one side, sizing him up. “It’s fine. You’re not the first. I’m not exactly Halle Berry.”

“Oh, God. Lady, I’m sorry...really...I...” He squirmed, his eyes met hers.

“I know you are. You and everybody else. Most people want to look away,” Claire said. “I feel the same way when I see that ring in your lip. Can we get on with it?”

His hand went to his pierced mouth. “Yes,” he said, his voice a cross between a croak and a squeak.

Claire chuckled to herself while she filled out the necessary paperwork. He fished out a set of keys.

“Will anyone else drive the car?” He cleared his throat.

“No. I do know how to drive,” Claire said. Whatever high she had left after her purge had worn off. It did that quicker now anyway. A lot quicker.

“Standard question, sorry.” Rental car boy started sweating, too.

He made her tense. Between his unintentional condescension and the map she was trying to read, it was touch and go. She wanted to take another pill. She spread the map out on the counter.

“The damn thing might as well be upside down.” Claire

poked at the map, brushing it away from her.

“It is.” Boy turned it right side up.

Claire stared. “What’s the difference?” Reading maps was another thing Liam had always done. Claire cut to the chase and asked the clerk how to get to the highway she needed. He wrote it out for her on the back of her receipt, trying to make up for his earlier lapse with superior customer service.

He insisted on carrying her bags to her car, like he wanted to take her arm but changed his mind. His young brow caved in. He looked worried she was ill and about to keel over. Or, more likely that she’d complain about him to someone several rungs above him. “Is there anything else you need?”

“No, really. I’m good, but thank you.” It was too complicated to explain. She’d been a little rough on him earlier, so she tried to be gracious. He was a kid. She knew she could have milked it, gotten something for nothing—maybe an upgrade or a gift certificate. That got old. Plus, she couldn’t think of anything she wanted. A GPS would make things worse. She had one in her own car and didn’t know how to turn it on.

When they stopped in front of the nondescript sedan she’d been assigned, the clerk put her bags in the trunk. It wasn’t the Mercedes she was used to, but it would do. She had a two-hour drive ahead of her. Small towns were always two hours from anywhere.

After one U-turn, a stop for directions at one rest area and two gas stations, Claire made it to the correct route. Twenty or so miles further and another little blue booster, she felt less anxious and able to take notice of the Pennsylvania scenery. Beautiful in its own, quaint way. So different than the cosmopolitan, west coast beach town she was used to. Soon, she was in the middle of nowhere—wet, rocky terrain that looked straight out of *Deliverance*. She hoped to Christ she didn’t have car trouble. All she’d need was to get strapped to a tree and forced to squeal like a pig while some inbred hillbilly plucked the banjo in the

background.

Alarm gripped her until houses and buildings appeared on the landscape, again. She was halfway through the drive, the sky a melting sherbet of pinks and oranges. She'd hoped to beat sundown to her hotel, but it'd be close. She passed a sign that read *Fasten Your Seatbelt for the Next Million Miles*. She'd been so distracted calculating just how many states that would cover she almost missed the eight-foot-tall chicken. She whipped her head around for a better look. *Was that papier-mâché?* She turned back around just in time to see the two six-foot dinosaurs. Definitely *papier-mâché*. She whizzed past a sign imploring her to "Let Jesus Save Your Soul," posted next to Minnie's: Best Strippers in Town. It was conveniently located next to the Son-shine Assembly of God, to the left of Paula's Porn Palace, and adjacent to Ma and Pa Kettle's Kristian Kiddie Day Care—"We don't spare the rod or spoil the child."

For the next thirty miles, Claire drove the pathway to porn or the highway to heaven, depending on your point of view. She could get massaged at Hal's Asian Hussies or prayed over by Susannah's Saints. Buy a bucket of wings and a lap dance at Mustang Sally's or join the "We Pray for Prisoners" prayer group. New Testament Studies or Blow Jobs. Name your perversion or your parish. It was hers for the picking. Claire thought her head would spin off her neck from trying to look at both sides of the road at once. She drove much slower than the rest of the traffic and almost got rear-ended. Twice, she about ran into the guard rail.

Her head was mid-spin when she saw him.

She saw the bright green rubber clogs first. He hitch-hiked, thumb out. Between the pill, her eyes, the sun, and her astonishment, she almost hit him. She slammed on the brakes with both feet. With agility surprising for a fat man, he leapt out of the way. Her tires pummeled the gravel shoulder, leaving a tornado of dust and rock in their wake. Claire came

to a violent, sloppy stop. Her bald head jerked forward and back with a snap. It took a full ten seconds for her to remember where she was or what she was doing as the dirt settled around her car like volcanic ash.

Had she hit him? Was he dead? She threw open the car door and got out. Cars whipped past her like nothing happened. He still stood. She'd been rubber-necking, not traveling anywhere near the speed limit.

"Are you all right?" I...I...the sun...I couldn't...are you hurt?" Claire's chest felt tight.

The porn star ambled over like he didn't have a care in the world. They met halfway. He took both her arms in his hands. She towered at least a head taller. He gently moved her further away from the busy highway. "It's cool, it's cool. I'm okay. You missed me. No worries, lady." He shrugged and pulled at his shaggy moustache.

Claire could feel the tears threaten, her head pounding. Why did she have to cry in front of this jackass? She was glad she hadn't run him over, even though he was a pig. Now, she wanted him to go away. What was he doing so close to a busy road, anyway? If he wasn't so drugged up, he'd probably have better judgment.

"What were you thinking?" Claire paced. "What idiot hitchhikes in this day and age?"

"Do it all the time." Porn star stood his ground on the side of the road. "Never had a problem, till you."

"I don't believe that for a second. You almost killed both of—"

"No, *you* almost killed both of us." He turned on his rubber heel and headed toward her still smoking rental. "But...you can make it up to me."

Claire scrambled behind him. *What'd he just say? Make it up to him? He should beg forgiveness.*

"You can you give me a ride." He walked over, opened the

passenger side door. “I’ve been thumbn’ it the whole way. I’m almost there. It’s about ten more miles up the road.” He got in, shut the door behind him.

She jerked the driver’s side door open and bellowed, “What are you doing?”

“Putting my seatbelt on. It’s the law.”

“You think I’m taking you somewhere?”

“You did almost run me over. I think it’s the least you can do.” *Was he batting his eyelashes?*

Claire slammed the door shut and took a few deep breaths outside as the traffic whizzed by. Now what? What were her options? She could say no and make him get out of the car. He was obviously a drug addict. Although, he seemed more alert than on the plane. She assumed near-death experiences did that to a person. Near-death. Right...she’d almost killed him. She put her hand on her smooth head and rubbed it back and forth. She should loosen up and take the porn star where he needed to go. *What’s the big deal?* She was driving anyway. It’d take all of her good breeding. Well, she didn’t have good breeding, but, he didn’t know that. She closed her eyes, thought of him carefully nudging her away from oncoming traffic, and got back in the car.

“Where are you going?” She turned the key and started the engine.

“Alex’s Adult World Gift Emporium and Warehouse. Keep going straight. Can’t miss it.” He leaned forward, adjusted his backpack, adjusted it some more. Still not satisfied, he shifted it forward, then backward, then sideways.

Claire hit the gas, pulled out onto the highway, and fantasized about shoving him out of the moving car. Where was a banjo-plucking inbred hillbilly when she needed one?