

Ian Grant pulled the 1000 thread count Egyptian cotton sheet up to his chest and tried to identify the feeling that interfered with this happy moment.

Well, he told himself it was a happy moment. A good meal, just finished ... a blonde, also just finished.

She hummed in the hotel shower, some insipid tune from her self-titled album. An ode to puppies, or making love, or making love in a field of puppies, or something like that – whenever he heard the song he forgot the lyrics within minutes. It was almost as forgettable as her hair, which judging by its roots once looked a much more interesting red.

He looked around at the ornate furniture, the remains of expensive room service, the lingerie scattered across the shag carpet, and wanted to be somewhere else. What the hell was wrong with him? “Are you happy?”

The humming stopped. “Well, sure I am!” Her natural voice fell a full octave from when she sang. Weird. “I have a single at number seven, and I’m on Craig Ferguson tomorrow! Oh, and you. You’re *so* good.”

Suddenly he felt like a candy bar.

“Yes, but ...” Sitting up, Ian ran a hand through a wild disarray of dark hair and gazed around the room. This wasn’t his home. This wasn’t his girlfriend, not really, and for the first time he realized she used him as eye candy, someone to hold her arm on the way into clubs. He used to like clubs.

*What’s her last name, anyway?* He glanced over at the CD she always kept on the headboard, but it said only “Bethani”. That one name crap should’ve ended with Madonna.

*What did I see in her? I mean, there is the hot body ...* and what did she see in him? With a sudden desire to do something other than just lay there, he grabbed the TV remote and stabbed the on button.

A few minutes later Bethani padded into the room, wrapped in a huge white towel. She stopped in mid stride to stare at the screen. “Are you watching ... the news?”

“Yeah ...” Some politician blabbed on the screen. The guy looked familiar; Ian thought they’d met at one of his father’s dinner parties.

Bethani perched on the edge of her bed, her gaze still on the screen. “The news is always depressing – why watch what you can’t change?”

“I suppose it has something to do with education.”

Her head tilted, like a bird staring into a mirror. “Ever seen an educated person have a good time?”

“Hm.” The cable network went into human interest and celebrity stuff, and Ian recalled his father once flew into a rage when he saw Ian on the same program, dancing on a car near the Hollywood Bowl. He tried to remember ... Sheen’s car or Kutcher’s? He’d been pretty blitzed at the time.

Then Ian sat up straight, as a familiar face glared at him. Was this a flashback?

*“Venerable Hollywood movie star Charles Grant narrowly escaped a tornado that tore through the little town of Hurricane, Indiana yesterday –”*

“Grant?” Bethani turned to Ian. “Why would he be in the Middle? Is he on location?”

With a shrug, Ian reminded himself that “escaped” meant they were all right, and turned up the sound.

*“And why is Charles Grant in Indiana? Sources say he came to the little town to bless the impending marriage of his daughter, weather photographer Allison Craine, to a man who’s reputed to be an Indiana police officer –”*

“Wow,” Bethani murmured, “I hope he’s okay. I needed him to co-produce my first movie.”

It took a moment for Ian to process the information, as a too-chipper woman announced in a bemused voice that Grant and Allison Craine remained on the scene, to help recovery efforts and presumably make wedding plans. Although the newscasters – and the weatherman – seemed to think this the most unlikely news of the day, after a moment Ian realized it made sense. Allie always ended up where trouble brewed, and although Grant wasn’t known to be hands-on, he had a reputation for sending aid whenever some deserving group needed it.

They got involved. Helped people. Made a difference. And, yeah, apparently took extra time to plan a wedding, too. When did Allie meet an Indiana cop?

*Wait ... Bethani wants my father to co-produce her movie?*

Ian turned to see blue eyes not vacant, but calculating. Of course. He took a breath, then threw off the sheet and reached for his clothes. “I’m going to Indiana.”

“What?” Bethani’s tone matched the incredulous voice in his head. “Why?”

“My sister’s engaged to a guy I never even met.” He pulled on his jeans. It took him a moment to find his second sock, draped over the bed lamp.

“But your sister hates you. You told me she got mad about the book you wrote, and they said on *Extra* that you showed up drunk at her coming out party.”

“Guilty.” He walked around her and found his black silk shirt draped over the bathroom door knob. “All the more reason to pitch in. Lend a hand. All those help clichés.”

“But *Ian*.” Her voice sounded so ... whiney. Why did he never notice it before? “Do you want to leave – this?”

Bethani dropped her towel.

No, he didn’t want to leave that body, kept firm with the help of personal trainers and choreography, especially since she’d offered him a part in her next music video. But for the first time he paid more attention to her face than to her body, and saw ... something empty. “Haven’t you ever wanted to help people?”

She gave him a slack jawed stare. “That’s what the government’s for. Besides, what can you do to help? You’re a drunk.”

In an instant Bethani, darling of the paparazzi, looked ugly. “What’s your last name?”

“Huh?”

“How much do we really know each other? What conversation didn’t involve the business or sex? Do you care so little that you never noticed I didn’t drink one drop of alcohol in all the time we knew each other?”

Scooping the towel back up, Bethani held it against her in a clenched fist. “You went to rehab? But you were such fun ...”

“I went to the same place I’m headed for now: reality.”

“In Indiana?”

“It has to be more real than Hollywood.” He scooped belongings into an overnight bag, and when it was stuffed began to fill his duffel. All his worldly goods, in two bags.

Bethani flung the towel across the room, then searched for her own clothes. “You can’t just leave me! I can replace you with any B-list celebrity out there, all the guys and half the girls!”

“I know.” Ian stopped beside her and reached out, but she shrugged him off. “But you see, that’s the point – I want to be useful.”

“Doing what?”

*Good question.* She stormed around him, while he stood there and thought about his two years of ditched college classes, mediocre acting career, and a bestseller he didn't even write himself. What could he do? He barely knew which end of a hammer to use, couldn't operate heavy equipment, and hadn't cooked himself a meal in years. Time to get educated, and fast – before Allie disappeared again and his father didn't need him ... again. For an instant his thought processes ground to a halt, then he blurted out:

“I'll help my sister organize her wedding.”

“You *what?*” In the midst of disentangling her black lace bra from the table lamp, Bethani whirled around to gaze at him, in figurative and literal naked amazement.

“Yeah.” He shouldered his bags, and checked his pocket for the keys to his Mustang. It would be – what – about a three day drive? “How hard can it be? You call a few caterers, yell at the flower guy, everybody's happy.”

“But you're straight.”

“I'll work through it.” Ian paused by the door. “Goodbye, Bethani. I'll give you a good recommendation for your next B-list beefcake.”

“But nobody's ever broken up with me!” She tried to throw the lamp at him, but it reached the end of its cord and crashed to the floor.

“Yeah, well ... in the end, people like you are just another addiction to get over.” Ian closed the door behind him, but could still hear her rage all the way down the hallway, right up until the elevator door closed.

He stepped outside into late dusk – or early morning? – and looked around the hotel parking lot. He couldn't see the stars, and smelled only ozone and asphalt, but as he threw his bags into the Mustang's trunk the air seemed clearer, somehow ... refreshed.

So, now to stop somewhere and get an audiobook on wedding planning, learn all he could in three days, then convince the half-sister who hated him that he could do it – without getting himself shot by her cop fiancée.

One thing about his new life would be the same as his old: He knew how to live dangerously.