

Sweetheart

Chelsea Cain

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Extract

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1

Forest Park was pretty in the summer. Portland's ash sky was barely visible behind a canopy of aspens, hemlock, cedars, and maples that filtered the light to a shimmering pale green. A light breeze tickled the leaves. Morning glories and ivy crept up the mossy tree trunks and strangled the blackberry bushes and ferns, a mass of crawling vines that piled up waist-high on either side of the packed dirt path. The creek hummed and churned, birds chirped. It was all very lovely, very Walden, except for the corpse.

The woman had been dead a while. Her skull was exposed; her scalp had been pulled back, a tangle of red hair separated from the hairline by several inches. Animals had eaten her face, exposing her eyes and brain to the forces of putrefaction. Her nose was gone, revealing the triangular bony notch beneath it; her eye sockets were concave bowls of greasy, soaplike fat. The flesh of her neck and ears was blistered and curdled, peeled back in strips to frame that horrible skull face, mouth open like a Halloween skeleton.

'Are you there?'

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Archie turned his attention back to the cell phone he held against his ear. 'Yeah.'

'Want me to wait on dinner?'

He glanced down at the dead woman, his mind already working the case. Could be an OD. Could be murder. Could be she fell from the wheel well of a 747. Archie had seen that last one on an episode of *Law & Order*. 'I'm thinking no,' he said into the phone.

He could hear the familiar concern in Debbie's voice. He'd been doing well. He'd cut back on the pain pills, gained a little weight. But he and Debbie both knew it was all too tenuous. Mostly, he pretended. He pretended to live, to breathe, to work; he pretended he was going to be okay. It seemed to help the people he loved. And that was something. He could do that, at least, for them. 'Be sure you eat something,' she said with a sigh.

'I'll grab something with Henry.' Archie flipped the phone shut and dropped it into his coat pocket. His fingers touched the brass pillbox that was also in his pocket, and lingered there for a moment. It had been more than two and a half years since his ordeal. He'd only been off medical leave a few months. Long enough to catch his second serial killer. He was thinking of getting some business cards made up: SERIAL KILLER APPREHENSION SPECIALIST. Maybe something embossed. His head hurt and he reflexively moved to open the lid of the pillbox, then let his fingers drop and lifted his hand from his pocket and ran it through his hair. No. Not now.

He squatted next to Lorenzo Robbins, who sat on his heels inches from the body, his dreadlocks hidden under the hood of

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his white Tyvek suit. The smooth stones of the creek bed were slick with moss.

‘That your wife?’ Robbins asked.

Archie pulled a small notebook and a pen out of his other pocket. A flashbulb went off as a crime photographer took a picture behind them. ‘My ex-wife.’

‘You guys still close?’

Archie drew an outline of the woman in his notebook. Marked where the surrounding trees were, the creek below. ‘We live together.’

‘Oh.’

The flashbulb went off again. ‘It’s a long story,’ Archie said, rubbing his eyes with one hand.

Robbins used a pair of forceps to lift the woman’s loose scalp, so he could peer under it. When he did, dozens of black ants scurried out over her skull and into the decomposing tissue inside her nasal aperture. ‘Dogs have been here.’

‘Wild?’ Archie asked, twisting around to look up at the thick surrounding forest. Forest Park was five thousand acres, the largest urban wilderness park in the country. Parts of it were remote; parts of it were crowded. The area where the body had been found was in the lower part of the park, which was frequented by a steady stream of joggers, hikers, and mountain bikers. Several houses were even visible up the hillside.

‘Domestic probably,’ Robbins said. He turned and jabbed a latex-gloved thumb up the hillside. ‘Way the body’s down here behind the scrub, can’t see it from the path. People come running through with their dogs off leash. Sparky scrambles down here, tears a hunk of cheek off the corpse.’ He looked

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down at the corpse and shrugged. 'They think he's found a dead bird or whatever. Owner lets him sniff around a little. Then they run on.'

'You're saying she was eaten by pugs?'

'Over time. A few weeks.'

Archie shook his head. 'Nice.'

Robbins raised an eyebrow as he glanced back up at the path. 'Funny no one smelled anything.'

'There was a sewer leak,' Archie said. 'One of the houses at the top of the hill.'

The eyebrow shot up another few millimetres. 'For two weeks?'

Archie drew the hiking path across the page of his notebook. It was maybe forty feet above, at its closest point. Then it curved and headed farther up the hillside, deeper into the woods. 'People rationalize.'

'You thinking she was a prostitute?'

'Based on the shoes?' She was still wearing one – an amber Lucite pump. The other they had found nestled in moss underneath a fern a few yards away. 'Maybe. Maybe she was a stylish thirteen-year-old. Hard to tell.' Archie looked at the grinning mouth, the teeth straight and white against all the surrounding blood and gristle. 'She's got nice teeth.'

'Yeah,' Robbins agreed softly. 'She's got nice teeth.'

Archie watched as his partner, Henry Sobol, came slowly, tentatively, down the hillside. He was wearing black jeans, a black T-shirt, and a black leather jacket, despite the heat. Henry kept

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his eyes down, lips pursed in concentration, arms outstretched for balance. With his arms extended and his shaved head, he looked like a circus strongman. He walked sideways, trying to step in Archie's footprints, but his feet were bigger than Archie's and each step sent a spit of dirt and small rocks rattling down the embankment. Above them, on the hillside, Archie could see that everyone had stopped to watch, their faces anxious. A homeless man looking for a place to set up camp had found the body and called the police from a convenience store a few blocks outside the park. He had met the first officer to respond and taken him to the site, where the officer had promptly lost his footing in the loose dirt and slid down the hillside into the creek, polluting the crime scene and nearly breaking his leg. They would have to wait for the autopsy results to even know if they had a homicide.

Henry reached the bottom, winked at Archie, and then turned and waved merrily up above. The cops at the top of the hill all turned back to their work taping the crime scene off, and keeping the growing group of sportily dressed hikers and joggers at bay.

Henry smoothed his salt-and-pepper moustache thoughtfully with a thumb and forefinger and rocked forward to examine the body, allowing himself a reflexive grimace. Then business. 'What killed her?' he asked.

Robbins placed a bag over one of her bloated, mottled hands and secured it with a twist-tie. He did it gingerly, as if she had nodded off and he didn't want to wake her. The fingers were curled, blistered, and swollen, and the nail beds were black, but the hand was still recognizable, though probably not printable. The other, which lay half buried in the earth and moss, was crawling with beetles. 'Search me,' Robbins said.

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‘She die here?’ Henry asked.

‘Hard to say until we know what killed her,’ Robbins answered. He gazed up at Henry. ‘Do you wax your head or is it naturally that shiny?’

Archie smiled. Henry had called Robbins out at the police softball game that spring. It had been like this ever since.

‘I was just asking,’ Henry said to Robbins.

‘Ask me after the autopsy,’ Robbins muttered. He produced another bag and gave it a snap in the air, and then gently lifted her other hand so he could slide it into the bag. The beetles scattered, and Henry took a small step back.

Archie wrote something in his notebook. It had been twelve years since they had stood over another dead girl in that park. That had set them on the trail of the Beauty Killer. They didn’t know back then it would become a career. Or that Archie would become one of her victims.

A voice from up the hillside hollered, ‘Hey.’

Henry looked up at the path, where Claire Masland was waving for them to come back up the hill. He put his hands on his hips. ‘You’ve got to be kidding me,’ he said to Archie.

Claire motioned again. This time she put her whole arm into it.

‘I’ll go first,’ Archie said. He glanced back at Henry and added, ‘So when you fall you won’t take us both down.’

‘Ha, ha,’ said Henry.

‘What do you have?’ Archie asked Claire when they reached the path. Claire was small and angular with a very short haircut. She

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was wearing a striped T-shirt and jeans. Her gold shield was clipped to her waistband, along with a phone, a gun in a leather holster, and a pair of red plastic sunglasses jauntily hooked through a belt loop. She tilted her head at a young uniformed cop who was covered in dirt.

‘This is Officer Bennett,’ she said. ‘The first responder.’

Bennett looked like a kid, tall with a baby face and a slight double chin that pressed fretfully against a skinny neck. He hunched his shoulders miserably. ‘I’m so sorry,’ he said.

‘Show them,’ Claire told Bennett. He sighed glumly and turned around. He had taken a header down the ravine and his uniform was stained with muck, and tiny bits of vegetation still clung to his shirt.

Both Henry and Archie leaned forward to get a better look. Clinging to Bennett’s shoulder blade, among the fern seeds, the moss particulate, and the dirt, was, unmistakably, a clue.

Henry looked at Archie. ‘That would be a human hair,’ he said.

‘When you, uh, fell,’ Archie asked Bennett, ‘did you actually make contact with the body?’

Bennett’s spine stiffened. ‘Jesus no, sir. I swear.’

‘Must have picked it up on the way down,’ said Henry.

Archie pulled a slim black flashlight out of his pocket and shone it along the length of the red hair. He held it for Henry to look. There was a tiny clump of tissue at the base of the hair. ‘It’s got a scalp fragment on it,’ Archie said.

Bennett whipped his head around, eyes wide. ‘Get it off me,’ he pleaded. ‘Get it off me, okay?’

‘Easy, son,’ Henry said.

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Claire, who was a good foot shorter than Bennett, reached up and plucked the hair off and dropped it in an evidence bag.

Archie called a crime scene tech over. 'Bag all his clothes. Socks, everything.'

'But what will I wear?' Bennett asked as the crime scene tech led him off.

Claire turned to Archie and Henry. The path they were on was about three feet wide, carved worryingly out of the hillside. The back foot of it had been taped off to let the fifty-year-old women by, so they didn't have to backtrack a mile into the woods and miss afternoon spa appointments. A chocolate Lab bounded through the foliage on the hillside as its owner, in cargo shorts, hiking books, and reflective sunglasses, walked past without even a second glance at the activity at the bottom of the glen. 'So?' Claire said.

'Head injury,' said Archie.

'Yep,' said Henry.

'Maybe she fell,' Claire theorized. 'Like T. J. Hooker, there. Hit her head on a rock.'

'Or maybe the rock hit her,' Henry said.

'Or,' Archie said, 'maybe Sparky scrambled down there and stuck his snout in our corpse, and the hair dropped off his tongue on his way back up the embankment.'

Claire and Henry both looked at Archie.

'Sparky?' Henry said.

'That is so gross,' said Claire.

2

Susan Ward felt sick to her stomach. Maybe it was nerves. Maybe it was the heat. Maybe it was the bar's toxic smog of cigarette smoke.

'You want another drink?' Quentin Parker asked. Parker had been the crime beat reporter for the *Herald* for as long as anyone could remember. Susan didn't know if he'd started out an alcoholic, or if it had something to do with the job.

'Something with an umbrella this time?' he said.

Parker drank Wild Turkey. No ice. The waitress had poured him one before they'd even sat down.

Susan ignored the crack about the umbrella and slid a cigarette from the pack she had set on the table. 'I'll just smoke,' she said, surveying the bar. Parker had suggested it. It was downtown, and easy to get to from the paper. Susan had never heard of it, but Parker seemed to know everyone in the place. He knew a lot of people in a lot of bars.

The bar was small, so Susan was able to keep an eye on the door, to watch for the man they were supposed to meet. Parker had set it up. Susan usually worked with the features editor, but

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this story was crime, and that meant Parker. She'd been trying to get this meeting for two months. Parker set it up with one phone call. But the whole story had been like that. She was about to single-handedly decimate the career of an esteemed politician. Most of the staff at the *Herald* had voted for the guy. Susan had voted for him. She'd take that vote back now if she could.

'I could have come by myself,' Susan said.

'He doesn't know you,' Parker said. 'And I like to help.' He was kidding, of course. Generosity was not the word that came to mind when you thought of Quentin Parker. Belligerent? Yes. Sexist? Yes. Great fucking writer? Yes. Drunk? Absolutely.

Almost everyone thought he was an asshole.

But for some reason, from that first day at the paper two years ago, Parker had looked out for Susan. She didn't know why. Maybe he'd liked her smartass mouth. Or her inappropriate clothes. Or whatever colour her hair had been at the time. It didn't matter. She'd take a bullet for him, and she was pretty sure that, barring the distraction of a drink or a hot lead, he'd do the same for her.

Susan looked around the bar again. Parker had chosen it well. There was little chance anyone would see them all together. There was a vague maritime theme: a steering wheel from an old boat on the wall, an anchor nailed above the bar. The bartender looked about a hundred and ten, and the waitress not much younger. The only food in the place was popcorn. The bar stank of it. But it was dark and cool, which was more than could be said about outside. Susan pulled at her black tank top. It said I SMELL BULLSHIT in cursive across the chest, and the letters tended to stick to her skin when she sweated.

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The door to the bar opened and a blinding rectangle of light streamed into the darkness, transforming the bar's smoke-choked atmosphere into pretty swirls of carcinogenic mist. Susan's stomach clenched. A middle-aged man walked in wearing a suit and fiddling with a BlackBerry. He was heavy, though not nearly as heavy as Parker, and he wore rectangular glasses that seemed too fashionable for him. She turned to Parker.

'Hide your valuables,' Parker whispered, taking a handful of popcorn from the bowl in front of them.

'You're sure it's him?' Susan asked, pulling at her tank top.

Parker guffawed, a quick laugh that sounded like a wheeze. He lifted the fistful of popcorn into his mouth and chewed. 'Thirty years on the crime beat,' he said, mouth full. 'You get to know a lot of lawyers.'

'Here,' Parker said, gesturing the lawyer over with a popcorn-greasy hand.

The lawyer sat. He looked ten years older up close. 'Parker,' he said with a nod. Then he looked at Susan. His glasses said Prada in big letters on each side. 'This her?' he asked.

'Our Brenda Starr,' Parker said, still chewing. He grinned, his yellow teeth small and shiny in the bar's low light. 'Kid does my heart good, the way she went after your boy.'

'My "boy",' the lawyer said, 'is a sitting US senator.'

Parker picked up another handful of popcorn. 'Not for long,' he said through the grin.

Susan took a drag on her cigarette and felt for the small digital recorder she had hidden on her lap to make sure it was on. It whirred under her fingertips and she felt immediately

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calmer. Beyond the lawyer, a young man wearing a red baseball cap came into the bar and sat down alone.

The lawyer wiped the sheen of sweat from his forehead. 'So the *Herald*'s running the story?'

'Senator Castle want to comment?' Parker asked. He brought his fist up and dropped a few kernels of popcorn into his open mouth.

'He denies it,' the lawyer said.

Susan laughed.

The lawyer pushed his Prada glasses up on his nose. 'You're lucky to get any comment at all,' he said, his face colouring.

Susan pledged right then and there that she was going to take down John Castle and the motherfuckers who'd protected him over the years. People idolized Castle for what he'd done for the state. But after Thursday, they would see him for what he was, a rapist, a manipulator, a blackmailer, and a fraud. She ground the rest of her cigarette out in the black plastic ashtray on the table. 'He denies it?' she said. 'He fucked his kids' babysitter and he went to enormous lengths to cover it up, including paying her off.' She pulled another cigarette out of the pack and lit it with a plastic lighter. Susan only smoked when she was nervous. But the lawyer didn't know that. 'I've spent two months on this story,' she said. 'I've got Molly Palmer on record. I've got interviews with Molly's friends at the time that match Molly's version of events. I've got bank records showing money passing from your law firm to her account.'

'Ms Palmer was an intern,' the lawyer said, spreading his hands innocently.

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‘For one summer,’ Susan said. She took a drag on the cigarette, leaned her head back and exhaled. She took her time, because she knew she had him. ‘Your firm continued paying her for five years.’

The corner of the lawyer’s mouth twitched. ‘There may have been a clerical error,’ he said.

Susan wanted to wipe the smirk off his face with her elbow. Why had he even bothered to show? A denial could have been delivered over the phone. ‘This is such bullshit,’ she said.

The lawyer stood up and looked Susan up and down. When you looked like she did, you got used to that, but coming from this guy, it made her a little furious. ‘How old are you?’ he asked Susan. ‘Twenty-five?’ He flipped a hand at her head. ‘You think the people of this state are going to let some girl with blue hair and some sort of political agenda take down a beloved five-term senator?’ He put his face right in front of hers, so close she could smell his aftershave. ‘Even if you publish the story, it will go away. And you won’t publish it. Because if the *Herald* goes near it, I will sue you.’ He jabbed a finger at Parker. ‘And you.’ He pushed his glasses up his nose one last time and stepped back from the table. ‘The senator denies all allegations,’ he said. ‘Other than that, he has no comment.’ He turned around and started for the door.

‘I’m twenty-eight,’ Susan called after him. ‘And my hair is Atomic Turquoise.’

Parker lifted his glass of whiskey to his mouth. ‘I thought that went well,’ he said.

‘Right,’ Susan said. ‘They’re quaking in their boots.’

‘Trust me,’ Parker said. He picked up a toothpick from a

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dish on the table and dug at a piece of popcorn kernel stuck between his teeth, his jowls swinging.

Susan had never loved him more.

He looked at her and winked. 'They're scared shitless,' he said.

Susan thought his face flushed with pride.

But it might have just been the whiskey.

3

Archie stood at his front door, his keys in his hands. In the year and a half he and Debbie had been separated she'd never asked for the house key, and he'd never offered it. It had stayed on his key ring the whole time, a constant reminder of what he'd lost. He had been a mess when she had asked him to leave. He had only been out of the hospital a couple of months, and he was still in the blackest dregs of his recovery. He didn't blame her. He had forced her into it. It was easier to be alone.

He pulled the brass pillbox out of his pocket, opened it, and extracted three white oval pills. He held them for a moment before he put them in his mouth, then enjoyed the familiar bitter taste before swallowing them. Then he pushed the key into the lock and pushed open the big door. The house was a low-slung, mid-century ranch that had been restored by the previous owners. Debbie had been pregnant with Sara when they bought it. It was far above his pay rate, but Debbie had just been hired as a designer at Nike, so they had splurged.

Debbie had left a lamp on, and it threw a warm half-circle of light across the dark hallway. Archie slipped his muddy shoes

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off at the door and walked over to the hall table and dropped his keys next to the lamp. A photograph of him and Debbie and the kids sat propped on the table in a silver frame. He looked happy, but he couldn't remember when or where it had been taken.

He felt Debbie behind him a moment before her arms moved around his waist.

'Hi,' he said.

She leaned her cheek against his shoulder blade and held him. 'Was it bad?'

'I've seen worse.' That hung in the air for a minute. Then Archie turned around and wrapped his arms around her. Debbie's short brown hair was tousled and she was wearing a black tank top and red cotton underpants. Her body was toned and strong in his arms. It was a body he knew as well as his own. 'Kids okay?' he asked.

She leaned in and kissed him lightly on the neck below his jawbone. 'They've been asleep for hours,' she said.

Archie lifted a hand to Debbie's cheek and looked at her face, kind and open, strong cheekbones, a long fine nose, a blush of freckles. And then, a flash of blonde, the smell of lilacs, and there she was: Gretchen Lowell. Always at the periphery of his consciousness. Archie winced.

He could feel Debbie's body tense under his hands.

'Is it her?' she asked.

He cleared his throat and shook the image from his head. His hand fell away from her cheek. 'I should get some sleep.' He wanted to get the pills out of his pocket again, to take just

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one more, but he didn't want to do it in front of Debbie. It hurt her too much.

'Is it hard not seeing her?' Debbie asked.

Archie wondered sometimes how much Debbie knew about his relationship with Gretchen. Debbie knew that Gretchen haunted him. She might have even used the word 'obsessed'. But he didn't think Debbie knew how far he had crossed the line.

'We said we wouldn't talk about this,' Archie said gently.

Debbie turned Archie around to face the mirror that hung on the wall behind the table. 'Look,' she said, and she slipped her hands under his shirt and lifted it up above his nipples and held it there. Archie hesitated and then looked at their reflection. His ex-wife was pressed beside him, her head resting against his shoulder, dark eyes shining. His face looked creased, half cast in the shadow thrown by the lamp, his long nose and lopsided mouth, thick hair and sad eyes, each a physical remnant of an ancestor, black Irish, Croatian, Jewish. He allowed himself a wry smile. Christ. Even his genotype was tragic.

Debbie moved a hand down to his abdomen and touched the long scar over his diaphragm where his spleen had been removed. It was his thickest scar, an ugly six-inch slash, the raised white scars from the stitches still visible around it, giving it a particularly Frankensteinian appearance. The scar tissue was tough, and he could barely feel Debbie's fingertips brush over it. She moved then to the smaller scars that scattered his chest. These were finer, the scalpel pressed firmly into his flesh more to pass the time than to inflict pain. They looked like silver

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blades of grass, each laid out even with the one before it, like hash marks on a grotesque score card. Debbie traced her fingers over the slightly puckered lump of flesh that marked the stab wound below his left ribs.

‘We had a deal,’ Archie said. ‘Life, in exchange for the locations of her victims. She kept her part of the bargain. I was the one who couldn’t handle it. She won’t talk to anyone else, Debbie. Think of the two hundred people she killed. Think about their families.’ It was a speech he had given often to himself over the two years he had gone every week to meet with Gretchen Lowell. It was all part of his effort to convince himself that he was just doing his job. He didn’t believe it any more. He wondered if Debbie did.

‘One hundred and ninety-nine,’ Debbie said. ‘You were number two hundred, Archie. And you’re still alive.’

She moved her hand up to the other scar, the scar that began below his left nipple, arced through his chest hair, and travelled down to its original point, in the shape of a heart. Gretchen Lowell carved a heart on all her victims. It was her signature. But her other victims had been corpses, the hearts bloody wounds obscured by decomposition and a litany of torture. As head of the Beauty Killer task force, Archie had stood over their bodies, stared at their morgue photographs, been one step behind for ten years. Until he walked into the trap that Gretchen had set for him.

She had infiltrated the task force six weeks before she revealed herself to him the night she drugged him. They had thought she was a psychiatrist, offering her expertise. He won-

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dered now if he would have been so quick to trust her if she hadn't been so beautiful.

The heart scar was delicate, the new flesh a dainty thread of pale skin. His prettiest scar. For months he couldn't bring himself to look at it. Now it felt as much a part of his body as the beating heart beneath. Debbie's fingers grazed it and Archie felt an electrical jolt run through his nervous system.

He reached up and took her hand by the wrist. 'Don't,' he said.

Debbie pressed her face into his shoulder. 'She's killing you,' she said, the words small and muffled in the cloth. 'She's killing us.'

Archie's voice was barely above a whisper. 'I love you,' he said. He meant it. He loved her and their children more than anything. He loved them completely, and it wasn't enough. 'But I can't just forget about her.'

Debbie looked up at Archie's reflection. 'I won't let her win.'

It broke his heart. Not because she was worried that he was in danger, but because she thought she had a chance of saving him. Whatever fucked-up game he and Gretchen played, it was between them. Gretchen didn't care about Debbie because she knew that Debbie wasn't a threat. 'It's not a contest.' What he didn't say was, she's already won.

Debbie looked at him for a minute, not saying anything. And then, slowly, sweetly, she kissed him on the cheek. 'Let's sit up for a while,' she said. 'Watch TV or something.'

Archie was grateful for the shift in topic. 'Like married people,' he said.

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Debbie smiled. 'Yeah.'

Pretending to be normal. That was something that Archie was good at. 'I'll be the husband,' he said. He followed her into the living room, just as the pills kicked in and the codeine rushed through his system. Like a kiss, it was soft and warm and full of promise.