

## 46. DENVER

Tammy was from my part of the country so it was strange that we both ended up together in Denver. It had been quite a long time since I had left Nebraska. I bounced around from place to place. I did some odd jobs here and there. Stuff like doing people's laundry and cleaning houses. I was running low on cash when I made Tammy's acquaintance. We were both staying at the same flea bag hotel. And Tammy told me that I should come to work with her.

"It's easy work and you can make a shit load of money."

I didn't know if I should believe her but I took her up on the offer.

"It's not as if you really have to do anything. Just get a little oil and rub it on these guys' bodies. Some of them ask for more. But that stuff is illegal so you can just tell 'em to fuck themselves."

I was on board with Tammy's attitude. I really didn't like the work, but I was willing to do what I needed to make a few bucks.

"Like I said, don't do anything that you don't want to do."

As it turned out, I didn't do much of anything. I didn't have any customers.

"It was a bad night."

"I thought that you said that I could make a butt load of money."

"Wait until the weekend."

I was going to hold my breath. How did I ever get tied up with this kind of thing?

Tammy explained her method, "If I have to do something really repulsive, I just get loaded. It's almost as if it's another person doing it. Not me."

I would keep that in mind.

"Sometimes that's the only way that you can make money. If you're lucky, you can leave with five or six hundred for the night."

"Just for giving massages."

She nodded.

This was getting bizarre. Even if I hadn't done anything repulsive, I needed a drink. I wondered how long I would have to do penance in this forsaken country.

"You're not too proud to suck cock for money." Tammy laughed. "I'm kidding you, girl."

Was she? Could she really make six hundred just for rubbing oil on some guys' backs. It must have been some fantastic oil?

"You know the stuff that makes the skin all hot."

"Like a barbecue chip?" I added a little humor.

She looked at me strangely, then she spurted out this laugh. She was my helper for the time being, whatever that meant. She was even more erratic than Rose. I was scared to find out why. This was all too far beyond me.

"You're not one of those goody goody types who looks down at women like me."

"I just try to get along with everybody."

"That's good. Because I don't want to be working with no bitch."

"I'm not bitch if that's what you're thinking."

"That's good. Have another drink!"

I was hanging out in her room. And she was getting me hammered. How many days until the weekend? How was I going to be able to last?

I never thought that it would come to this. I was riding high in Lincoln. Hey, even after I left, I was going in style. But I had to keep moving around. And it cut into my finances. I did pretty well. Then the bottom just caved in. It wasn't for anything that I did. I never lost any money. I just never made very much.

I couldn't see myself in Tammy's profession. I was more of an actress-singer type. My talents were just untried.

"I don't want to think of you as some kind of spoiled bitch. But look at yourself. I don't think that you've ever gone hungry one day in your life."

"I could use a good meal right now."

"There's some chips on the bed."

I wasn't sure if I should thank her or sneer at her. I grabbed the bag and crunched away.

"I didn't say that you could have them all. Leave some for me."

"Sorry!" I tossed the bag back to her.

I was getting this serious buzz. I lay down on her bed.

"Do you think that I'm hot?"

I wasn't sure what she wanted me to say. It didn't seem as if she was coming on to me. She just wanted to talk.

"You look cute."

"Would you do me?"

"If I was a guy."

"You're not a guy. Do you like pussy?"

Rose never embarrassed me in this way. If I didn't say anything, would she still want to share her chips.

"Don't worry, Chloe. I'm not gay. I was just asking."

"That's cool."

"You want to know what I like, my dear. I like money. Lots of it."

We were both getting good and shit-faced. She was a little aggressive. But there were no pretenses with Tammy. Maybe I could hang with her for a while.

"Want to know how I got into this business? I like sex, and I like money. Nice combination. And I can get the money, but I don't always have to give up the sex."

"Lovely."

"You sound a little stuck up. You talk weird. Like one of those English ladies. Like out of a book. It's not right you know. We're both from the same parts. We could even be sisters. What would you think about that?"

I didn't want to say the wrong thing, "I never had a sister!"

"But you and I, we could share like sisters. That would be fun!"

"Sure would. Can I get another drink?"

"Help yourself. It's cheap vodka."

"Real orange juice?"

"Florida's own. Just like we like it."

"You are living the high life."

She was acting tough, “Sure am, my bitch!”

“Right on, honey!”

I was getting the hang of it.

“I’m feeling a little horny. Let’s go get some guys and bring ‘em back her to fuck.”

“I’m not sure!”

“You told me that you like sex.”

“Not tonight. I’m feeling a little under the weather.”

I hoped that I wasn’t getting her pissed off.

“Don’t worry sweetheart, I’m not going to jump your bones in the middle of the night.”

“I was going to go back to my room. I was feeling a little tired.”

“It wasn’t something that I said. I don’t want you leaving on my account.”

“Nothing like that, Tammy. I’m just falling asleep.”

“You can stay here.”

Tammy was a lot blunter than Rose. Everything was totally physical. Almost in a scary way. Rose always seemed to be saying two things at once. She was almost always in denial. Tammy was a lot more vulnerable, almost child-like. Rose would never expose that side of herself.

When I left, I hoped that I hadn’t made Tammy mad. I wasn’t afraid of her. I just needed some time on my own.

I didn’t see myself involved in Tammy’s profession. But money was money. Next thing I found myself in the thick of things.

Some of the guys accepted the fact that I was new to this. So I didn’t get any pressure. I guess that they got turned on just seeing an innocent type like me. After a while I thought that this wouldn’t be that difficult.

“Girl are you going to take your clothes off or what.”

I’m not really into that sort of tings.”

I wasn’t sure if I needed to call the bouncer. But he was getting rather aggressive.

“I didn’t pay just to have you rub on me. I’m not a fucking magic lantern.”

“This is a house of massage. And you paid for just that. A massage. I don’t do extra.”

“I could do that to myself. How about if you just gave me a hand job? How much would that be?”

“I’m not here to do that kind of thing.”

“You’ve got a picture of a sexy lady in a window. I’m expecting something a little more exciting when I come in here.”

“The massage is forty dollars.”

“I gave you the money.”

“I need you to lie down on the table so that I can give you the massage.”

“You can put the damn towel over my dick, and keep stroking until I come.”

“I can call security if you don’t leave me alone.”

“You’re a fucking slut.”

“I don’t need you abusing me.”

“You don’t know what abuse is.”

He swung at me, and I ducked and he hit the wall. Security heard the racket and rushed in

here.

“What’s happening?”

“This bitch won’t put out.”

“Myron, this guy tried to hit me.”

His hand already hurt from taking a swing at me. Myron had the guy out in a jiffy.

“What an asshole!”

“Myron, he was a real jerk.”

“Tell me if you have any more like that.”

I didn’t have anymore that night.

“I told you that we’d have to wait for the weekend.”

“I’m barely hanging on. I only got twenty for that one guy.”

“You should have sucked him off. You could have made a bill.”

“You said that I didn’t have to do that if I didn’t want.”

Tammy set me straight, “You don’t. But if you don’t have sex with the guys, you’re not going to make any money.”

“I’m not into sex with guys that I don’t know.”

“Come down, and hang with me. We’ll party some. I’ll get you high. When you’re with him, you’ll get a kick out of it, no matter what kind of freak he is.”

“I’m not like that.”

“When you get desperate for money, you’ll do anything.”

“You’re spending your money on drugs. How does that balance out?”

“Don’t moralize with me! I’m having a good time.”

I didn’t say anything back.

“Here, have some chips. Myron bought them.”

“I feel like a real dinner.”

“You’re going to need that twenty for your room.”

“I’ve still got a little money stashed in my room.”

I understood the pressures of the job. If I bent the rules, I could turn a bad night into an all right one. It scared me to get involved that way.

“Let yourself go!”

“I didn’t sign up for this.”

“Try giving a BJ to start. It’s a little less personal.”

“I’m not going to put some weirdo’s cock in my mouth, It sounds disgusting.”

“It’s fun! Don’t you like sex?”

“It’s not that. I’m not used to this.”

“It’s nothing to get used to. Just do it”

I hated these guys’s bodies. And even the nice ones were too out there for me. None of them talked to me like human beings. They just treated me like a donkey or something.

Tammy had a way of making them feel at home. It was so natural. Like they were all damaged in the same way as her . I had been on the road all this time, but I couldn’t accustom myself to this kind of humiliation.

“Girl, a job’s a job. Don’t act as if you’re better than me. Just try to look sexy, and enjoy yourself.”

I went back to my room crying. It was one thing to hang out with Tammy. But the job was quite something else. It seemed all right when she talked about.

“You’ll get over it. At first, we all think that we’re special. Then you realize what it’s really about. That’s why you have a body like you do. You’ve got to use it.”

The next day Tammy was trying to convince me to go back. I didn’t have a lot of choices. Try as I may, I couldn’t get myself to do any sex stuff with any of the customers.

“It’ll come with time. And after it does, it will all just rush out like a waterfall.”

I had no idea what she was talking about. I didn’t want to get caught up in this kind of shit. I didn’t have it in me. I felt as if I’d be crying myself to sleep every night.

I felt that I was being tossed around without any clear direction. When I lived at home, Bill and June interfered with my life. They monitored me and made these outlandish rules. Even though I’d become overwhelmed by my adventures with Rose, I still had a purpose that held me together. I even had the motivation to leave home. Later, I felt truly inspired when I read to Cody. I was taking part in the educational process. This feeling when I went to Lincoln. I was creative. I felt good about myself.

Now things had taken a nasty turn for the worse. It had seemed like years that I had been out here on my own. Things hadn’t gotten better. I was just struggling to survive. My resources were getting low. And I was plagued by feelings of desperation. I had given up hope of any sort of rescue. I wasn’t that old. But I felt as if I was dying. In Lincoln, I really believed that I would get back in school. College seemed within my reach. Now, I could barely put two sentences together. It wasn’t as if there was a family that was going to take me in. There was no reward at the end of the rainbow. This was it.

Not only were my dreams for the future slipping out of my grasp, I didn’t know how to hold together my present. I couldn’t keep a job for very long. I hated staying in one place longer than a few months. Tammy had to stay fucked up all the time just to hang on. That allowed her to deal with these abusive situations. I did not want to become like her. But how could I avoid the pressure. I was slipping further and further down without any hope of rescue.

Girls like Donna had it so easy. Their life came to them in a gift box. They opened the wrapper and just followed along. I tried to do the same. But I couldn’t pretend. I guess that I got instructions on how to go to hell, because that’s where I felt my life was headed.

This should have been the time for some stock-taking. I was hung over from the night before. And I didn’t want this to become a pattern. But I didn’t feel like doing much of anything. There were times when I was with Rose that I felt that things were in this lull. I’d wake up all groggy. And my only thought was when we were going to get high. That was hardly a way to survive. But Bill and June had just become so oppressive. The more that I thought about my life, the more everything piled on at once. If I could just zone out, then I could ride that feeling until it faded out. Then I’d be ready to crash again. I knew it was a cycle. Not a good one. I was digging myself deeper in the hole. But I had the wherewithal to get out. Not this time. There was no easy out any more. I was down to my last few dollars. I was no longer the charming ingenue. Disaster loomed around the corner.

Even as I saw what I had to do, I could barely motivate myself. I wanted to party. It wasn’t so much the alcohol talking. It was the doldrums that had gotten a hold of me. I just lay here unable to move.

It was a nice day in Denver. The air was crisp. There was a gentle breeze. I felt a nice walk would invigorate me. It would get my blood flowing. I could create a positive attitude for myself.

I pulled myself out of bed and had a shower. I could feel the cobwebs dissipating. Things felt good for once. I had enough money for some breakfast. I went on a long walk. I felt that I had cast off that dark cloud that had been obsessing me. I was ready to fly again.

When I returned to my room, the same fear hit me. I needed more money. I needed to get out of this shitty motel. I needed to vacate Denver. I didn't want to go to work with Tammy again. Did I have a choice? I was going to have to pay for this place again. I didn't see doing any favors for the night clerk as my ticket. Maybe I could make it through a couple of more nights.

The problem was I could never make enough money to get ahead. I would need something extra just to get myself out of here. I wish that I could win the lottery.

I started to understand the worst part of Tammy's profession. Now and then, there would be some cute guy with money. That's how she saw it. He'd be a fucked up. And really desperate. Maybe he struck out at the bar. Whatever. And he'd end up here ready to pay. And Tammy would think that maybe she could make more out of this one. Just for that little moment, she'd get a rush. She'd play around with numbers. And she'd come out on top. He'd be the one to take her away from here.

There was always the flaw with her plan. The real winners would want nothing to do with her. Then she'd fall for some tough guy. And he'd cheat her out of everything that she had. She needed someone to slow it all down. For my part, I couldn't understand how she could keep landing on her feet. I was surprised that she hadn't succumbed long ago. She had some kind of perverse angel on her side.

Although I had kicked my hangover, I was no closer to finding a solution for my life. Hangovers had their purpose. They helped focus your efforts so you didn't have to bother with anything else. When you got rid of them, it gave you a real sense of accomplishment. It also made me want to get drunk again. I hadn't felt like this in a while. I had been desperate. I was on the streets. But I had fought the temptation.

What was I telling myself? I wanted to believe that I was different than Tammy? I was sure that she had also fought the descent. But I didn't want to think that it happened that easily. Tammy seemed to flash in and out of reality. That didn't seem to be an issue for me. I knew what I had to do. I was just avoiding it.

This is where it became tricky. My avoidance was just a feeling. Not an idea. And it only made me want to party. And if I kept partying all the time, I'd need money to stay on my feet. After a while, it wouldn't make any difference how I got it. I would become just as lax as Tammy. I couldn't see myself digging sex with these creeps. Couldn't I just put it out of my mind?

I reviewed my options. I could go back to work with Tammy. I could test out my theory. I could see how far I could go before the revulsion took over. And if I could deal with the nasty part, then I could make a little money. If I was lucky, I could take it further.

I really needed a drink bad. I needed to find Tammy. She'd set me up with her booze. "This isn't going to come free."

“What are you saying?”

“You’ve got to give a little more of yourself. I like you, Chloe. I do. But you keep playing the part of this uptight bitch. What do you have stuffed up that pussy of yours?”

“Huh?”

“You know what I mean. You can’t loosen up.”

I was doing my best to play along. There was no middle ground here. Tammy was calling me out. I had to show her what I was made of. I was only afraid that I didn’t have enough endurance to keep on with her. In the end, I was just going to give up.

“You’re too tight up there. It’s like all the juices are just rotting away. You just need someone to help you out.”

She was scaring me again.

“I don’t mean me Chloe.”

It was hard to tell, she was sitting on her bed in bra and panties. Every so often, she’d get in this wild mood and just rub her fingers along her legs.

“Why are you such a prude. Did your parents do something to you?”

Sometimes, she was just darn out cruel.

“I’m going to go back to my room.”

“I didn’t mean anything by it.”

She probably thought that she was toughening me up for the world. I thought that I had one over on June. But that was nothing compared to Tammy.

“Stay and have another drink. I’m lonely. Like next to me.”

She was creeping me out. But I agreed to stay for another drink. I lay on the other bed.

“See, we’re great together. We should be roommates.”

“Yeah, it sounds like fun.” Was that how I really felt? I asked her for another drink.

“Remember, you drink my alcohol, you have to play my game.”

I gave her a funny look.

“I’m kidding you. Don’t get so jumpy.”

Fortunately for me, she passed out. I excused myself, and went back to my room.

When I lived at home, I had trained my memory to record every detail of my life . I needed to do this since I couldn’t afford to keep any incriminating evidence lying around. When time allowed it, I could unlock my treasures and roll them out for my inspection. These recollections helped reassure me against the haphazard manners of June.

My creative writing class showed me how I could coherently organize my memories into a long narrative. This was the same technique that I had observed in the novels that I read. I appreciated this lesson even more intimately when these books came alive for Cody and me. I discovered how I could make others interested in my story. I also learned how the writer could engage the reader in the drama of a character’s inner monologue. What made the great novelists so skillful was their ability to delve into the psyche of their readers. They could capture the narratives of other people with vivid detail. This made the novelist a valued participant in our shared experiences. In fact, we learned how to measure our own lives against their portrayals.

I believed my own self-analysis had provided me with critical skills in observing other people. I could anticipate their actions. It was almost like being a mind reader. I had to admit that my skills had eroded the longer that I had been out on the road. This was a little scary sine I

needed to be extra cautious.

Hanging out with Tammy really underlined how far I had slipped. Tammy's life presented a difficult example for the observer. You couldn't really understand her unless you played along with her games. That wasn't easy because her edgeplay often required a lot of time under the influence. The experience didn't lend itself to a critical eye. I think that the problem was much worse than it first seemed. Many of her memories were buried so deeply. And they'd emerge in contradictory flashes. She's goad people to get involved in her shit.

After spending time with her, I would feel terrible about myself. But she didn't want to be helped. So I'd just feel all alone in her mess. Tammy's overseer had abandoned her a long time ago. Her story was simply too convoluted to bear clear telling. There was no glorious revelation that would allow her biographer to embrace his role. The chronicler of her sad tale would appear to be pandering to the reader's voyeuristic fantasies. Each shocking incident would only invite scenes of more bizarre rambunctiousness. She would almost accustom herself to an audience and do what she could to frighten them away. This was the potent nature of her escapades.

Most writers would look at the story of others and want to make it theirs. In Tammy's case, they would skip over most of the details and try to generalize based on a few basic impressions. An accurate portrayal would suggest that Tammy had literally indulged the writer's fantasies. You couldn't make this stuff up. How far back would you have to take it before these tales would assume their criminal proportions?

I started to feel as if I was in Tammy's boat. At what point, had my biographer also given up. Perhaps, he was afraid that I would catch him in some kind of police sting.

"How old are you, girl?"

"How old do you want me to be?"

"That wasn't what I was asking."

The narrator's murky past was almost a staple of American fiction. We were talking of a man of high-standing who was willing to use all his resources to negotiate a dirty deal with his conscience. The key was to push the episode to such a climax that genuine remorse would be forthcoming. The girl would have to accept her moral condemnation. And the writer would spend the rest of his life doing penance.

Didn't the writer's vocation begin with a twinge of guilt? These were things that he couldn't make up and then will away in a rehab session. The modern history of America and Western Europe was distinguished by these noble statesmen who were willing to risk it all for a chance for eternal happiness. When the girl understood the balance of power, she was justifiably willing to scream bloody murder. But that hardly did the trick to implicate the actual evil-doers. The dirty game was all a ruse. The stakes were all part of international intrigue. And only a select few were ever allowed in the match. No wonder Lee Tate wanted to think of himself as a spy. If only he hadn't been so clumsy.

Tammy was never going to be anyone's teen idol. She knew it long ago. She was probably a millions times more delightful than Rose. And Rose had game. But Tammy could never be alert enough to manage a curtain call. And there were times when she just needed to fall flat on her face. A hardy snack of chips and salsa would befit the audience for one of Rose's soirees. But any witness to Tammy's demise would require some heavy anesthesia. Tammy



didn't want to be fixed.

As much as I was ready to step up to write the novel about my life, I was having difficulty wrapping my head around my own story. I had lost track of myself long before I arrived in Denver. I couldn't blame my dilemma on poor Tammy. I know that I had it all together when I was in Lincoln. But at each stage of the way after that, I was forced to compromise more and more. I couldn't roll out my memories and get them to save me. I had to admit to these gaps in my experience. Things were held together like loose fragments. I felt as if I was again facing the interrogation of Dr. Briggs.

"So Tammy is one of your aliases."

"I didn't think that I was collecting them."

"What do you want to be called?"

"It's not about the name Dr. Briggs. It's about the heart."

I guess that explained it all. I just couldn't get my heart in gear.

"You need a cardiologist not a literature teacher."

"I need neither. I'm fine on my own."

"Tammy, you don't look fine."

"I'm trying to get out of bed. And it's not working."

If I wasn't viewing myself as a divided self, Tammy could call on Chloe, and things would sort themselves out. But I was lost in the jumble. Tammy had given me something that made us fuse into one person. Even though I could conduct independent observation, there was only one body to speak of.

"Dr. Briggs, why are you doing this to me?"

"It's not me. It's a literary device. If you figure out the puzzle, you can snap out of it."

It was a series of reflections with each looking back at me.

"I still can't move."

"I told you that you shouldn't have gone off with that guy."

"He gave me money."

I wasn't doing a very good job at sorting it all out. Even with one body, there were too many different personalities to fit into one.

"Take the one that works best."

"Works how?"

"The one that get you high."

"High how?"

"The one that gets you off."

Whatever that I did, I needed to get away from Tammy. At least for now.

I was certain that there were other opportunities in Denver. There was a lot of money here. I wanted to get some of it for myself. I didn't want to take off my clothes. And I didn't want to touch some guy either. I wasn't really cut out for restaurant work. I had no real skills. I'd have to go to school if I wanted to qualify for most jobs.

Tammy thought that I should have counted my blessing since she had helped me find work. But I felt as if I was going backwards. I didn't want to seem unappreciative. She just had no idea what I needed.

This wasn't just a job for Tammy. It was more of an ordeal. She needed the sense of

suffering. At the same time, the job gave her the chance to redeem herself. It worked for her every time. I didn't know how to play along.

Things were getting really desperate. I needed some kind of break soon. Most of the time that I went into a store to fill out an application, they looked at me as if I should be back with my folks. They didn't want to give me a job. They just wanted to give me a hug and send me home.

Fortunately, one guy at a thrift store took pity on me. So I never had to touch another customer again.

"Maybe this work wasn't cut out for you. We can remain friends."

"Sure. I'm going to live here until I find a place."

"We could get a place together."

The idea scared me a little, but I didn't want to let on, "Yeah, great."

I did a couple of days at the store. I didn't realize how liberating work could be. I had a schedule. I had things to do. I didn't have to worry about some guy inspecting my body.

I was still at the hotel. I just could get high all the time.

"I understand that you have a real job. I'd just never want to be tied down like that."

"I'm not working now."

"But if I want to party, I want that to be my right."

"Sometimes in life you have to make sacrifices."

"You're talking like a mom. Did you ever think that you would start talking like a mom?"

I supposed that Tammy had pushed me out much further than I could ever get on my own. Indeed, June was talking through me. What was my choice? I wasn't going to get naked for some stranger. Not now, not ever!

"We're all stranger to each other at some point."

I wanted to steer clear of having Tammy as a roommate. But I didn't have to make a decision yet. I liked to party with her now and then. I just didn't want her pestering me about it.

I felt that I had temporarily jumped off of the roller coaster ride. I had no idea what lay in store for me. But I couldn't worry about it. Tomorrow, I'd be back to the store and that would be fine with me.

Some of the days were getting long and boring. Whenever I'd start to read, my boss told me to arrange the clothes. There were boxes to sort out. He always wanted to see me busy.

"Do you miss the parlor?"

"I'm doing OK."

"It doesn't have the drama. I'd tried to go back to civilian work. But it's impossible. You really do live off of the attention."

I wanted to tell myself that I wasn't like that. I hadn't worked her job long enough to get affected that way.

"You're going to give it up one way or another. You might as well get paid for it."

"My body's not made like that."

"Every girl is made like that. She just needs to admit it to herself."

She would always be dressing me down. She wanted me to share her misery. When I was drinking like this, it was easy to become too focused on my problems. It was funny, I'd start

drinking to forget. Then I'd really get reminded of how things were.

That night, I fell asleep in Tammy's room. I had this weird dream that I was working in the parlor. And Lee Tate came in. He didn't recognize me at all. I was giving him a regular massage. And he asked me if I had anything more to give.

"That's going to cost you extra."

"I already paid."

"That was for the massage."

"But I thought that you'd put out if you really like the guy."

"Lee, I don't really like you."

He recognized my voice, and he tried to grab me. But he was lying on the table. I pushed him down on the ground, and I ran out.

"Myron, there's some guy in there who's trying to kill me."

Then I woke up. It was almost dawn. Tammy was passed out half-naked on the other bed. There were chip wrappers and empty bottles everywhere. I had to get out of there.

When I got back to my room, I realized that I couldn't do this anymore. It wasn't just the massage parlor. It was Tammy. It was the drinking. It was even the thrift store.

I packed my things. I counted my money. I had enough money to get a bus out of here.

The bus station wasn't that far away. I studied the schedule to see where I could go next. I had no idea. I felt as if I was going around in a circle. I had no reason to head for the coast. I didn't want to go back East. Heaven knows, I didn't want to go to Utah.

A couple of hours later, I was sitting in my seat on the bus. I assumed that it was the right one. I would find out pretty soon. Good bye, Denver.